The creation of imperial space in the Pacific Northwest

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This paper discusses two diplomatic disputes that had a central bearing on the creation of imperial space in the Pacific Northwest: the Nootka Sound crisis (1790), which brought Britain and Spain to the brink of war over the spoils of trade and empire in the Pacific, and the Anglo-American dispute over the Oregon Territory, which dragged on from 1818 to 1846. It is argued that British, Spanish and American politicians and diplomats created an imperial domain that had both Western and national contours. On the one hand, they worked with the polarity between civilization and savagery, and shaped an abstract imperial space that circumscribed processes of Native–Western interaction in the region. On the other hand, they worked with different discourses on sovereignty and competing visions of empire. The paper contributes to recent debates about the spatiality of imperialism by pointing to the tension between the universalist and nation-centred cast of imperial aggrandisement, knowledge-production and dominion.

Introduction

This paper is about the fashioning of the Pacific Northwest (the region between Alaska and California) as Western imperial space between the late-eighteenth century, when this region became a locus of exploration and trade with Native people, and the beginnings of formal colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century. During this period there emerged two processes of Western engagement with the Pacific Northwest. On the one hand, a changing local geography was formed out of processes of Native–Western interaction. Explorers encountered a densely populated region and their reports sparked an intense burst of commercial interaction. British, American and Russian traders plied the coast, bartering with Native groups for sea otter furs, and larger companies stretched the land-based fur trade across the Rockies, establishing trade posts on rivers that drained into the Pacific and developing a variety of commercial ventures. This mode of interaction involved cultural accommodation and conflict, and intricate processes of social and geographical change among Native groups. On the other hand, the Pacific Northwest was shaped by geopolitical processes of appropriation that were moulded out of international diplomacy and the law of nations. Politicians derived imperial meanings from explorers' and traders' activities, subsumed local geographies of interaction into an abstract imperial space of maps and plans, and relegated the status of Native people on the land.

I am concerned with this latter mode of connection—a set of Western imperial practices that operated at long range and with considerable abstraction. This geopolitical
mode of territorial encroachment was fuelled by partial facts about the Pacific Northwest, and it produced effects of power that Native people could not influence. The Western geopolitical imagination ran with little direct information about the Pacific Northwest, and for a long time this process of reterritorialization, taking place in Western corridors of power, had little direct bearing on the contact process. In the longer run, however, politicians created an imperial space that formed the geopolitical framework of colonial appropriation. The connections that Natives and newcomers made on the ground became circumscribed by imperial interests and representations that reconfigured the terms of contact.

I seek to show how this imperial space was pieced together. The paper concentrates on two diplomatic disputes that had a central bearing on the creation of imperial space in the Pacific Northwest: the Nootka Sound crisis of 1790, which brought Britain and Spain to the brink of war over the spoils of trade and navigation in the Pacific; and the Anglo-American dispute over the Oregon Territory, which started in 1818, culminated in the Oregon Treaty of 1846, and stretched Western sovereignty across the North American continent. A good deal has been written about these disputes and I cannot recount all of their intricacies here. Yet they are usually in isolation from each other and the literature on them does not have an ostensibly geographical bent. My aim here is to review the main archival sources pertaining to these disputes with questions of power, knowledge and geography in mind. I am interested in the spatiality of imperialism. How are visions of empire, tactics of territorial appropriation, claims about sovereignty, and attitudes of dominance over distant lands shaped geographically? The Nootka and Oregon disputes give us some intriguing insights into such questions, I think, and I want to start by sketching the conceptual problematics that permeate my analysis.

**Imperialism, space, and the Pacific Northwest**

My account is informed by a range of ideas that are drawn from the recent critical literature on colonialism and empire. This literature is augmenting imperial historians’ long-standing concern with the politics of imperial aggrandisement and empire-building by focusing attention on the ways in which practices of knowledge-production and systems of inscription induce and support imperial interests and the exercise of colonial power. It is now commonly argued that imperial expansion was shaped by cultural outlooks, modes of representation, and institutional frameworks that fabricated reality and slotted disparate peoples and places into binary images of Europe and its (always somehow inferior) others. In his influential book *Orientalism*, Edward Said explores how the West constituted and handled the Orient as foreign yet familiar through a dynamic of experience and encapsulation. Western encounters with the Orient, he argues, were encapsulated in “the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotype, [and] the polemical confrontation”. Said discusses how Western knowledge about the Orient became folded into “an internally structured archive” which naturalized colonial intervention and cast the relationship between West and East in enduring, oppositional terms. He alerts us to “the odd combination of the imaginative and the empirical” in the discourse of Orientalism and suggests that Western representations of cultural and geographical differences rest on “an amalgam of imperial vagueness and precise detail”. The West formed compelling yet unrigorous ideas about what was “out there”.

Following Said, scholars in a variety of disciplines have investigated how Europe and successor-states of European settler empires such as the USA—that is, the West—sought to make empire fitting and legitimate. Explorers, traders, writers, politicians,
and other agents of empire variously represented alien lands as empty, accessible, commercially enticing, rightfully Western, or amenable to colonial settlement; and they deemed alien peoples to be culturally backward, morally degraded, or in need of improvement and rule. Many scholars, including geographers, have focused on the techniques of representation that exemplified and fuelled the West’s proprietary vision. Cartography was an important tool of imperial expansion and technology of abstraction. Maps captured far-flung places on a grid of latitude and longitude, enabled politicians and merchants to visualize imperial and commercial prospects, and featured names and vignettes that domesticated foreignness and conveyed distant places to the West. Brian Harley has sketched how cartography shaped “anticipatory geographies” of colonialism, and in his book \textit{The Cartographic Eye}, Simon Ryan explores “the ideologies that underlie the very possibility of land as property.” Imperialism, Ryan suggests, “encourages the construction of space as a universal, measurable and divisible entity, for this is the [imperialist’s] self-legitimising view of the world”. He is writing about Australia but registers the general claim that “in imperial ideology”, the West’s ‘others’ “under-utilise the space imperialism understands as absolute”.

This literature is enriching our understanding of the spatiality of imperialism, but commentators complain that many writers portray imperialism in a much too amorphous and ineluctable light. The implication of Ryan’s thesis, for instance, is that the imperial endeavour was effectively the same everywhere and ultimately unencumbered by the details of the places it ranged over. He occludes the fact that European overseas expansion was riven with debate about how other lands and peoples differed from Europe, and what imperial space rested on. A Western (Cartesian–mathematical–positivist) conception of space was not imposed on the world in a mechanical or unitary manner. Derek Gregory stresses that Europeans “absolutised space” by essentializing and hierarchizing different histories and geographies, David Demeritt suggests that Europeans sometimes struggled to “to differentiate [imperial] space”, and Harley notes that while European cartographers dispossessed Amerindians “by engulfing them with blank spaces”, there are “regional and national differences in the extent to which an Indian geography is silenced”.

