

# Before and After the State

*Politics, Poetics, and People(s)  
in the Pacific Northwest*

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and Daniel L. Boxberger**



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# Contents

List of Figures and Tables / vii

Acknowledgments / ix

Introduction: Hegemonic Transformation and the  
Imposition of the State in the Pacific Northwest / 1

*Lisa Philips and Allan K. McDougall*

## PART 1: SUPERIMPOSING A STATIST STRUCTURE: SETTING THE STAGE

**1** Setting the Political Stage in the Pacific Northwest / 11

*Allan K. McDougall*

**2** Identities on the Fringe / 30

*Daniel L. Boxberger*

**3** Eastern Games, Western Lives, 1793–1846 / 47

*Allan K. McDougall*

**4** Superimposing the Statist System / 76

*Allan K. McDougall*

**5** On a Mission: Translocality and Hegemonic  
Transformation in Nineteenth-Century Oregon / 88

*Allan K. McDougall*

**6** The Impact of Hegemonic Change on Blended  
Communities / 104

*Daniel L. Boxberger*

PART 2: HEGEMONIC TRANSFORMATION: ROLES,  
PLAYERS, AND IMPROVISATIONS

- 7** Creating a Script: Hegemonic Transformation,  
Identity, and Translocality / 137  
*Allan K. McDougall*
- 8** Defining Roles and Constructing the Cast / 147  
*Lisa Philips*
- 9** Early Improvisations: Ranald MacDonald / 160  
*Lisa Philips*
- 10** Written out of the Script: Three Generations  
of McKays / 179  
*Lisa Philips*
- 11** Later Revisions: (Re)constructing the Cast of US  
and Canadian Pioneers / 207  
*Lisa Philips*
- Conclusion: Epic Scripts / 233  
*Lisa Philips and Allan K. McDougall*
- Notes / 257
- Index / 293

*Introduction*  
Hegemonic Transformation and  
the Imposition of the State in the  
Pacific Northwest

*Lisa Philips and Allan K. McDougall*

AS FASCISM ROSE IN Europe following the Great War, workers in Italy attempted a revolution. In assessing their aborted attempt from his cell, Antonio Gramsci, then imprisoned by the fascist government of Benito Mussolini, realized that the elite – in the form of those holding social, cultural, and economic ascendancy – enjoyed power through a combination of their capacity to enforce their will over the population *and* public acceptance or tolerance of their actions. Given the pervasiveness of domination by an elite group, Gramsci attempted to craft a worker-dominated social order to replace the capitalist one, but he found that such a transposition required more than adapting power relations, and the task proved formidable. Altering the economic order was not sufficient, since the social order was also at play.<sup>1</sup>

When a dominant class – whatever it is and however it is defined – is able to enforce its interests and negotiate acceptance of those interests with a receptive society, then it becomes hegemonic.<sup>2</sup> To replace the elite in postwar Europe, a collective identity had to be established that ignored the cultural practices of the old order. How does hegemonic transformation take place? How can its impact be measured? These questions lie at the heart of this book. To understand the process of hegemonic change and its impact on the lives and identities of a region's inhabitants, we have trained our sights on the Pacific Northwest, a unique setting that, in less than a century, changed from a stateless territory, to a fur trade regime, to an immigrant settler state.

Under contested or joint sovereignty from the earliest European settlements in the 1790s through the mid-1840s, the lack of a single presiding state in the Pacific Northwest prevented the establishment of a legal order. During this period of institutional flux, the area's residents lived under an evolving set of social institutions. Then, in the 1840s, the British–US border was imposed in the region that we now know as British Columbia,

Oregon, and Washington. As settlers arrived from eastern North America, they brought with them tools to maintain and define public order. A segment of society, the newly arrived settlers from the East, gained state control and used that control to promote and maintain their view of the public good. What did the imposition of statist institutions mean for those living in the area? Who got to be a member, or a citizen? Family relations had previously been foundational to identity, but as legal orders and new constraints were placed on the already diverse societies residing in the region, physical location and social position came to define choices available to individuals. Legal regimes and court cases provided labels to set categories of identities – and the rights associated with those identities.

