

Unsettling Colonialist Themes and Imagery in Canadian Gold  
Rush Narratives: A Contemporary Review of Pierre Berton, and  
Canadian Identity in the 1950s

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In 1957, the National Film Board released a short documentary about the Klondike Gold Rush, using mostly photographs to convey feelings Northern romanticism. The opening line of *City of Gold*, recited by the infamous Pierre Berton, states that, “There are moments and places in history that stir men’s imaginations.”<sup>1</sup> This line situates Klondike within a “Wild West” themed adventure story, filled with nostalgia, personal trials and tribulations, and the search for a dream and a distinct Canadian identity. As a result, other stories are left out to evoke these sentiments, such as scenes of violence and encroachment on indigenous territory for resource extraction, instigated by processes of settler colonialism.

The 1950s is an imperative time for the rise of popular gold rush histories in Canada. Pierre Berton’s, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush*, and the film, *City of Gold*, are considered classics of Canadian history, but they are also cultural mediums that tend to weave colonial mindsets into a single fabric under the pretense of Canadian values. Berton’s *Klondike* inserts indigenous actors into underlying stereotypes of the “noble savage,” and as ephemeral, feminized, culturally static and a means of collateral for white men’s success. Deeply rooted colonialist portrayals of the “authentic” Indian, combined with Northwest romanticism, and liberal individualism facilitated a new, 1950s “Canadianization,” followed by tourist agendas promoting the allure of the frontier. This process results in, what Paige Raibmon accurately describes as, “when representations become consumables, the value of an authentic stamp increases.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *City of Gold*, film, directed by Wolf Koenig and Colin Low, (1957, Ottawa: National Film Board), [https://www.nfb.ca/distribution/film/city\\_of\\_gold](https://www.nfb.ca/distribution/film/city_of_gold)

<sup>2</sup> Paige, Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 13.

This essay will be an introspective review of Canadian gold rush historiography, including both the Klondike Gold Rush, and British Columbia's rushes of the Fraser River and the Cariboo Trail. Therefore, I will make comparisons between Pierre Berton's work and modern-day gold rush projects, such as the Canadian Museum of History's 2016 exhibit, *Gold Rush! El Dorado in BC*. How does Canada's gold rush history change as an exhibit in terms of narrative, its intended audience, artifacts, and context? Finally, the last section will argue about how gold rush historians half a decade later, such as Julie Cruikshank and Adele Perry, demonstrate new and important perspectives. This includes giving a voice to indigenous ways of remembering, and highlighting the process of settler colonialism. Through a critical examination of these sources, I argue that it is not enough for historians to simply recognize indigenous presence within Canadian gold rush history. Rather, it is necessary to question the underlying colonial dispositions within gold rush narratives that traditionally constructs unified values of Canadianness. Therefore, postcolonial perspectives are important to unsettle these dominant structures, including our own ontologies about indigenous peoples' place in the gold rush.

Historiography about the gold rush provides a useful framework to reassess Canadian history for several reasons. First, both gold rush "fevers" of British Columbia and the Klondike had a lasting impact on Canada's landscape in the Northwest, with both being resource extractive societies. Second, they created new cultural "contact zones" and formed new borders as an extension of Canadian sovereignty. For example, the BC gold rush led to an explosion in Victoria's population, and the development of British Columbia as a province.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the gold rush has often been a subject of popular Canadian history, in which stories of devastating effects

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<sup>3</sup> Canadian Museum of History, *Gold Rush! El Dorado in British Columbia*, training manual (Gatineau, 2016), 7.

on indigenous communities have been largely excluded from older narratives. This topic also has a personal connection, since I was a Volunteer Interpreter for *El Dorado! The Gold Rush in BC* between April and December of 2016. The specific time period and material that I have selected is not to ignore other significant gold rush histories, but to provide analysis on specific stories that apply to other publications and related subjects. Therefore, I will focus on Pierre Berton's work, due to his overwhelming popularity and ability reflect on anxieties about Canadian identity, Northern sovereignty, and 1950s consumer culture.