In other words, imperialism involved processes of differentiation as well as these universalist formulations of imperial right and territory. Imperial space was constructed as exclusively British, or Spanish, as well as rightfully Western. Imperial differentiation also stemmed from European concerns about the legitimacy of empire and bitter disagreements over the nature of sovereignty. One of “the foundational conceptions” of modern imperialism, Anthony Pagden reminds us, was the conviction, inherited from classical and Christian precedent, that an expansionist state “was required to legitimate its actions by appeal to some law, in most cases of either supposedly natural or divine origin”. In the early modern period such convictions became tailored to particular parts of the world and were advanced in instrumental ways. For example, in his \textit{Two Treatises of Government} (1690), which became a cornerstone of Anglo-American thinking about land and colonialism, the English philosopher John Locke argued that Europeans had the right to settle unused and undeveloped areas of America without the consent of Native people. Locke had colonial interests in Carolina and wrote at a time when doubts were being raised in Britain and America about the legality and morality of colonization. Pagden argues that questions of imperial legitimation only became important when “obvious spoliation had taken place involving a sufficiently large number of persons over a sufficiently protracted period of time”. Spain’s conquest of the New World and the Atlantic slave trade precipitated intricate philosophical reflection in Europe on the morality of empire. On numerous other
occasions, however, questions of legitimation arose from imperial wars that were sparked by sheer opportunism, centred on national honour, and completely overlooked the interests of non-European peoples. This interplay of legal precedent and imperial opportunism leads us to Michel Foucault’s formulation that right and sovereignty should not be viewed solely in terms of “a legitimacy to be established”, but also—and in his terms, more resolutely—in terms of the techniques of domination that they put in motion.[12]

In short, there were various routes to sovereignty. Arguments for sovereignty were based on both absolute ideals and strategic interests. In the geopolitical disputes I am concerned with, it is the tensions between these different ways of claiming distant territory and producing imperial space that come to the fore. I seek to show that politicians created an imperial space that had both Western (or universalist) and national (or differentiated) contours, and mobilized discourses on sovereignty and empire that were both vague and precise, and principled yet imperious. At one level, politicians developed a Western/Eurocentric space of empire with felicitous interpretations of the law of nations, and they worked with the polarity between civilization/cultivation and savagery/wilderness. From a Western perspective, however, the Pacific Northwest also became a combative diplomatic-cum-imperial space. Britain, Spain and the USA drew on different legal precepts, invoked different visions of empire, and positioned this region in different kinds of empire. Western politicians and diplomats advanced two kinds of argument for sovereignty: one based on absolute ideals that sprang from the need for legitimacy and gave the overarching binary between ‘West and rest’ a particular geographical texture in the Pacific Northwest; the other based on the elaboration and defence of national–imperial interests that made this region a heterogeneous imperial domain. The following section teases out the geographical contours of the Nootka Sound crisis and focuses on Britain’s handling of the affair. The section after that, on Oregon, shows how politicians tried to devise an imperial geography that was based on “mutual convenience” between “civilized nations”.

**Geography and empire in the Nootka Sound crisis**

I will start by describing some of the facts of the Nootka crisis and then turn to the dynamics of representation embedded in this dispute. In January 1790, the British Cabinet learned from Britain’s chargé d’affaire in Madrid, Anthony Merry, that a Spanish naval officer, Estevan Martinez, had seized a British fur trade vessel at Nootka Sound as a legal prize. Merry’s despatch prompted a vitriolic diplomatic exchange. Britain’s Foreign Secretary, the Duke of the Leeds, instructed Merry to tell Spain’s first minister, the Conte de Floridablanca, that Britain would not abandon her “unquestioned right” to trade and settle in “the District in question”, and Spain’s ambassador to London, the Marquis del Campo de Alange, was told that Spain must “satisfy the injured Honour of the British Crown” before questions of sovereignty could be agitated. Campo de Alange notified the British that the vessel had been arrested because its commander planned to establish a settlement at Nootka Sound “in the name of the British King”, and he urged “His Britannic Majesty” to discourage British subjects from encroaching on Spanish territory. As the British saw things, Spain was asserting a claim “to the exclusive Right of Sovereignty, Navigation and Commerce in the Territories, Coasts and Seas” of the Pacific.[13]

On 6 May, Britain’s first minister, William Pitt, briefed Parliament about the affair. Spain, he declared, had made
the most absurd and exorbitant [claim about sovereignty]... that could well be imagined, a claim which [Britain]... had never heard of before, which was indefinite in extent, and which originated in no treaty, nor formal establishment of a colony, nor rested on any of those grounds on which claims of sovereignty, navigation, and commerce usually rested.

Pitt assured the nation that he would protect Britain’s international commercial interests, and he secured a loan from Parliament to fit out ships of the line.\textsuperscript{[14]}

During the summer of 1790 this geopolitical fracas over an obscure event in a part of the world that British and Spanish ministers knew little about escalated into an international crisis. Britain and Spain spied on each other, sought allies in Europe, and prepared themselves for war in Europe and America.\textsuperscript{[15]} War loomed until October, when Floridablanca and Alleyne Fitzherbert, Britain’s ambassador to Spain, negotiated a \textit{Convention}. Spain dropped its claim to exclusive sovereignty, but questions of territorial jurisdiction remained ill-defined. The \textit{Convention} stipulated that Spain would restore the property that Martinez had seized, permitted both British and Spanish subjects to navigate and trade in the Pacific, and allowed British merchants to trade along the Pacific coast of America and settle in places not already occupied by Spanish subjects (although British traders were forbidden from going within 10 leagues of spots that were occupied by the Spanish).

As the quotations I have drawn on suggest, politicians conjured up a vast but hazy field of sovereignty and juxtaposed different visions of empire. Martinez presented Britain with an opportunity to gain access to the resources and markets of Spanish America. Henry Dundas (then Treasurer to the Navy) proclaimed that Britain sought to “vindicate its honour” and “would not be limited in its market”.\textsuperscript{[16]} In the second half of the eighteenth century, and especially in the wake of James Cook’s three voyages (spanning 1768–80), the Pacific became a major area of British commercial and imperial interest. By 1790, over 50 British whaling vessels were operating in the South Pacific and Atlantic, the sea otter trade in the North Pacific was flourishing, Britain had a colony at Botany Bay, and pundits held out hope that the Northwest Passage (the fabled water route across North America, which Cook searched for in 1778) would be discovered and would transform the structure of British trade with Asia.\textsuperscript{[17]} Spain, of course, regarded the Pacific as its imperial preserve, but Floridablanca knew that Spanish officials were unable to police it effectively and sensed that Britain aimed to become “Masters of the trade” of Spanish America.\textsuperscript{[18]} This and many other European disputes over remote places became flashpoints of imperial aggrandisement and tests of national nerve. Pitt’s ability to make Spain back down over exclusive sovereignty, I will note below, rested on Britain’s military superiority. But I want to start by considering the amount and type of information that politicians worked with.

\textit{Britain, Spain and the Law of Nations}

Britain’s and Spain’s combative diplomatic stances were conditioned by legal precepts, selective facts about the Pacific Northwest, and rarefied understandings of the Pacific. Britain initially based its call for “satisfaction” on the legal idea that European subjects were at liberty to navigate and trade in parts of the world that were unoccupied by other European nations. Yet questions of right were not simply played out in legal terms. Politicians made broader connections between power, knowledge and geography. The British Cabinet viewed the Pacific through the cartographic field of vision developed,
especially, by James Cook. Cook’s chart of the northwest coast of America (Figure 1) depicts his exacting search for a northwest passage and reveals that he saw little of the coast between Nootka Sound, where he sojourned for a month in the spring of 1778 among Native people, and the latitude 55° north. As important, Western traders responded quickly to James King’s report in the official account of Cook’s voyage that a lucrative trade in sea otter furs could be forged between the northwest coast and China. Cook made categorical and social connections with the coast by imposing a cartographic grid, depicting much of the coast with a pale but unbroken cartographic line, and bestowing names; and Cook’s officers described this region as a space awaiting commercial development. Cook’s cartography formed a baseline of Western knowledge and understanding that others built on. More precisely, he brought the Pacific Northwest into commercial and political circulation with a forked system of representation. He described his dealings with the people of Nootka Sound—and other Native groups—in detail, but there are few signs of Native life on his map of the northwest coast of America. Between 1778 and 1790 explorers and traders gradually filled in Cook’s map of the coast, but the baseline he put in place—this rarefied, cartographic way of seeing and dealing with distant lands—endured.

