

## On the Cusp of Contact: Gender, Space and Race in the Colonization of British Columbia

Caroline Lefebvre

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## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

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### **On the Cusp of Contact: Gender, Space and Race in the Colonization of British Columbia**

Essays by Jean Barman, edited by Margery Fee  
Harbour Publishing (2020), 468 pages  
ISBN: 9781550178968

#### **Reviewed by:**

m d caroline lefevre  
Independent Scholar

Allyship or intellectual (mis)appropriation? In *Indigenizing the Academy*, Devon Abbott Mihesuah stated, “[Indigenous intellectuals] are impatient with scholars who continue to profit from editing anthologies of essays focusing on familiar topics we’ve seen repeatedly and composing stories that are useless as tools of decolonization” (p. 143). Is *On the Cusp of Contact* such a book?

Margery Fee and Jean Barman are both professor emeriti from the University of British Columbia and became interested in Indigenous literature and history respectively after attaining their doctorates in the early 1980s. Barman credits herself as having redressed the past by integrating the history of Indigenous education into the scholarship “...long before it was fashionable to do so” (p. ix). Barman has been described as a vernacular historian because her approach to disseminating BC history “evoke[s] queasy feelings in readers” such as myself who are “more used to purified genres and clear disciplinary perspectives” (p. xxii).

The book contains sixteen chapters of previously published articles or book chapters (AoCs) by Jean Barman. Reflecting predominately the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the AoCs are categorized under four subheadings rather than being presented chronologically. To promote the textbook’s content as current, Fee’s introduction attempts to link the AoCs, which span almost two decades, tangentially to critical contemporary issues. Each chap-

ter opens with a brief synopsis and identifies accolades received since their publication, which leaves me questioning the latter's purpose and intended audience. The common thread throughout the book is that of the (sexual) relations between Indigenous women and the male newcomer population, and their mixed-race children and how they are impacted by greed, a Darwinian racist mentality, nation-building or what Barman refers to as "the pathway to erasure" (or what some Indigenous people would properly refer as white power and genocide).

The first two chapters under subsection *Making White Space* introduces the reader to the Victoria and Vancouver landscapes – the main hubs of contact that saw the land seizures and displacement of the Lekwungen and Squamish people from those areas. Barman attests the Lekwungen were more successful than the Squamish at securing "the good deal," because of their chief's mixed heritage (i.e. being part white).

The second subsection, *Indigenous Women* contains five chapters dedicated to how Indigenous women were depicted as prostitutes in relation to the newcomers and/or settlers. Extrapolating heavily from personal accounts written by prominent members of society who were blatantly racist towards Indigenous women, Barman, in questioning their definition of prostitution, also sought to discover the lineage of such attitudes, while emphasizing Indigenous feminine agency. Barman later claimed the newcomer/settler's gratification towards Indigenous women came in the form of sexual pleasure, economic gain, political advantage, and moral rape. In discovering misperceptions toward Indigenous women were held up to a "patriarchal model" (i.e., 'his-story'), perhaps what is needed are "...works of history [that] actually analyze the perpetrators of colonialism in an attempt to ascertain how we have arrived at this point (p. 144)," especially the fact that white men were sexualizing pre-pubescent Indigenous girls.

The third subsection, *Finding Solace in Family and Place* contains five chapters on the family life of 'outsider' mixed-race relations in various BC locations. According to Barman, outsiders – those who did not fit the dominant white standards of society, attained solace by keeping to themselves and remaining out of sight; this was particularly so for islanders. White men in mixed-race relationships maintained this invisibility by leaving their Indigenous partners at home, denying their involvement, and/or for economic gain, abandoned their families altogether and remarried white women. Since being visibly mixed was a stigma that was virtually impossible to overcome, it was advantageous for children to marry into their father's heritage as a way of erasing their indigeneity.

In four chapters under subsection *Navigating Schooling*, Barman blames excessive (white) tradition and racial diversity (Indigenous and mixed) as underpinning the public school system. Overtime, Darwinian white racist attitudes led to student segregation, educational inequality, and finally Indian residential schooling (IRS). Although she lists four contemporary attributes of inequality pertaining to IRS, the gravity of killing the Indian to save the child or genocide are not considered.

When reviewing this anthology as a tool of decolonization, I would not recommend it as a stand-alone text for the following reasons and for many outside the scope of this review. The AoCs reflect antiquated research methodologies that repeatedly re-inscribed categories of racial discrimination, while some statements are disputable and at times misleading. The AoCs lack definitions, some have quotes taken out of context, and references that are missing. As a way of sounding current, some of the AoCs were modified under the presumption that the word 'Indigenous' was synonymous with outdated terminologies, such as those in the original publications, and could be used interchangeably. Thus, giving the impression a deeper understanding of these terms is essential.

Claiming collaboration with Indigenous scholars a hallmark of Barman's practice, and the AoCs reflecting connections to community members, Fee in her introduction, recognizes and rationalizes that none of the AoCs include Indigenous co-authorship because "[c]haracteristically, Barman says that anyone mentioned in the notes should be considered a co-author" (p. xxvi). Consequently, when Indigenous history is approached with the intent to redress or re-inscribe the ills of the past, when inferences stem from pools of racialized narratives, and when Indigenous peoples' contributions are reduced to an endnote, it puts allyship into question. Better to hear it from the voices of those whose histories are being disseminated, otherwise, one could argue the pathways to erasure are still being maintained.