**“Mr. Canada:” Pierre Berton, as Canada’s Postwar Klondike Storyteller.**

Pierre Berton's *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush* was the first successful, extensive account written in Canada on the Klondike Gold Rush. Published in 1958, *Klondike* runs over 400 pages in length, comprised to appeal towards a Canadian mass culture. A.B. McKillop coins Pierre Berton as “the premier chronicler of Canadian history,” for over thirty years, and his name had a definitive “cultural brand.”<sup>4</sup> His other major publications include *The Mysterious North*, and *The Last Spike*, which also chronicles Northwest development, and expresses postwar, Canadian desires and social values. However, *Klondike* was a project of massive scale for Berton. Building off from *Mysterious North*, his research involved several trips to Yukon Territory, an extensive bibliography of material from the University of Toronto and elsewhere, public documents, geological surveys, and several interviews with ex-miners and saloon keepers.

<sup>5</sup> Although *Klondike* is categorized a historical nonfiction, the book's genre often blurs into an adventure novel, while his writing imbued many touches of Northwest, wilderness romanticism. The book is also a biography, featuring a “cast of major characters” within its preface, such as

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<sup>4</sup> A.B. McKillop, *Pierre Berton: A Biography*, (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2008), xii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 302-304

miners, Bill Haskell and George Carmack, Dawson City officials, with particular attention to saloon keeper, Belinda Mulroney, of whom Berton interviewed himself.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, his creation of *Klondike* grapples with fears and desires centered on individual liberalism. By this, I refer to the idea of risking everything for the thrill of adventure, the hardships which follow, themes of fortune and loss, death, order and lawlessness. However, Berton's project also has a personal undertone to it, by inserting his father, Frank—a former Klondike miner—into the story as a pilgrim himself. This contributes towards the larger story of tuning into Canadian individualism, including the frontier conception of “man versus wilderness.” In this case, I redefine “wilderness” as it was understood within a colonialist perspective. This definition leads to notions of authentic “Indians” as elements of nature, exotic others, onlookers and tragic characters, written in a manner that justifies postwar nationalist sentiment.

This section will examine the different ways in which *Klondike* popularizes indigenous peoples according to embedded racialized and gendered ideas. In order to fuel white, 1950s, middle-class imaginations of the Canadian Northwest, Berton's narrative about indigenous people coincides with historical discourse which justifies colonial power. They are often portrayed as physically animalistic and culturally static, ephemeral, intellectually inferior, desiring to be European, and subject to drunken and violent habits. For example, they come to be known as, “Crooked-Eye Indians who lived in hide teepees and believed in a ghostly cannibal” in a landscape which Berton “uncivilizes” the Northern Plains as a “dun terrain” with “muskeg broken only by the occasional stunted spruce.”<sup>7</sup> He goes on to trace the miners' journeys up the Yukon River, passing by them as they appeared, “dirty, ragged, and sick-looking [and] smoking

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Berton, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush: 1896-1899*, revised ed., (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1972), xxi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

salmon and offering to buy or sell something.”<sup>8</sup> The above examples show how indigenous peoples are placed into categories of nature’s “brooding onlookers,” who signify danger ahead to the miners in their quest for gold. The ulterior motive is to compose a story which resonates with a larger Canadian audience, thus following with ingrained concepts of the Indian in order to fit a certain narrative.

The theme of the “ephemeral Indian” in Berton’s *Klondike* also poses critical questions about colonialist power structures in 1905s historiography. This can be seen through accounts of singular events, and in this case, the first gold discovery. In her essay titled, “Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives,” Julie Cruikshank problematizes the word “discovery,” because it implies a “discrete, bound incident, and favours Western accounts over indigenous observers.”<sup>9</sup> More importantly, Cruikshank’s emphasis on oral history demonstrates that discovering the gold was more of a process than an event for indigenous elders.<sup>10</sup> The act of particularizing the first discovery as a definitive event, and giving credit to George Carmack—a miner—speaks to colonialist sensibilities of northern exploration, development, and white, Canadian prosperity. Therefore, the book must follow a specific narrative of discovery, consistent with literary motifs of the passing Indian in a canoe to announce that a white man found gold on the Klondike.<sup>11</sup> Berton goes on to explain how Carmack incites his own claim to fame, yet he acknowledges conflicting accounts, in which his native companions, Skookum Jim and Tagish Charley, were the real finders as Carmack slept.<sup>12</sup> However, according to

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 275.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Cruikshank, “Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives: Skookum Jim and the Discovery of Gold,” in *Ethnohistory*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1992), 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Berton, Pierre, *Klondike*, 91