The British geopolitical imagination ran with particular brands of information about the Pacific Northwest and located them on this cartographic grid. Britain’s call for satisfaction became more rancorous in April 1790, when John Meares, a British trader, presented the British Cabinet with a detailed Memorandum about the incident at Nootka Sound. Meares reported that four vessels belonging to a prominent London company (in which he was an investor) and commanded by former British Navy officers had been seized by the Spanish, and that Martinez took formal possession of the coast for Spain in June 1789. Meares added insult to injury. British ministers were particularly
struck by his revelation that he had purchased spots of land in and around Nootka Sound from Native chiefs, erected a small building in the Sound itself, and “hoisted the British Colours thereon”, a year before Martinez arrived on the coast. This information allowed the British to push another precept, which was enshrined in Locke’s *Two Treatises*: that “discovery alone, not followed by Actual Possession and Establishment, can never be admitted as giving any Right to the Exclusion of Other Nations”, as Leeds articulated it. Patricia Seed has shown that the British had a peculiarly *architectural* view of possession-taking and sovereignty. The terms possession, property and planting were closely affiliated. The British claimed that dominion over alien lands was rooted in building, cultivation and residence.

The British Cabinet pressed this principle with a small number of seemingly definitive facts that came to hand. The English East India Company’s hydrographer, Alexander Dalrymple, who was an expert on the Pacific, supplied ministers with two Spanish works on America, the 1790 edition of Aaron Arrowsmith’s *Chart of the World*, and other documents, which, to his mind, shattered Spain’s claims. Leeds sent these documents on to Fitzherbert and highlighted that on “the most Authentic Map published in different Countries” (i.e. Arrowsmith’s), and according to “a Noticia de California [by A. Burriel], said to be published in 1757 by Authority of the Spanish Government”, the “Whole Coast, north of the Peninsula of California” appeared to be “Unknown to Europeans” and unsettled by the Spanish. In other words, when Meares made his purchases, Spanish settlement—and hence jurisdiction—did not extend above the latitude 40° north. The geographical parameters of the diplomatic debate now became more precise. In British eyes, Spain could only reasonably claim sovereignty between the latitudes 40° north and 45° south, thus leaving the sea otter trade and the whale fishery intact, and was obliged to restore land as well as the British vessels.

Floridablanca tried to convince France and other European courts of the legitimacy of Martinez’s actions, and gain their military support, by drawing on an equally rarefied body of ideas. “The vast extent and limits” of the Spanish Empire, he declared, “are clearly laid down and authenticated by a variety of documents, laws and formal acts of possession”: Pope Alexander VI’s Bull *Inter Caetera* (1493) and Article 8 of the Anglo–Spanish Treaty of Utrecht (1713), which confirmed the “vast extent” of Spanish dominion in the New World; Spain’s discovery of Nootka Sound in 1774, and Spanish acts of possession-taking in the North Pacific up to 1789 (manifested by the planting of crosses and the exchange of gifts with Native people), which proved that Spain had “preserved her possession entire”; and Spanish Royal *Cedulas*, peremptory orders, and international treaties stretching back 120 years, which legitimized Martinez’s actions.

The British were not satisfied. Leeds insisted that Papal Bulls, prior discovery, the “general words” of treaties, and leaving “a few trifling articles with the Natives” did not establish clear territorial rights; sovereignty could only stem from “open Possession”. Meares had abandoned his dwelling at Nootka Sound before the Spanish arrived, but he made it clear that he intended to reoccupy the building.

In short, Britain and Spain worked with incommensurable imperial visions and discourses on sovereignty. The British worked with a vision of commercial access and pointed up the primacy of planting, holding that physical manifestations of possession were more authoritative than words, acts and tacit understandings, which merely preserved territory. Meares’s shack punctured the “ancient limits” of the Spanish Empire in the North Pacific, and the documents supplied by Dalrymple hedged Spain’s dominion in the South Pacific. The Spanish, by contrast, worked with a vision of imperial retrenchment that was articulated with discourses of imperial continuity and contiguity.
To defend his claim that Spain had unquestioned rights to western America “by immemorial possession” and “the acknowledgement and acquiescence of all nations”, Floridablanca resorted to what Jose Rabasa has called “a thesaurus of New World motifs”. Rabasa discusses how Spain invented (rather than discovered) America as “a new region of space”, and a domain of both Spanish and European dominance, by configuring the New World as a garden of imperial opportunity, a zoo of natural and human differences, and a book that could be read. Floridablanca drew on narratives of possession and (Amerindian and European) acquiescence that came from a thesaurus of acts and texts. Western America, he suggested, had been made Spanish by a web of entitlements that stretched back over three centuries and covered the region entirely. Floridablanca was not concerned with the density of Spanish settlement or the scope of Spanish control. It was European recognition of the longevity and elasticity of the Spanish Empire, and the effectivity of languages of imperial prestige, that mattered to him. The British, of course, thought that his understanding of imperial proprietorship was flimsy because it was based on piecemeal imperial intentions and patchwork colonial practices. Britain and Spain were at loggerheads over how imperial space came into existence.

At another level, however, neither Britain nor Spain questioned Europe’s underlying right to sovereignty over Native land. Leeds and Floridablanca worked with fundamentally Eurocentric discourses and the polarity between civilization and savagery. Leeds stressed that Britain’s claim to Nootka Sound was morally superior to Spain’s because Meares had built on land “with the consent of the Natives”. This was an important trope of imperial legitimation, but it was a duplicitous one. Anthony Pagden has shown that while Europeans were acutely aware that “some kind of claim to the legitimate possession of the lands of ‘aboriginal peoples’ was a necessary condition of successful occupation”, legal and philosophical arguments about European dominion over ‘ungodly’ and ‘uncultivated’ peoples were informed by, and fed into, assumptions about European superiority over the rest of the world. The legal historian Leslie Green has argued that eighteenth-century international law “did not recognise the aboriginal inhabitants of . . . newly discovered territory as having any legal rights that were good as against those who ‘discovered’ and settled in their territories”. This is a controversial claim, but it corresponds with the arguments over Nootka Sound. Leeds was not suggesting that Native people had sovereignty over their lands. Rather, he used the clause about Native consent to bolster the diplomatic case that Britain derived from Meares.