In the pages that follow, we focus on that transitional, pivotal time in the Pacific Northwest to examine the mechanisms of social domination over individuals and then to trace the continuation of this hegemonic transformation in nation building through the early twenty-first century. While reviewing the fluctuating amalgamations of state power, legal authority, collective leadership, and public acceptance and acquiescence, we ask: How does a state take root in a territory previously free of boundaries?

The pervasive fluidity of social worlds is frequently lost in scholarly studies of the imposition of statist systems.<sup>3</sup> And although much excellent contemporary scholarship addresses identity, academics often accept or assign surprisingly static categories – such as capitalist, Indian, or colonizer – usually under the guise of critical studies of class, race (or ethnicity), and gender, and many of the categories used to describe or delineate historically located people and groups have been applied after the fact. This book is about identity, hegemonic transformation, the state, *and* the political and social constructions that give form to contemporary, mainstream histories and to ongoing national narratives. In essence, it is about the building blocks of contemporary assumptions behind presumed identity and power in British Columbia, Oregon, and Washington.

Both histories and national narratives work very much like plays on a proscenium stage presented from a distant and static perspective.<sup>4</sup> The audience is allowed a single vantage point, one that has been constructed very carefully by the author of the play. The players on the stage, the backdrop, and the props are chosen to present a consistent and coherent reading of the events that unfold according to each meticulously scripted plot or mythos. Throughout this book, we deconstruct both the proscenium stage on which nineteenth-century Pacific Northwest narratives have

been performed and the building blocks of those performances – the histories. We then present a diachronic exploration detailing how such spectacles are continually reconstructed to serve a multitude of ends, both conscious and unconscious, by looking behind the set and beyond the script.

We seek to address fundamental issues and questions about the impact of imposing a border across a region already teeming with vibrant and dynamic social interactions that spanned and merged economic, cultural, and kin relations. The stories of people’s lives grabbed our attention and galvanized our interest, much as reality TV has captured public attention in the past two decades. Reality shows are not unlike historiography: while almost all historical recounts have a basis in some actions in the past, the presentations are mediated through the mores and expectations of those editing (or scripting) the events. People’s lives draw us in. We crave stories of their overcoming of obstacles, their wealth, their successes, their failures, their skills, their cunning, and their celebrity – and at times their mere notoriety. People are even interested in postnotoriety: “Where are they now?” But while the stories are the hook, scholars wishing to move beyond voyeurism or the spectacle must pursue the patterns hidden within and between the stories – or they may ascribe, or construct, an epic dimension to the past to bolster their own present or future.

The authors of this book have been working together since 2003, exploring archival traces of individuals’ lives and documenting links between those lives and the social and political changes wrought when state borders were imposed.<sup>5</sup> For the contested period between 1810 and 1846, we found that existing narratives of the early western United States tend to focus on the individuals who made good: that is, the stories recount the accumulation of capital, whether economic, social, or symbolic. Most accounts of the formation of the United States, especially those written before the late twentieth century, emphasize the settlers’ “triumphs” over the British; over large non-US corporations (viz., the Hudson’s Bay Company); over the “extinct” and then the “warring” Native Americans; and finally over the “undeserving” trappers and traders, who claimed land in the region prior to the influx of American cross-continental settlers of Northern European origin. Alternatively, contemporary British-Canadian histories of the West *north* of the forty-ninth parallel offer a detailed account of the incorporation of a largely British-designed and -populated West into the greater Canadian Confederation project. However, as is evident throughout this book, the stories that emerged from our research

did not always fit those rather narrowly conceived but widely circulated narratives.