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 43

“[Skookum] Jim’s story” Carmack’s credit was due to telling Jim that being Indian would deny them any possibility of acknowledgment.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that although Berton conducted numerous interviews, he came across Jim’s story, through previous testimonies that were cross-referenced by William Ogilvie, a government surveyor.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, this brings to question the source’s originality and authority about telling the “real” story. How might Berton’s narrative be challenged had he directly interviewed Jim or his relatives? Therefore, the Klondike’s discovery story is also about giving power to traditional sources to create the desired narrative. In Charlotte Gray’s book, *Gold Diggers: Striking it Rich in the Klondike*, she draws from both Berton and Cruikshank, as well as information from indigenous heritage centres to acknowledge different discovery stories.<sup>15</sup> Although Gray draws certain facts from Berton, she goes further to support Cruikshank’s argument about the fluidity and complexity of different oral and written testimonies.<sup>16</sup> She also argues that since Carmack’s Tagish wife, Kate was a part of the story, and, and this is also an issues of Tagish women being disadvantaged and robbed of agency.<sup>17</sup> This shows that historians can deconstruct an “event” in different ways for a thematic purpose. I have shown how for Berton, white “discovery” was geared towards nationalist inclinations to justify indigenous subordination, but for Grey and Cruikshank, it is about questioning these same sentiments to illuminate colonial discourse. This re-asserts the argument that it is necessary to consider underlying hegemonic ideas as context for how history is specifically narrated for an intended audience.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 44

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 429

<sup>15</sup> Charlotte Gray, *Gold Diggers: Striking it Rich in the Klondike*, (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2010), 388.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 388

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 42

Popular narrative styles about the gold rush in the 1950s, exemplified by Pierre Berton's *Klondike*, also demonstrated racialized and gendered binaries between white and indigenous Canadians. This is most evident in the book's depictions of the "squaw man," in relation to the "man versus nature" trope within colonialist frontier representations. For example, Berton brings George Carmack to life as a character, by presenting his specific qualities as a "squaw man." The word being derogatory for an indigenous woman, Carmack was called this by other white men, due to him marrying a Tagish woman.<sup>18</sup> Although some miners did take indigenous wives, Berton's argument is that very few were defined as "squaw men," because they did not resemble their counterparts, while their wives "lived like whites."<sup>19</sup> However, George Carmack's shifting racial identity suggests that it relies heavily on his appropriation and knowledge of Chilkoot and Tagish culture. Berton states that, "[Carmack] alone did not want gold. Instead, he wanted to be an Indian, in a land where natives were generally scorned by the white man."<sup>20</sup> Carmack could apparently speak both Chilkoot and Tagish (although it is arguable how fluent he was in both dialects), began to appear "Indian-like," and adopted nicknames like "Siwash George."<sup>21</sup> However, Berton concludes in a brief excerpt, that after his moment of discovery, Carmack "ceased to be Indian," and "never thought of himself that way again."<sup>22</sup> The theme of the "squaw" reappears several times, especially in certain situations which illustrate contact between miners and indigenous women. This demonstrates the tendency for colonialist societies to associate gendered binaries to racial categories. Whether or not Carmack was indigenized out of fascination for exoticness, or for important social and political reasons, his identity also becomes

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*, 39

<sup>19</sup> Berton, Pierre, *Klondike*, 10

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 38

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 38

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 44

feminized through marriage and cultural appropriation. Once he claimed his discovery and his riches, he reverts back to 1950s, masculine concepts of individual prosperity and Western liberalism. *Klondike* also reconstructs saloons as spaces where white men engaged in “squaw dances” with indigenous women, as “primitive” entertainment and a relief from monotony in gold rush towns.<sup>23</sup> The “squaw” reappears again with descriptions of the women filled with embedded cultural stereotypes. “Squaw dances” in *Klondike* portray indigenous women as anthropological objects within a vanishing culture. In addition, Berton refers to a testimony from an American geologist, who observes how the women quietly sat in the corner, with babies on their backs.<sup>24</sup> The account goes further to call their babies “little red people,” and the women “as stolid as ever [and] silent dancing figures in the dusk [which] made an almost weird effect.”<sup>25</sup> Once again, this highlights Raibmon’s definition of binaries of authenticity—the colonial either/or and an authentic/inauthentic mentality as a means to insert indigenous men and women into dominant social values.<sup>26</sup> The “squaw man” or “dance,” proves an intersecting of racialized and gendered conceptions, often infused into traditional histories. Many historians have often conceived gold rush culture as predominantly white and male, yet older historiographies celebrate, rather than critically examine this particular aspect. As explained in *Klondike*, living or mingling with indigenous communities affects white masculinity, thus making the miner uncivilized. This reflects the larger social context of what Jennifer Wilhelm defines as “post war ideas of male, liberal democratic citizenship,” and this has a major impact on historical films.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 19

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 19-20

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 20

<sup>26</sup> Raibmon, Paige, *Authentic Indians*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Wilhelm, “Picturing the Nation in City of Gold: Photographs, History, and Narrative in Post War Documentary,” (MA Thesis, Carleton University, 2008), 8.