Floridablanca questioned the veracity of Meares’s Memorial, and over the next few years it became increasingly apparent that the trader had misled the British Cabinet about his activities. In 1790, however, Britain’s demand for satisfaction sprang from the fact that other European observers (including Floridablanca) accepted that Meares had occupied Nootka Sound before Martinez. Britain and Spain were not interested in the nature of Meares’s dealings with Native people. The Nootka Sound crisis abstracted the realm of contact that traders like Meares were involved in. When Meares was interviewed by Britain’s Privy Council in 1791, he recounted how he had given Chief “Maquilla” of Nootka Sound “considerable presents for leave to build a House”, and suggested that Natives and Westerners often struggled to fathom each other’s agendas. But politicians were not concerned with these issues of cultural perception and negotiation. The notes they made in the margins of Meares’s testimony simply highlight where he had erected buildings. They did not annotate any of his comments about how he came into possession of land; local details like this were irrelevant. All
Meares had to do was show that he had occupied some land and illustrate that Martinez had stripped the British of a lucrative trade.[32]

**British imperial vision**

Britain’s handling of the affair should be viewed in broader military, political and cultural registers. First, and foremost, it did not really matter what Floridablanca thought about Britain’s reading of the law of nations or Meares’s *Memorial*, for Britain’s navy was much stronger than Spain’s and Floridablanca knew that Spain could not win a war without allies.[33] During the summer of 1790 Spain tried but failed to rejuvenate the Bourbon Family Compact with Louis XVI of France and could not secure the military support of any other European court.[34] A few concessions over trade and navigation in the marchlands of the Spanish Empire, Floridablanca reasoned, following the Convention, had prevented a disastrous war that might have crippled the lucrative heartlands of Spanish America.[35]

Britain’s firm stand over Nootka Sound was also conditioned by political factors. Pitt was entering an election year, and if his firm handling of the crisis had an important bearing on his election victory, as some have argued, it was because international commerce was central to British national identity and well-being.[36] As Linda Colley and other cultural historians have spelled out recently, “the claim that trade was the muscle and soul of Great Britain was abundantly echoed” in art, poetry, novels, speeches, treatises and the press. “This cult of trade”, as Colley puts it, “crossed party divisions, just as it crossed social boundaries”. It also crossed the ocean with traders like Meares. British traders were viewed as public agents—as bearers of Britain’s commercial soul. Since “the Insult and Injury was publick”, Dalrymple declared in a pamphlet on the dispute, “the Satisfaction and Atonement must be publick!”.[38] There was a symbiotic relationship between the British flag, the king, his nation, its merchants, and Britain’s empire of settlement and trade.

Patrick O’Brien suggests that Britons from different backgrounds shared the conviction that international commerce and national prestige were intimately connected, and that both “depended on the use of force, backed up by a skillfull deployment of diplomacy in order to make and to retain economic gains at the expense of their major rivals”.[39] Merchants relied on credit, and Britain went into enormous debt fighting imperial wars that extended the nation’s commercial system. It was these connections between credit and debt, government revenue and commercial expansion, and naval strength and national prestige—the imbrications of what John Brewer has called Britain’s “fiscal-military state”—as much as any point of law, that made the incident at Nootka Sound an important national issue.[40] This similitude of commerce, imperialism and state patronage was echoed by John Cadman Etches (one of the owners of the vessels seized at Nootka Sound), who argued that the “shoots of diverging commerce should be fostered and protected, with the same scrupulous vigilance as its bank paper, or its national stock.”[41] Eighteenth-century Britons were fascinated with “the moveable products of imperialist accumulation”, Kathleen Wilson notes, and merchants like Etches, the movers of such products, expected the state to regulate and safeguard their commercial environment.[42]

Britain’s capacity to bring places like Nootka Sound into spheres of imperial influence did not simply rest on the determination of a few politicians or flow solely from the Cabinet room. British imperial vision was shaped by more diffuse discourses and practices. The British had a ledger-book imperial mentality. Pitt’s Downing Street
library housed a large collection of maps and “universal histories” of European exploration, and the Board of Trade and Foreign Office kept piles of commercial information. Inscription devices such as the map and the ledger, and advisers such as Dalrymple (and Sir Joseph Banks), allowed ministers to whittle away complexity and picture the world through simpler co-ordinates. We get a glimpse of the synoptic quality of British commercial and imperial thinking in an interview that the Committee of Trade and Plantations conducted with Meares in May 1790. The trader was asked a range of general questions. What was “the highest and lowest latitude of successful commerce” in the North Pacific? Was the Native population large enough to make the demand for British manufactures “considerable”? Was the Asian market for furs likely to become overstocked in the near future? The Committee wanted a broad picture of the value of the sea otter trade rather than a detailed account of how it was conducted. The British Cabinet reduced the intricacies of commercial interaction on distant shores to simpler patterns and equations. Nootka Sound was brought into a realm of political–imperial calculation as well as into the fields of diplomacy and international law.

The process of abstraction I have been describing reflects the rationalist currents of eighteenth-century thought. The British Cabinet had what Mary Louise Pratt calls “imperial eyes” that “passively look out and possess” with forms of knowledge and modes of classification that made the redeployment of the Pacific from European imperial perspectives seem beneficial to the whole world. Dalrymple suggested that the Nootka Sound crisis was essentially a struggle over the “civility” of commerce. Britain, he claimed, was trying to stretch a system of “Universal Commerce” that supplied “the mutual Wants...of ALL MANKIND”, and trying to prevent “the Lives and Property of the PEOPLE” from being “sported away; at the caprice of a Fool! or a Tyrant!”—i.e. by the Spanish. Yet this benign world of commerce was viewed through national lenses. This tension between the universalist and national contours of British imperial vision is encapsulated in Figure 2, *Billy and Harry Fishing For Whales*, published by William Holland in December 1790. Dundas steers the boat while Pitt, revelling in the Convention with Spain, fishes hefty bags of sterling and some small fry out of the South Sea. The Pacific is represented as an abstract, accessible and lucrative space—a free sea full of money. But Pitt and Dundas are placed there, protecting British whalers, filling state coffers, and taking this part of the world out of Spain’s imperial clutches.

British traders did not exploit the terms of the Nootka Convention as fully as Holland prophesied. The Pacific remained a fractured commercial space, and by 1800 American traders dominated the sea otter trade. Following the dispute, Britain sent George Vancouver to the North Pacific to survey the coast and negotiate with Spanish officials at Nootka Sound over the restoration of British property. Vancouver’s diplomacy settled little, and by the mid-1790s Britain and Spain were no longer interested in Nootka Sound. The Spanish quit the region in 1795. However, the Nootka Sound crisis launched a process of imperial abstraction that broadened and deepened over the next 60 years. The British asserted themselves in the Pacific, and the Pacific Northwest was inserted into spheres of European imperial influence and rationalization. Folded into Britain’s assertion of imperial rights was the equation of individual commercial prosperity and national well-being. British politicians collated and recentred knowledge about the Pacific, and claimed the right to make and hold space for British traders. These place-holding tactics, and the relations of appropriation they put in motion, operated above Native heads, in a European space of representation. When politicians
turned to questions of sovereignty in North America, Vancouver’s survey of the coast gathered new imperial meanings.

**Delineating the Oregon Territory**

Howard Jones and Donald Rakestraw note that in the 1840s “free-spirited Americans converged on the [Oregon] territory while equally unruly and outspoken statesman on both sides of the Atlantic transformed the distant territory into the flashpoint of another war-threatening crisis”.[48] An expanding American Republic encountered an old imperial partner, and the Oregon boundary dispute became very acrimonious. For Americans, the continental destiny of the USA, and the twilight of Europe's presence in the New World, was at hand. Throughout this dispute, however, Britain and the USA sought a “mutually convenient” settlement between “civilized nations”. Politicians worked, once more, in an abstract realm, shaping the Oregon Territory with the tools of cartography, partial facts about discovery and occupation, and grand ideas about civilization and savagery. I will sketch how the Oregon Territory was delineated in the diplomatic negotiations of 1818, 1826 and 1843–45.

**Cartography, diplomacy and the 49th parallel**

When questions of jurisdiction in this region first became a focal point of debate, in a round of negotiations held in London in 1818, diplomats concentrated on the status of the 49th parallel as an appropriate boundary. These negotiations culminated in a *Convention* that retracted the sale of the American fur trade post of Astoria at the mouth of Columbia to British traders in 1813 (though America traders never returned there), fixed a boundary from Lake of the Woods (now on the Minnesota/Ontario
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border) along the 49th parallel to the Rockies, and granted Britain and the USA joint
occupancy of the vast area west of the Rockies. Questions of sovereignty were left in
abeyance.