Because this study began with the impact of the imposition of the border on well-established communities, we expanded more traditional studies by tracing the impact of shifting hegemonic structures through multiple generations. Pierre Bourdieu is one of the few theoreticians who attempted to address multigenerational social hierarchies through the transference of capital.<sup>6</sup> One of the most compelling components of Bourdieu's model of mechanisms of social domination is his inclusion of the capacity of social actors to actively impose and engage their cultural productions and symbolic systems in the reproduction of social hierarchies. According to Bourdieu: "In modern society there are two distinct systems of social hierarchization. The first is economic, in which position and power are determined by money and property, the capital one commands. The second system is cultural or symbolic. In this one's status is determined by how much cultural or 'symbolic capital' one possesses."<sup>7</sup> His insights into the importance of nonmonetary forms of capital, including the accumulation and exchange of such capital through means as varied as marriage and education, opened up novel approaches to studying complex social positioning and change. But what about potentially incommensurate forms of capital that belonged to different societies that were put into contact with each other through migratory influx? What if, in that admixture of different social groups, the forms of capital were not set – were not recognizable or recognized and accepted by all the jostling groups? In the final chapters, we return to Bourdieu to answer some of these questions and to document some of the effects that shifts in capital – especially social capital – made in the lives of people born in the West prior to the imposition of the border.

As is documented repeatedly throughout this book, histories are written using contemporary currency that reflects the capital of the day. But the currency (or capital) *du jour* changes, which is why certain characters or players may be written out of a given historical account – written out of the script – but then, later, may be reclaimed as players, if their capital is re-evaluated in a new era.

This book contains an alternate view to studies defining sovereignty on the West Coast, to the steps to territorial government in Oregon, and to the role of nationalism in ongoing and current social constructions. It highlights personal and popular acquiescence to the hegemon, it details the malleable character of identity, and it addresses the agency of

marginalized residents – in contrast to their public erasure – as they survived or fought to survive in a rapidly changing constellation of external constraints. The authors, all of whom have extensive experience in archival research and who live and work on both sides of the border, used correspondence from local, regional, and national archives; contemporaneous social media from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries; and other secondary sources, whether early histories or newspapers, as *primary* data documenting contemporary perspectives to inform their analyses. The resulting mosaic provided the foundation for generalization rather than the test for an established hypothesis: that is, the methods and arguments were inductive rather than deductive. This approach enabled the arguments to grow from the recorded and reported experiences of people, resulting in the accentuation of individual agency.

In this book, we trace the incorporation of the Pacific Northwest into distant economic, legal, and political practices; outline the impact that the resultant hegemonic transformation had on people living in the region; and attempt to isolate the influences of distant icons and practices of governance. For example, what impact did the imposition of external labels invoked by others holding intellectual credentials, social ascendancy, or religious or secular office have on people situated in the changing social and political milieu of the nineteenth-century Pacific Northwest? Was a belief in constitutional structures necessary to maintaining order, or did it facilitate the emergence of hegemonic power in the hands of those accustomed to it?

[Part 1](#) of the book documents how the Pacific Northwest was incorporated into the statist order, and [Part 2](#) comprises a set of case studies that deconstruct the narratives of that hegemonic transformation. Much of this book focuses on the discrete lives of individuals who moved to or who were born in the Pacific Northwest *before* 1846, the year the boundary dividing the region into British and American domains was imposed. Those individuals had some local agency in defining, changing, or maintaining their identities – including the option of withdrawing from the newly emerging state-oriented society. At the same time, later constructions of history had the capacity to redefine those individuals to reflect contemporary values of the evolving nations and societies. But even if communities left the centre of the hegemonic stage, they remained on the fringe or in the wings.



**Part 1**, “Superimposing a Statist Structure: Setting the Stage,” begins with an interrogation of some of the fundamental components, events, locations, and individuals that provided the grist for scripting the public histories of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Pacific Northwest. It then teases out external influences and local practices that set the groundwork on which the statist system was imposed and hegemonic transformation occurred. **Chapter 1**, “Setting the Political Stage in the Pacific Northwest,” outlines the major international players in the region, who had appeared by the early seventeenth century, and traces the influx of European and Russian traders through the end of the eighteenth century. **Chapter 2**, “Identities on the Fringe,” covers a similar period as **Chapter 1** but focuses on non-European players, providing an alternative perspective of activities and interactions between local inhabitants and those brought to the region for commercial reasons.