The National Film Board's documentary, *City of Gold*, was filmed according to a specific mandate, centered on national interests, and "embedded in policies of federal nation-building in the north of the 1950s."<sup>28</sup> Directed by Wolf Koenig and Colin Low, *City of Gold* was sponsored by the Department of Resources and Development, which had administrative control over Yukon Territory during this time.<sup>29</sup> Pierre Berton was the film's narrator, who once again inserts a personal connection by introducing the Klondike as a historic moment and place where he once lived, and where his father panned for gold. To accompany Berton, the film's main visual feature to tell the story is through photography, by juxtaposing old images of 1890s gold rush towns in their prime, with 1950s present day footage of children playing near old, decrepit buildings. Similar to *Klondike*, *City of Gold* embodies nostalgic sentiment and individual adventurism, through photographs of miners, a few women (dance hall girls), scenic landscape shots, and the crowded streets of Dawson City, at a time when the town was considered "mecca."<sup>30</sup> The photographs emphasize the Klondike gold rush as a unique, Canadian story, to the extent that, "history will never see its like again."<sup>31</sup> This statement, combined with the photographs, demonstrate the film as a vehicle for creating a tourist economy in Dawson City, using a "cultural currency" of Canadian symbols.<sup>32</sup> Wilhelm also argues that the NFB and its directors used the gold rush and the photos to control a specific narrative, and create postwar ideals of privileged, white male experiences within the Northern wilderness.<sup>33</sup> Building off of this, it is difficult to miss who essentially winds up excluded from this story.

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<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm, Jennifer, "Picturing the Nation in City of Gold," abstract.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 14

<sup>30</sup> Koenig and Low, *City of Gold*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>32</sup> Wilhelm, Jennifer, "Picturing the Nation in City of Gold," 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 35

*City of Gold* delivers striking images of poor, rugged miners, from rags to riches and back, men “shrewd and cold-blooded enough” to be rich, miners at work in the rivers and camps, and those who narrowly escaped death through the Chilkoot Pass.<sup>34</sup> These same groups of men are later shown together, celebrating Canada Day and July the 4th in Dawson City. As a result, indigenous men and women are entirely left out of the film. Even when Berton was explaining the attraction of Klondike to those around the world, he only mentions Australia, The United States and the British Commonwealth.<sup>35</sup> The only images of indigenous people that are included, were in a separate album of gold rush photos, purchased and assembled by the Library and Archives Canada, all of them unused by filmmakers, yet presumably staged, without any further details about the photos’ subjects.<sup>36</sup> These also included Tr’ondek and Han villages, staged to ignore the story of thousands of prospectors who encroached upon their territory.<sup>37</sup> Carol Payne argues that postwar NFB photography represented Canada through privileged symbols of national identity, and gave authority to document indigenous people as “anthropomorphized” objects of a “colonial gaze.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, this particular gaze and the process of exclusion creates a hegemonic “expansionist propaganda,” based on motifs of individualism.<sup>39</sup> Hegemony of 1950s gold rush history is heavily ingrained into popular national values, and so the following section will discuss both *City of Gold* and *Klondike* to further situate them within post war ideals of Canadian expansionism, and particularism.

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<sup>34</sup> Koenig and Low, *City of Gold*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>36</sup> Wilhelm, Jennifer, “Picturing the Nation in City of Gold,” 35

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 35

<sup>38</sup> Carol Payne, *The Official Picture: The National Film Board of Canada’s Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941-1971*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Cruikshank, Julie, “Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives,” 35.