Europeans and Americans had viewed the 49th parallel as an acceptable boundary
separating British and French territory west of the Great Lakes for much of the
eighteenth century, but it had never been instituted by any treaty. When diplomats
stretched this boundary to the Rockies in 1818, they drew on diplomatic and cartographic
notions that stemmed from an Anglo-French congress, held in Paris in 1719 under the
terms of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), which attempted to adjudicate British and French
jurisdiction around Hudson Bay.[49] This congress did not fix any boundaries, but the
idea that the 49th parallel “westward” from the Great Lakes was a convenient border
can be found in instructions to British diplomats.[50] In 1818, American diplomats Albert
Gallatin and Richard Rush suggested that the 49th parallel might be adopted as the
boundary to the Pacific.[51]

Gallatin and Rush did not just work on diplomatic assumption. This boundary was
also engraved on British, American and French maps. Yet the eighteenth-century
cartography of North America was quite varied. Some maps divided British and French
territory around Hudson Bay further north than the 49th parallel—most notably John
Mitchell’s Map of the British and French Dominions in North America (1755), which
was respected on both sides of the Atlantic—and others did not depict any boundaries
west of the Great Lakes. So why did Gallatin and Rush not draw on Mitchell’s map
to argue for a boundary that would run further north than 49 degrees? Gallatin gave
the following explanation: the 49th parallel, he noted, “had been assumed many years
before, as a positive fact” and it

appears very extraordinary that any geographer or map-maker should have invented
the dividing line, with such specific details, without having sufficient grounds for
believing that it had been thus determined by the Commissioners under the treaty of
Utrecht [who met in Paris].[52]

It seems that Gallatin and other diplomats viewed maps as transparent depictions of
an assumed geopolitical order. Mitchell’s map did not encourage dispute because it did
not represent diplomat wisdom and gave no geopolitical precedent for the existence of
other boundaries.[53]

In these negotiations cartography and diplomacy, image and assumed reality, re-
inforced one another. Maps depicting the 49th parallel compounded the idea that this
was a suitable boundary. Diplomats strove for quick boundary settlement, and their
willingness to carve up the continent in this fashion points to recent arguments about
the cartographic texture of nation-states. As scholars such as Richard Helgerson and
Matthew Sparke have tried to show, the status of the state as a unified space that
governments and citizens see as their land and nation depends on the advent of the
state as a territorially defined entity and actor.[54] Cartography was central to the arrival
and presentation of states as nation-states. Maps were both instruments of state power
and constitutive of the nation-state. The state needed to be mapped—given its own
exclusive space, these scholars suggest—before it could become a fully-fledged field of
state intervention and national space. This, in effect, is what Gallatin started to create
in 1818. The state began to appear in what John Quincy Adams (then US Secretary
of State) called “the Western deserts” of North America in the guise of a clear, geometric
division of state jurisdiction.[55] The British objected to Gallatin’s suggestion because
the 49th parallel bisected the British fur trade, which was firmly implanted west of the
Rockies, but this mode of resolving questions of sovereignty—this territorialization of state jurisdiction—continued. From 1818, the 49th parallel remained a geopolitical pinion of debate.
Annals of discovery and occupation

By 1826, when Britain’s Foreign Secretary, George Canning, prompted another round of negotiations, ideas about the region had changed. In 1819, Adams concluded the Treaty of Florida with Spain, which extended the US border from Texas to the Pacific at 42°N, and in 1824 he struck an agreement with the Russians, limiting their territorial pretensions to 54°40′N (see Figure 3). The region between these lines of latitude became known as the Oregon Territory and Adams touted President James Monroe’s position that the USA would reject the “application of [any British] colonial principles of exclusion” to this or any other unclaimed region in America.[56] Meanwhile, Canning had been lobbied by the directors of the Hudson’s Bay Company, who complained that the USA planned to establish military posts in the Oregon Territory and argued that the free navigation of the Columbia River was essential to their business on the Pacific.[57] The Company absorbed the Montreal-based North West Company in 1821 and established the Columbia Department west of the Rockies as part of a major commercial expansion. By 1826, the Company had 13 establishments scattered between the lower Columbia River and headwaters of the Fraser River. When the head of the Company’s North American operations, George Simpson, toured the Columbia Department in 1824–5, he confirmed that it had enormous commercial potential, but he warned his superiors that if the 49th parallel was adopted as the boundary, the Company’s new, lucrative spatial economy would crumble.[58] The Company had an important, if shifting, influence on British political attitudes towards the Oregon Territory. As J. S. Galbraith has observed: “as a chartered monopoly in an age increasingly devoted to the idea of free trade, the Company was unpopular with most British politicians . . . but it was nevertheless a British company and [in the mid-1820s] those who attacked it as a domestic institution were usually prepared to support it in its conflicts with foreign states”.[59]

Canning and the Company were determined to retain the territory between the Columbia and the 49th parallel, and it was with these strategic interests in mind that the British diplomats at the 1826 negotiations were instructed to focus on the timing and spacing of discovery and occupation in the Oregon Territory.[60] Gallatin and his British counterpart, William Huskisson, advanced views of sovereignty that were based, again, on felicitous readings of the law of nations, a small number of debating points, and some propitious facts. Gallatin claimed that the USA had exclusive title to the area between the 49th parallel and the Columbia River. His argument hinged on questions of discovery. The American sea otter trader Robert Gray discovered the Columbia in May 1792, naming it after his vessel, and the American explorers Lewis and Clark were the first Westerners to descend the river from one of its sources, in 1805. But in 1826, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s headquarters west of the Rockies were located at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia—so named by Simpson to mark Vancouver’s “discovery of the River [five months after Gray] and the Coast on behalf of Gt Britain”—and Gallatin quickly recognized that for the British, “mere discovery without occupation constitutes no title”.[61] The British also offered a different reading of discovery. As they saw it, Vancouver’s survey and map of the coast, and his expedition up the Columbia River, diminished American claims to the river because he was sent on an official scientific expedition, whereas Gray had embarked on “a lucky adventure”. H. U. Addington, Undersecretary of State at the Foreign Office, summarized Britain’s position for Canning thus:

The American title...is founded on the expeditions of Gray, and of Lewis, and Clarke... but more especially of the first, Gray, a private trader, and sailing in a private Merchant Vessel...
Great Britain proceeds to oppose to the[se] names... those of Meares, Cook, and Vancouver, all sent on publick expeditions fitted out by their Government; but especially the latter, who, in, 1792, explored most minutely every part of the Coast in question, and took formal possession of it in the name of Great Britain...[62]

Gallatin countered Addington’s appeal to the authoritativeness of “official” surveys by insisting that Gray was the “true” discoverer of the river and noting that Lewis and Clark ventured west under the patronage of President Jefferson.[63] And when Britain tried to base a claim to the coast south of the 49th parallel on Meares’s discoveries, Gallatin stressed that the trader was looking for the Straits of Juan to Fuca and had bestowed names near the Columbia River that were “indicative of his total failure to find the Strait”—Cape Disappointment and Deception Bay. In other words, Britain and the USA emphasized that symbolic acts of possession-taking—in this instance, acts of naming and the scientific status of exploration—had a cardinal but variegated connection with questions of sovereignty. The most significant feats of territorial appropriation, they argued, were underpinned by imperial intentions that were at once public and scientific. A proper—or fitting—imperial space, they implied, was a rational space fostered by the state.