The third chapter, “Eastern Games, Western Lives, 1793–1846,” focuses on the ventures and strategies of traders in eastern North America, whose entangled schemes pitted national interests against each other in their competition for personal financial gain. Those games moved traders – pawns – into the Pacific Northwest, and many of them settled in the region, building and strengthening kin, trade, and other social networks that were firmly in place when the border was imposed in 1846. In this chapter, the theme of “translocality” emerges as increasingly central in the hegemonic shift from the Pacific Northwest of 1800 through 1830 to that of the 1840s and onwards. Translocality highlights the dynamic and deeply embedded social relationships that connect migrants to both their mythic place of origin and their equally mythic place of destination. **Chapter 4**, “Superimposing the Statist System,” introduces the “statist club,” those government bodies that are recognized by other states and whose spokespersons use Western, internationally accepted legal and political means to make a case for divvying up the world into sovereign territories or states. The statist system is that set of devices – international law, legal precedent, warfare, rights of discovery, treaty negotiations, and the like – that are invoked to claim, justify, or contest sovereign claims to territory or property.

**Chapter 5**, “On a Mission: Translocality and Hegemonic Transformation in Nineteenth-Century Oregon,” sketches the crucial role that the early Protestant missionaries played in the transformation from the interactions of the blended communities in the first half of the nineteenth century to the imposition of the American state-centred society south of the border

in 1846. Once the border was imposed – and more importantly, once the state structures had been legitimized by the statist club – members of the emerging elite immediately set out to consolidate their hegemonic sway. [Chapter 6](#), “The Impact of Hegemonic Change on Blended Communities,” addresses treaty-making – or not – and the imposition of categories of entitlement – or not – on both sides of the newly imposed border.

[Part 2](#), “Hegemonic Transformation: Roles, Players, and Improvisations,” moves from the larger statist stage to the lives of individuals, addressing devices used to (re)construct histories in order to build comfortable and separate national identities. [Chapter 7](#), “Creating a Script: Hegemonic Transformation, Identity, and Translocality,” documents an early reconstruction of Oregon’s history through an analysis of acquisition lists from the first three years of the Oregon Historical Society, from 1899 through 1901. A more current example of the construction of history to fit contemporary values is outlined in [Chapter 8](#), “Defining Roles and Constructing the Cast,” which examines changing social values that underpin selections for the US National Statuary Hall. These two chapters delve into the use of social constructivism, as formulated by Murray Edelman and Karl Popper, to illuminate the subtlety and ubiquity of constructions to create and reinforce comfortable national narratives – or epic myths.<sup>8</sup>

“Early Improvisations: Ranald MacDonald,” [Chapter 9](#), presents a view of the history of the Columbia District from the perspective of the son of one of the earliest traders, Archibald McDonald, and Archibald’s wife, Princess Raven, one of Chief Comcomly’s daughters. The chapter introduces Ranald MacDonald’s astounding life and his ultimate marginalization – as well as his reaction to that dismissal – by the widow of General George Armstrong Custer in an article she published in the late 1880s. [Chapter 10](#), “Written out of the Script: Three Generations of McKays,” is a case study illustrating how families of internationally recognized personages were moved from lead actors to bit players as the script was rewritten by members of the emerging hegemon. At the same time, this chapter documents how political and legal changes in the classification of citizens and of race in Oregon from the 1840s through the 1880s had a direct impact on the options available to the children of the prior elite. [Chapter 11](#) moves to larger-scale reconstructions of history and to the emergence of separate British-Canadian and US identities. “Later Revisions: (Re)constructing the Cast of US and Canadian Pioneers” details how the shifting definition of the word *pioneer*,

based on a distillation of current values, elides inconvenient antecedents or masks deeper issues of minoritization and marginalization.

The book's conclusion, "Epic Scripts," continues the exploration of the outcomes of hegemonic shift through an examination of transformations in the configuration and the extension of social and economic capital. We conclude the book with the evolution of two national myths: the Oregon Trail as the pathway to manifest destiny in the United States and the Last Spike as the consummation of Confederation in Canada. These myths, which evolved and re-emerged with each new generation, have led to highly divergent and yet strikingly parallel national identities in the Pacific Northwest. Ultimately, these national myths continue to support and sustain hegemonic structures north and south of the border.

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