*City of Gold* was not only a National Film Board production, but a tool to internationally expose Dawson City to potential tourists, expand Canadian sovereignty, and promote democratic, Canadian citizenship. Photographs of landscape production for gold mines speak to ideas of progress and development, amidst Cold War defence and industrial projects, such as the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line and the Alaskan Highway.<sup>40</sup> The film's footage of Dominion Day and July the 4th celebrations, reflect an ambivalence towards American influence, incorporating both scenes of white, North American democracy and Canadian national cohesion. These images, as well as *City of Gold's* overall narrative, emphasize an independent Canadian culture through the gold rush, out of fear of disengagement amidst American consumerism.<sup>41</sup> Representing symbols of aesthetic Canadian values also coincided with 1950s cultural policy planning, one example being the Vincent Massey Commission, which served to promote nation, tradition, community and culture.<sup>42</sup>

Both the film and Pierre Berton's *Klondike* confirm to similar standards of historical narration, which subject indigenous agents into wards of the state, or excludes them altogether. Popular postwar ideals of representing the north as a barren landscape from civilization, figuratively and literally removes the First Nations from their territory.<sup>43</sup> This is especially evident when *City of Gold* fails to mention the Chilkat and Tagish's trade routes, in which the Chilkoot Pass was named after.<sup>44</sup> Overall, *City of Gold's* traditional gold rush myths, compliments a new Canadian nationalism, which values adventure, resource extraction and development, and liberal, democratic participation. As previously mentioned, *Klondike* shows

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<sup>40</sup> Wilhelm, Jennifer, "Picturing the Nation in City of Gold," 12

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 56

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 57

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 68

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 68

similar motifs, but differs from the film, in the sense that Pierre Berton includes indigenous people in an idealized manner. In his biography about Berton, A.B. McKillop mirrors his life and work with national circumstances that perpetuated his subsequent success. Leading up to *Klondike*, the federal government created the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources as a means to protect Canada's North.<sup>45</sup> The need for an increasing mining sector after the war, justified a modern sentiment for the "last, best west," while radio and television made Canadians more aware of the disparity of wealth between northern indigenous communities and the south.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, after *Klondike* was published, its success rested on its acquiescence with John Diefenbaker's "northern vision" for increasing Canadian sovereignty and paternalism, and fending off American influence.<sup>47</sup> These intrinsic values of nation-building are evident within *Klondike*, and even more prominent in the 1972 revised edition. In the preface, Berton reassures his audience that through the story of the gold rush, Canada's history and geography makes them distinct, and promotes Canada as a peaceful nation compared to the United States.<sup>48</sup> Berton also mentions the country's colonial past as a necessary means to achieve progress and settlement. He considers Canadian colonial history as more conciliatory than, through the illusion that the government did not take land as "violently from the Indians" as its American neighbours.<sup>49</sup> *City of Gold* also exerts similar undertones of the virtuous, white Canadian, through images of the Mounted Police to represent law and order. The film also states that there was not a single

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<sup>45</sup> McKillop, A.B., *Pierre Berton*, 288

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 289

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 324

<sup>48</sup> Berton, Pierre, *Klondike*, xiii.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, xiii.

murder or major theft throughout one summer in Dawson City—presuming this did not include crimes against indigenous people.<sup>50</sup>

So far, I have argued that 1950s gold rush literature rested upon underlying colonialist stereotypes and exclusion for the purpose of facilitating a new Canadian identity. This also creates interplay between racial and gender conceptions within an appealing narrative for general audiences, as well as government initiatives. Pierre Berton's *Klondike* and Koenig and Low's *City of Gold* are two prominent examples of constructing a story of Canadian postwar ideas of male, liberal, white citizenship. This comes at the expense of pigeonholing indigenous people into roles of being cultural stagnation, alcoholism, and ephemerality, secondary to white man's advancement.

**New Ways of Storytelling: The Canadian Museum of History's *El Dorado! The Gold Rush in BC***

This section will build off of similar themes from the first, with issues of Canadian identity, individualism, and colonial hegemony. However, I will shift towards modern portrayals of gold rush history, exemplified through a museum exhibition. According to Ruth Phillips, Canada is currently undergoing a “second museum age,” which developed from a shift in the 1980s and 1990s in reforming museums.<sup>51</sup> This transformed the museum into a site of contestation, due to increasing indigenous activism against overreaching curatorial authority of colonial collections.<sup>52</sup> Phillips builds her argument from James Clifford, who defines the museum as a “contact zone,” based on moral relationships of reciprocity and the recognition of

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<sup>50</sup> Koenig and Low, *City of Gold*

<sup>51</sup> Ruth Phillips, “Replacing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age,” in *Canadian Historical Review* vol. 86, no.1 (2005), 87.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 87

indigenous objects as their own history, and not simply defined by colonialism.<sup>53</sup> While the argument of whether or not museums can achieve this goal is important, my focus is a critique of the Canadian Museum of History's *Gold Rush! El Dorado in BC*. Coming from a national context of postcolonialism and changes in museology, this will serve as a rich comparison to Berton-era, gold rush literature.