This appeal to the spirit and purpose of ‘official’ projects of exploration did not take the Hudson’s Bay Company’s out of the scene of sovereignty; rather, this debate about the authority of science and state patronage was dovetailed with arguments about the imperial geography that could be construed from processes of trade and settlement.[64] Britain objected to “the American doctrine, that the occupation of one point on a River gives, ipso facto, to the Occupant an exclusive title to the whole extent of the Country watered by that River”. Britain could demolish this argument, Addington suggested, by proving that British traders occupied the region drained by the Columbia first and had occupied it continuously since 1810. Gallatin grasped that “occupancy and mutual convenience” were “the only bases of any arrangement” that Britain would accept, but he set up this idea of convenience in a different way. The USA, he claimed, could derive rights of sovereignty on the ground of contiguity and population which gave them a better right to the adjacent unoccupied land than could be set up by any other Nation... How much more natural and stronger the claim when made by a Nation, whose population extended to the central parts of the Continent, and whose dominions were by all acknowledged to extend to the Stony Mountains.

Gallatin suggested that Britain had acknowledged this principle of contiguity in numerous imperial proclamations and colonial charters. The USA pursued this argument about its “natural” right to expand westwards up to 1846 (it was part of what became known as the doctrine of manifest destiny), but Britain would not accept it. Simpson pointed out that the USA showed no intention of occupying the Oregon Territory, and when American settlers did start to venture over the Rockies, in the 1840s, Company personnel insisted that British traders were the first and bona fide occupants of the region.[65]

The Oregon Territory was becoming a combative diplomatic space, and the state (in the guise of national territorial rights derived from Gray and Vancouver) was becoming an increasingly visible player in its future. As with the Nootka Sound crisis, however, politicians also objectified this region as an exclusively Western—or absolute—space of dispute. In 1845, a British philanthropist, Henry Howells, reminded the British government that this space was occupied by over one hundred thousand Native people, to whom “it rightfully belongs, and not in equity to either of the nations claiming the
same”, but his message was ignored. Such issues had effectively been buried much earlier.[66] Gallatin noted that

Mr Huskisson said that it would be lamentable that... the United States and Great Britain should be drawn to a rupture on such a subject as the uncultivated wilds of the North West Coast. But the honour and dignity of both countries must be respected, and the mutual convenience of both parties should also be consulted. He then objected to the straight line which we proposed [the 49th parallel] as having no regard to such convenience... [because] its cutting off the southern portion of Quadra & Vancouver’s Island... was quite inadmissible.[67]

Questions of “convenience” did not glide over Native land and people simply because politicians assumed that Natives were uncultivated people who were irrelevant to an Anglo-American colonial future. More accurately, Native land was being thoroughly worked over by diplomats, and Native people were made to disappear in networks of imperial signification. The Pacific Northwest was being turned into an “uncultivated wild” by explorers such as Vancouver, who mapped the coast with great precision. Vancouver’s cartography barely acknowledged a Native presence or the contact process going on along the coast. The Oregon Territory was being desocialized by a cartographic and diplomatic apparatus of representation and refilled with imperial imagery. The 49th parallel cleaved the interior and Vancouver’s cartographic lines hugged the coast.

**Imperial enlightenment?**

The diplomats at the 1826 negotiations failed to establish a border and the joint occupancy agreement was renewed. The boundary issue was not agitated again until the late 1830s, when a USA Senator, Lewis Linn, launched a political campaign to get Van Buren’s government to promote American claims to and settlement in the Oregon Territory, and an increasing number of American politicians started to discuss the issue in Congress. In October 1843, Abel Upshur (then US Secretary of State) noted that past negotiations had “very nearly exhausted the argument”, but politicians and diplomats proceeded to interpret the territorial implications of past treaties more fully and look for a “civilised settlement”.[68] US politicians John Calhoun and James Buchanan presented their nation’s territorial case to Britain in exhaustive detail. With the Oregon Territory now delimited by two lines of latitudes, they tried to work out how British and American jurisdiction might fill the Oregon Territory to its geographical limits. They were particularly concerned with how principles of continuity could be extrapolated from acts of discovery and occupation. Explorers who discovered part of an island, they argued, could “reasonably” claim “the whole”, and those who discovered the source of a river could claim “the entire region drained by it”. Calhoun added that the USA had a good claim to all the lands west of the Mississippi between latitudes 42° and 54°40” north by virtue of international treaties and conventions stretching back to the Peace of Paris (1763). The USA, he claimed, had inherited all of France’s and Spain’s claims to the American continent and the Pacific. Britain’s minister plenipotentiary to Washington, Richard Pakenham, assured Lord Aberdeen, Britain’s Foreign Secretary, that the claim Calhoun derived from France was “good for nothing” and that the rights the USA inherited from Spain were restricted by the stipulations of the Nootka Convention. Packenham asked Calhoun to concentrate on the details of British and American discovery and occupation in the region.[69]

During this last set of negotiations, the past and the present, and different logics of imperial fashioning—the authority and geographical scope of treaties, the cartographic
austerity of the 49th parallel, and the more intricate imaginative geographies of sovereignty that could be extrapolated from explorers’ and traders’ discoveries—started to collide. These different ways of spatializing and historicizing this imperial domain had become deeply intertwined and were not easily unravelled. The Oregon Territory had become what Aberdeen called thoroughly “litigated ground”, and Buchanan noted that the diplomatic dispute now turned around “irresistible inferences” and “superadded titles”. This region had become a multi-faceted imperial space that was congested with Western legal principles, imperial inferences and local exigencies. In other respects, though, this dispute boiled down to a few grand images and debating points: “civilised” nations imposing themselves on “uncultivated wilds”; the clash of different imperial philosophies; and Gray or Vancouver as the “true” discoverers of the Columbia.

Britain and the USA claimed rights over a region that they deemed to be “settled only by savages”, as Upshur put it, and politicians put their stamp on this region by depicting themselves as enlightened peacemakers who were bringing uncultivated lands and peoples under the aegis of reason and civilization. In July 1845, Buchanan observed:

If the discovery of the mouth of a river [Gray], followed up within a reasonable time by the first exploration [Lewis and Clark]…do not constitute a title to the territory drained by its waters in the nation performing these acts, then the principles consecrated by the practice of civilized nations ever since the discovery of the New World must have lost their force. These principles were necessary to preserve the peace of the world. Had they not been enforced in practice clashing claims to newly-discovered territory and perpetual strife among the nations would have been the inevitable result.[70]

Buchanan implied that this dispute was about the nature of diplomacy itself. He and Pakenham elaborated what might be called a hermeneutics of imperial discretion, rehearsing and interpreting each other’s territorial claims in considerable detail, establishing a long historical geography of “consecrated” principles and practices, and working towards a “civilised” settlement. But behind this image of the rational peacemaker, of course, there remained utilitarian affairs of state and ideas of national destiny. Buchanan’s model of imperial enlightenment—his diplomatic textualization of space—was encompassed by American expansionist energy. American pioneers were pouring into the Willamette Valley south the Columbia and US Senators declared that these Americans’ interests would be protected at any price.

Pakenham’s response to Buchanan was infused with the same mixture of diplomatic reason and state utilitarianism. In 1792, he argued,

Vancouver…circumnavigated the island which now bears his name; and here we have…as complete a case of discovery, exploration, and settlement [Fort Victoria on the southern end of island, established by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1843], as can well be presented, giving to Great Britain…the strongest possible claim to the exclusive possession of that island.