*Gold Rush!* was a special exhibition on display at the Museum of History between April and December of 2016, and collaboratively organized by the Royal BC Museum. During this time, I had the opportunity to work with the CMH as a Volunteer Interpreter for this exhibit, in which I interacted with visitors, and educated them about the weights and measurements of gold. The exhibit featured about 280 artifacts and many different interactives, photos, and reproductions, all focused on “gold fever” as a historical phenomenon.<sup>54</sup> *Gold Rush!* was designed to take audiences through four different zones, the first introducing some of the main themes, such as gold's effect on the colony of British Columbia. The three consecutive zones address different gold rushes around the world—with zone two featuring an interactive map of rushes from other colonial geographies, such as Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand. Visitors are then introduced to the story of the 1858 gold rush in the Cariboo and Fraser River. Finally, the exhibit ends with an explanation of modern day uses for gold, by showcasing Olympic gold medals and even an Oscar. The exhibit was intended for audiences to experience an immersion into a dark vault-like atmosphere and along the Fraser river beds, to learn more about gold as a valuable commodity throughout history.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> James Clifford, *Routes, Travel, and Translation in the Late Twentieth-Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 192, 194.

<sup>54</sup> Canadian Museum of History, *Gold Rush! El Dorado in BC*, 3

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 4

The exhibit also addresses negative colonial encounters with indigenous peoples within British Columbia as a secondary theme. Near the beginning, a text panel introduces the meaning of “El Dorado:” a South American myth about the promise of gold, originating with colonial encounters between natives and conquistadores, latter returning home with stolen treasure.<sup>56</sup> The fourth zone is the most important, because it introduces British Columbia, and tackles issues of migration, travel and adventure, hardship and violence. Various text panels reflect on the disruption of social order and balance between indigenous people and Europeans in 1858, by the arrival of miners from different countries.<sup>57</sup> The exhibit depicts racism as an experience also faced by many Chinese and black miners. Artifacts featured in this zone include various First Nations implements and Chinese objects, such as a tiny church cross with Chinese lettering taken from the mining town of Barkerville. This zone is also where the VIP station was located, and there, I introduced visitors to different scales, including an original Chinese miners’ scale.

Based on my experiences from the exhibit, I argue that it sufficiently told a narrative that reflected different sides. As a small-scale exhibit within a national museum, it can often be difficult to portray an event such as the gold rush as both a Canadian story of wealth and development, and a violent colonial process. The fact that the CMH provided the space for *Gold Rush!* this automatically presumes a curatorial responsibility to address certain narratives to satisfy both national interests and the general public. The exhibit’s focus on the diversity amongst gold miners compliments modern, Canadian preoccupations with multiculturalism. The idea of “gold fever” (or in Berton’s words, “Klondicitis”), is a literary trope to attract a big

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 7

audience. Finally, the exhibit recognizes the gold rush's detriments on indigenous communities, placing emphasis on violent encounters between them and the miners.

However, this leaves some critical questions, considering the conclusions made about Pierre Berton's "traditional" gold rush history. What if this exhibit was about the Klondike instead? Would the curators choose Berton's *Klondike* as its main source material, and would they show *City of Gold* to visitors? If so, how could curators then engage with Berton, and would they deconstruct these colonial stereotypes? *Gold Rush!* avoids such depictions, although this is obvious, due to the museum's ethical responsibilities, and postcolonial activism which separates us from the 1950s. The frequent presence of First Nations, Chinese and African-Americans in the exhibit, revolve around their place within a society subject to violence and exclusion on racial grounds. Local indigenous communities along the Fraser River struggled with reclaiming their fishing rights, which resulted in violent encounters with encroaching prospectors, and a series of truces in the Fraser Canyon. During my time as an interpreter, I would sometimes explain to guests who wanted to learn more, about how the gold rush was a highly difficult time for indigenous people. Overall, the exhibit included First Nations' artifacts to invite audiences to understand the gold rush as both destructive and transformative for many communities. Despite this interpretation, their story still corresponds with *Gold Rush!*'s overall theme—gold as an exquisite commodity throughout history. It is alluring, yet oftentimes toxic, but important in the creation of modern British Columbia.

*Gold Rush!* is not a perfect medium to represent the gold rush as a colonial event with indigenous perspectives, for obvious reasons. Although the exhibit recognizes instances of resistance and agency—such as Chief Spintlum's truce with American miner, Henry Snyder—it

lacked attention towards modern-day cultural, economic and political effects and indigenous viewpoints. The exhibit reached a degree of inclusion, but First Nations were essentially seen as respondents rather than active agents to the gold rush, as well as victims of violence. I should restate however, that *Gold Rush!* was a special exhibition by the Canadian Museum of History, meaning it had limited space and time, and was intended for a vast audience of different places. The exhibit's portrayal of the gold rush slightly resembles Pierre Berton's, in the sense that it responds to a bigger crowd, and to themes of Canadian nation-building and identity. However, it strongly differs, through a heightened awareness of respecting indigenous Canadians, and the museum's moral obligation for all visitors. This raises the question of who has the right to tell the "right" story of the gold rush, which accurately represents indigenous history. A local cultural centre might have the ability to do so, and also to evoke a political statement with postcolonial undertones, unlike in a state museum. However, despite these shortcomings, I found that working with the CMH was an engaging experience, and I look forward to the possibility of museums taking on similar stories in the future.

### **Unsettling the Stories: Cruikshank, Perry, and the "Decolonization" of the Gold Rush:**

How do contemporary Canadian historians offer new insights about the gold rush? The final section will draw from postcolonial arguments to speak back to underlying colonial structures of 1950s gold rush histories. Works by Julie Cruikshank, and Adele Perry will be the main focus, because they either directly respond to Pierre Berton, or tackle other specific colonial representations. Jennifer Wilhem's paper, which addresses *City of Gold*, was useful, since Wilhem critiques the film as a vehicle for Northern tourism and Canadian sovereignty at the expense of indigenous agency. Charlotte Grey's *Gold Diggers* is interesting, because despite

being recent publication (2010), Gray writes with similar narrative styles to Berton. For example, she also chronicles famous characters, mostly miners, and their experiences of hardship, wilderness, as well as themes of individual psychological depth, and personal anecdotes from Grey herself. However, her inclusion of indigenous people consists of the same ethical responsibility as the museum exhibit. She provides some room to address the different local indigenous inhabitants—the Han, Tlingit, Tagish, and more—who made a home within an “inhospitable” land for many generations.<sup>58</sup> She calls “Skookum Jim” and “Tagish Charley” by their real names (Keish and Kaa Goox), and demonstrates the miners’ racialized actions and sensibilities. However, it is easy to unintentionally insert indigenous people into simple categories of victimhood and persecution, despite conscientious efforts. Therefore, Julie Cruikshank’s work is very useful, because she recognizes resistance, as well as other methodological approaches respective to indigenous learning practices.

Earlier, I compared Cruikshank’s definition of understanding “discovery” in Klondike history. More importantly, she allows for indigenous oral testimony to become “windows to construct the past,” rather than simply evidence to be sifted for facts.<sup>59</sup> Her essay compares both oral and written accounts from Yukon to recognize embedded “social processes” and question the “privileged status” in documentary information to attain factual evidence.<sup>60</sup> Her interviewees are indigenous elders named, Angela Sidney and Kitty Smith, and descendants from Skookum Jim, who meaningfully reconstruct him as a First Nations man within the context of Tagish and Tlingit society.<sup>61</sup> Their histories speak back to Berton’s *Klondike*, and against one-dimensional

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<sup>58</sup> Charlotte Grey, *Gold Diggers*, 7

<sup>59</sup> Cruikshank, Julie, “Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives,” 22

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 21

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 27

caricatures of Jim as a tragic figure, succumbed to drunkenness and poverty, and overshadowed by white men's success. An example of this in *Klondike* is when Jim and "Tagish Charley" were presumably patrons of Belinda Mulrone's saloon, where they were treated as "white men," because of their miners' clothing, but were later arrested for drunkenness.<sup>62</sup> Berton's account of Jim and Charley's final years, symbolizes indigenous tragedies as a necessary misfortune to colonial state formation. However, Cruikshank, Smith, and Sidney reflect on Jim as Keish instead, and through "intellectual consistency," in elder knowledge, they revive him as a man of his community with strong familial ties.<sup>63</sup> The elders parallel Keish's story coincidentally with the gold discovery, when he journeyed up the river to find his missing sisters, thus attributing his personal success to his ability as an animal helper, and a responsible clan member.<sup>64</sup>

Cruikshank's approach is significant, because she critiques overarching myths that justify traditional, colonialist portrayals of "authentic" Indians and assimilationist mindsets. Through elder teachings, Kitty Smith, and Angela Sidney exemplify resistance against tragic fiction which also tends to exceptionalize Keish compared to his own "race."<sup>65</sup> This proves that important grounds can be made just by questioning myths and colonialist structures within certain gold rush narratives.