In 1841–42 the Hudson’s Bay Company alerted the Foreign Office to American plans to evict British traders from the region, but Aberdeen did not address the Company’s worries until the mid-1840s, when American congressional resolutions over Oregon started to be supported by the executive, and when British political debate about Oregon started to be overshadowed by the Irish potato famine and splits in Prime Minister Robert Peel’s Cabinet over the repeal of the Corn Laws.[71] According to Galbraith, Aberdeen would not be intimidated by the Company, and by 1846 he was willing to give up the Columbia. Aberdeen viewed the 49th parallel as a territorial compromise that would not damage national honour, but he was determined to hold
on to Vancouver Island. The island was important to Britain for both practical and analytical reasons. Anticipating an unfavourable boundary settlement, the Hudson’s Bay Company established a trade depot (Fort Victoria) on the south end of the island in 1843. More holistically, Vancouver’s survey made Britain’s claim “complete” because it lay at the heart of a body of imperial plans, activities and representations that stretched from 1790 to 1846.[72] Vancouver Island had become central to Britain’s geopolitical and commercial relationship with the Pacific Northwest.

Simpson, who toured the American settlements and missions around the Columbia in the summer 1841, also came to the opinion that the 49th parallel was a reasonable compromise. Richard Mackie has shown that a declining fur trade and the development of profitable export industries “were the background to Simpson’s 1842 decision to realign the company’s business to the resource-rich northern region”. The 1840s, Mackie continues, ended “a thirty-year period during which the British fur traders effectively controlled the non-Native commerce of the coastal and interior districts between California and Russian America”. Both Aberdeen and Simpson thought that the adoption of the 49th parallel as the international border would leave the Hudson’s Bay Company with “a viable economy”. As Mackie summarizes the geographical reorientation of the Company’s commercial strategies west of the Rockies between 1824 and 1842:

While Fort Vancouver reflected Simpson’s 1824–5 plans for the [Columbia] department, Fort Victoria mirrored the experience of the intervening two decades and his new plans. The fur trades of the Columbia and Fraser drainages figured prominently in the 1820s. Terminus of the York Factory Express and the interior fur brigades, Fort Vancouver was built near the end of the transcontinental trade route . . . [and was] accessible from the lower Columbia.

Fort Victoria, on the other hand, was a Pacific depot, accessible to the Company’s new deep-sea commerce from Oahu, Sitka, and San Francisco, as well as from London. Access to the Pacific was immediate: there was no hazardous and time-consuming river bar to cross [at the mouth of the Columbia]. The new post was to be the base of an ocean-borne commerce with Pacific markets.[73]

In fine, the Hudson’s Bay Company was no longer as dependent on the drainage systems that emptied into the Pacific.

Britain and the USA compromised in June 1846, stretching the 49th parallel from the Rockies to the Gulf of Georgia and leaving Britain Vancouver Island. The Oregon Territory had become both an absolute imperial space framed by lines of latitude and a combative imperial domain with ardent national geographies—America’s Columbia River and Britain’s Vancouver Island—inscribed within it.

Aftermaths and reflections

The Oregon Territory cut the Hudson’s Bay Company’s immense Columbia Department in half and induced formal colonial relations. The Oregon Donation Act of 1850 allowed American settlers to acquire land in Oregon and Washington in breach of federal land laws relating to Indian country, which stipulated that the US government had to extinguish Native title first; and in 1849, Britain, worried about “the encroaching spirit” of the USA, awarded the Hudson’s Bay Company a charter to colonise Vancouver Island.[74] The Charter of Grant stated that the Company should protect “the welfare of the natives”, but it did not mention Native title to land. James Douglas, who became colonial governor of the island in 1851, was subsequently instructed to extinguish Native title. During the 1850s, he made 14 small land treaties with Native groups. Yet
the colonization of Vancouver Island—and later British Columbia—proceeded on the assumption that this was British territory. British sovereignty was secure and colonists viewed the region through Vancouver’s lenses, remarking that Britain’s new colonial possession was an empty and alluring land “full of promise and hope”.[73] “[T]here are some unquestionably who know our [Vancouver] Island by name alone”, the son of a British fur trader noted, “and recognise in it an almost mythical locality”. Cook, Vancouver, and politicians who drew on their texts, had shaped an anticipatory geography of colonialism. They fostered a process of engagement that resituated the meaning of contact and denigrated Native people.

The Oregon Treaty was a rationalization of 60 years of Western imperial fashioning. The politicians who drafted the boundary settlement drew on a complex of power, knowledge and geography that emanated from western corridors of power and ran with particular brands of information that came from the Pacific Northwest. The treaty was the result of an intricate history of imperial delineation, and this history framed the transformation of geopolitical abstractions into the occupied colonial territories of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. A particular way of dealing with a distant region had become entrenched: the British Colonial Office and American Government took on regions that they hardly knew and trusted their colonial development to locals with experience, such as Hudson’s Bay Company traders. This situation gave colonial governors like Douglas, and American pioneers, considerable leeway to adapt state directives as they saw fit and develop new, local modes of colonial appropriation.

I have tried to show that the Pacific Northwest was a not an inert plane over which a geopolitical drama unfolded. It was created through a concatenation of diplomatic arguments and competing national outlooks. Part of my purpose in this paper has been to show that histories of imperial aggrandisement are spatial histories. Western discourses on sovereignty were not imposed on the Pacific Northwest in a unitary or programmatic way. They were discursive practices that both fashioned, and were fashioned by, encapsulated knowledges about the lands they ranged over. These diplomatic disputes point to the geographical-cum-representational violence of imperialism. Native land was appropriated from afar, and embodied geographies of interaction were pared down and abstracted away, to the point where territory actually became non-native, underlying Native claims to the soil were seen only dimly, if at all, and territory was emptied of prior significations and seen as an imperial shell awaiting colonial development. “The Oregon territory is a subject of curiosity”, a reviewer for The Gentleman’s Magazine wrote in 1845, “because it is said to be the only remaining portion of the globe where there lies an unoccupied territory, suitable to receive the emigration from populous countries”. [77]

I have emphasized the connections between territorial appropriation and geographical abstraction, and the composite—and often contradictory—make-up of arguments for sovereignty. The imperial fashioning of the Pacific Northwest was fuelled and supported by a range of interests, knowledges and strategies. It was fuelled by both grand and piecemeal imperial projects, and by a set of auspicious local facts and knowledges. These projects, and the political, diplomatic and legal precepts and practices that were pertinent to them, shaped how these facts and knowledges entered into imperial equations, were packaged for imperial purposes, and were used to shape arguments for sovereignty. Such arguments both reflected and fed into a set of Western assumptions about non-Western lands and peoples, and more strictly national interests and strategies. In turn, the facts of discovery, exploration and occupation that politicians and diplomats worked with conditioned how British and American sovereignty was superimposed on Native territory and how the Pacific Northwest was carved up as imperial space and
colonized. To borrow and embellish one of Jody Berland’s formulations, the Nootka and Oregon disputes produced imperial space “as traversed space”—as “space that has been mapped and shaped by specific imperial forms of knowledge and interest”.[78]

Finally, in regions like the Pacific Northwest, where Natives and non-natives still struggle to accommodate each other’s attachments to land and Native land claims are still with the courts and government treaty commissions, it is important to reflect on what sovereignty and colonialism rest on as well as what they amount to. The process of abstraction I have described amounts to a system of geographical and cultural effacement, but it was a system, I have emphasized, that stemmed from variegated practices of representation and incommensurable imperial understandings. If we reflect on the arbitrariness of imperial aggrandisement—on the fact that Native people were not asked or required to acknowledge the Western ideas and assumptions that encompassed their land, and dwell on the notion that spaces of sovereignty such as the Oregon Territory are historically and geographically complex constructions—we may begin to build more multi-dimensional genealogies of empire. Genealogies in Foucault’s sense of the term: investigations of the past that make the present seem not “as necessary as all that”, and ones that recognize that there are “a whole order of levels of different types of events differing in amplitude, chronological breadth, and capacity to produce effects”.[79]

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Notes


[2] For a fuller discussion of these disputes, see D. Clayton, Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island (Vancouver 1999).

[3] For a good survey of these dynamics, see A. Loomba, Colonialism/Postcolonialism (London 1998).


[13] Henceforth, cumbersome citations from primary sources will be given in notes at the end of a paragraph. Merry to Leeds, 4 January 1790, Leeds to Merry, 2 February 1790, Public Record Office, London [hereafter PRO] FO 72/16, 87–8, 130–2; Campo de Alange to Leeds (trans.), 10 February 1790, Chatham Papers, PRO 30/8/341, 65–7; Leeds to Pitt 23 February 1790, Chatham Papers, PRO 30/8/151, 55–6; Leeds to Campo de Alange, 26 February 1790, PRO FO 16/72, 136.


[20] Cook depicted the coast with a thin line and left the vast area between the coast and Hudson Bay blank. His cartographic baseline was strengthened by the team that prepared his chart (which was drawn by Henry Roberts) for publication. Alexander Dalrymple and Sir Joseph Banks—the veritable custodians of geographical knowledge about the Pacific during this period—played an important role in the engraving of this chart. It was they who persuaded the Admiralty to omit the Hudson's Bay Company's interior discoveries from this map and highlight only Cook's endeavours. They viewed Cook's chart as a record of maritime exploration and thus wanted to depict only what Cook had seen. See H. Wallis, Publication of Cook's journals: some new sources and assessments, *Pacific Studies* 1 (1978) 163–94; T. Campbell, A Cook mystery solved, *The Map Collector* 32 (1985) 37.

[21] On this filling in, see G. Williams, Myth and reality: the theoretical geography of the northwest coast from Cook to Vancouver, in Fisher and Johnston, *op. cit.*, 35–50.

[22] Meares, memorial (draft) and enclosures, PRO HO 28/61, 291–373. The memorial was published by the British government in May, and summaries of it appeared in the London Times and The Gentleman's Magazine.


[24] P. Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge 1995) 16–40; Leeds to Pitt, 2 June 1790, Chatham Papers, PRO 30/8/151, 57; Leeds to Fitzherbert, 5 July and 17 August 1790, PRO FO 72/18, 22, 189. These points about possession were echoed by many opposition politicians and pamphleteers.

[25] Dalrymple to Nepean, 3 July and 20 August 1790, PRO 95/7/4, 339–41, 438; Leeds to Fitzherbert, draft instructions, letters and enclosures, 7 and 16 May 1790, PRO FO 72/17,
35–88; Leeds to Pitt, 5 July 1790, Leeds to Fitzherbert, 16 August 1790, Leeds Papers, BL Add.MSS. 28066, 67, 217.

[26] Floridablanca to Merry, enclosure in Merry to Leeds, 4 June 1790, PRO FO 72/17, 239–61; Floridablanca to Fitzherbert, translations and enclosures in Fitzherbert to Leeds, 16 June 1790, Leeds Papers, Add.MSS. 28066, 27–55. For the texts of the treaties and royal orders referred to by Floridablanca, see F. G. Davenport, European Treaties Bearing on the History of the USA and its Dependencies (Washington 1917); C. Revillade Gigedo, Reports...on California, 1768–1793, Land of Sunshine 11 (1899), 168–70.

[27] Leeds to Fitzherbert, 4 May, 22 June, PRO FO 72/17, 20, 343; Leeds to Fitzherbert, 5 July, 17 August 1790, PRO FO 72/18, 22–3, 75.


[34] On Spain’s dealings with the estranged Louis XVI of France, and Luzerne’s and Mirabeau’s denunciation of the old Family Compact between the French and Spanish Bourbons, see Black, op. cit., and J. Derry, Politics in the Age of Fox, Pitt and Liverpool: Continuity and Transformation (London 1990) 80 and passim.


[41] On these collections, see Ehrman, op. cit., 348 and passim; J. Hutton (Ed.), Selections From the Letters and Correspondence of Sir James Bland Burges (London 1885). Burges was Undersecretary of State at the Foreign Office and prepared an expurgated—official—narrative of the Nootka Sound crisis: Great Britain, Official Papers Relative to the Dispute Between the Courts of Great Britain and Spain... (London 1790).


[51] Adams to Gallatin and Rush, 28 July 1818; protocol on the sixth conference, 9 October 1818; Gallatin and Rush to Adams, 20 October 1818, in W. R. Manning (Ed.), Diplomatic Correspondence of the USA: Canadian Relations, 5 vols (Washington 1945) I, 281, 872, 878. On American assumptions about the boundary, see W. Sturgis, The northwest fur trade, and the Indians of the Oregon Country 1788–1830, in S. E. Morrison (Ed.), Old Southern Leaflets (1845) n.p. The 49th parallel was also appealing to the British because it would bring British traders in contact with the Mississippi River and might authorize them to trade inside the USA. It did not become clear that the headwaters of the Mississippi lay below the 49th parallel until the 1820s. In 1818, the USA refused Britain access to the river under any terms. See W. Goetzmann, New Lands, New Men: America and the Second Great Age of Discovery (New York 1986) 150–5.

[52] A. Gallatin, The Oregon Question (New York 1846) 23–4. More immediately, Gallatin’s idea stemmed from an Anglo-American convention of 1807, when American plenipotentiaries proposed the 49th parallel as an appropriate border west of Lake of the woods “as far as the respective territories of the two parties extend in that quarter”.


[60] There had been a round of negotiations in 1823–24. Britain proposed a boundary that ran along the 49th parallel to the Columbia, and then down the river to the Pacific. Gallatin returned to London in 1826 with a counter-proposal—the 49th parallel to the Pacific, but allowing British subjects use of the Columbia if it proved navigable from its point of intersection with the parallel. Britain rejected the offer but came back with a compromise, proposing the Columbia River as the main boundary but granting the USA what is now the Olympic Peninsula and therefore some good deep-water harbours in Puget Sound. Gallatin considered the offer offensive—an attempt to create an American island in British territory. Thus, when the 1826 negotiations started, Britain and the USA were back at square one. See Manning, Diplomatic Correspondence, II, 55–76.

[61] Merk, Fur Trade and Empire, 124; Gallatin to Clay, 16 November 1826, Manning, Diplomatic Correspondence, II, 529–36.


[63] These formulations can be tracked in Manning, Diplomatic Correspondence, II, docs 920–31.

[64] The quotations in this and the next paragraph come from Stapleton, op. cit., and Gallatin to Clay, 16 and 25 November 1826, Manning, Diplomatic Correspondence, II, 529–36.


[68] Upshur to Everett, 9 October 1843, Manning, Diplomatic Correspondence, III, 210–3 (Upshur’s emphasis).

[70] Buchanan to Pakenham, 12 July 1845, Great Britain, Oregon Territory, 34–9; Douglas to Simpson, 23 October 1843, PAM-HBCA, D.599, 119.


[72] Packenham to Buchanan, 29 July 1845, Great Britain, Oregon Territory, 43.


[75] C. Forbes, Vancouver Island: Its Resources and Capabilities as a Colony (Victoria 1862) 1–2.


[77] The Gentleman’s Magazine, n.s. 23 (1845) 284. This reviewer was discussing John Dunn’s History of the Oregon Territory (1944).