Adele Perry adds a new layer to British Columbia's gold rush in her book, *On the Edge of Empire*, through a synthesis of postcolonial, Marxist, and feminist theory. Perry investigates the gold rush as an example of BC's colonial society existing on the grounds of gender and racial constructions. First, she argues that it facilitated a homosocial culture amongst white men, but

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<sup>62</sup> Berton, Pierre, *Klondike*, 382

<sup>63</sup> Cruikshank, Julie, "Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives," 28

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 28, 34

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 33

this was complicated and based off of racialized hierarchies.<sup>66</sup> Christopher Herbert builds off of Perry's argument, and suggests that changes in defining masculinity reflected how white men justified colonial domination, and although they often resisted Victorian ideals of white manliness, their accounts reflected consistency in these attitudes.<sup>67</sup> However, Perry goes further to investigate the relationship between Victorian white masculinity and stereotypes of First Nations women, especially within mixed-race relationships. In the first section, I highlighted Pierre Berton's account of white miners taking indigenous wives, who were thrown unwillingly into a white way of living. When George Carmack married Kate, she was represented as bewildered in her own "labyrinth" that was his house, while using Indian techniques to find her way around.<sup>68</sup> Adele Perry critiques these paternalist representations, by deconstructing miners' accounts filled with romantic racism and "noble savagery."<sup>69</sup> Perry reminds us to read such accounts with an investigative lens, to recognize the false dichotomies, and instances of coercion and abuse in mixed-race relationships.<sup>70</sup> Like Cruikshank, she engages with themes of resistance, and acknowledges the failure of certain colonial policies, such as racial segregation in the cities, thus giving some agency for indigenous women.<sup>71</sup>

*On the Edge of Empire* is also a call for historians to unsettle themselves and engage more with "home-grown colonialism."<sup>72</sup> Julie Cruikshank does the same, but also provides a framework for giving elder testimony more agency, and understanding the reasons behind

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<sup>66</sup>Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 20, 32.

<sup>67</sup> Christopher Herbert, "White Power, Yellow Gold: Colonialism and Identity in the California and the British Columbia Gold Rushes, 1848-1871," (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2012), <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/docview/1011479729?pq-origsite=summon>, 8-9.

<sup>68</sup> Berton, Pierre, *Klondike*, 382

<sup>69</sup> Perry, Adele, *On the Edge of Empire*, 68

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 68

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 123

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 6

mythical sentiments engrained within gold rush history. Jennifer Wilhelm effectively questions the goals and mentalities behind the making of *City of Gold*, to deconstruct social values and government policies in postwar Canada. Even Charlotte Grey's book *Gold Diggers*, significantly acknowledges indigenous peoples as victims of colonial domination, despite resembling more of a popular history. What is most important about these secondary resources is not the call for including indigenous stories into gold rush history. It is a demand for scholars to look for embedded colonial structures in primary resources, and address the context in which they justified systemic exclusion and normalization of indigenous people.

For this essay, I acknowledged Pierre Berton and *City of Gold* as primary sources for the same reasons as one would look at miners' diaries. To "decolonize" Canadian history requires careful attention by scholars in approaching the historiography on a particular subject. However, I do not intend through this essay to de-legitimize Pierre Berton's influential role as a dynamic writer and an embodiment of popular Canadian culture. Every historical product has its own subjective agenda, and influenced by particular social values to be questioned. Therefore, this essay was meant to analyze Berton's *Klondike* also as a product of its time, and to critically investigate hidden colonial sentiments within its surroundings. My assessment of the Canadian Museum of History's *Gold Rush! El Dorado in BC* proves that this process is not limited to academic writing, but invokes similar responsibilities for public historians and museum curators. However, I have also demonstrated that teaching the general public about the gold rush through museum exhibits, and within a postcolonial framework, can oftentimes be difficult and complex. Many factors become involved with its design and narrative structure, such as the exhibit's timing, place, stakeholders and intended audience. This raises the question of the difference

between the “truth” and the story. Julie Cruikshank grapples with this question, by placing special value on indigenous oral history to allow historians to ask themselves how they should write about the gold rush. Therefore, my advice to any Canadian historian would be this: consider your own epistemologies, and the social, cultural and political values which define “Canadian history,” as a key element to understanding the country’s long and difficult legacy of colonialism.

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