

Who Shapes the Land: Actor-Centered Perspectives on Western Canadian Settlement (1881-1918)

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Abstract: This paper proposes a theoretical and methodological model to reinterpret Western Canadian settlement in Alberta and Saskatchewan (1881–1918) using an actor-centered approach that integrates Actor-Network Theory and Structuration Theory. Combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies from History, Geoscience, Sociology, and Indigenous studies.

Keywords

- Western Canadian History
- Socio-Environmental Dynamics
- Actor-centered history
- Medium Constructionism
- Decolonization
- Structuration

Areas of research

- Population studies
- Economic, regional, and industrial development
- Immigration

Introduction

Historians have traditionally depicted Western Canadian settlement through two dominant narratives. The Frontier Thesis presents westward expansion as a transformative process, whereby settlers adapted to and reshaped an untamed landscape. In contrast, the Metropolitan Thesis emphasizes the dominance of eastern urban centers in driving the economy and politics of the West. However, both narratives privilege a top-down perspective—focusing primarily on Euro-Canadian pioneers and governmental policies—while neglecting the significant roles played by Indigenous peoples, environmental factors, and nonhuman elements.

This paper proposes an actor-centered approach to reinterpret settlement in Alberta and Saskatchewan between 1881 and 1918. Drawing on *Actor-Network Theory* (ANT) and *Structuration Theory*, the study reconceptualizes settlement as a dynamic and reciprocal process in which individuals, institutions, and ecological forces continuously interact. By integrating perspectives from History, Geoscience, Sociology, and Indigenous studies, this analysis challenges linear, nation-building narratives and contributes to the ongoing discourse on decolonization in Canadian historiography.

Land Acknowledgement

My research is located on Treaty 7 territory, encompassing the traditional lands of several First Nations in Southern Alberta. These include the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai), Tsuut'ina, and Stoney Nakoda (Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney). I also recognize that Moh'kins'tsis (Calgary) is home to the Métis Nation of Alberta (District 5 and 6). Recognizing these territories is essential in understanding both the historical and contemporary implications of settlement in Western Canada.

Historical and Cultural Context

The myth of the North American Frontier has long colored interpretations of Western Canadian history. Early texts—from the novels of James Fenimore Cooper to modern media such as *Red Dead Redemption* and *Yellowstone*—depict a rugged landscape transformed by heroic settlers. Yet, these narratives obscure critical aspects of settlement. Canadian Frontier development involved adapting to the environment and the interplay between an endless variety of networks and structures and the dialectic between Alberta and Saskatchewan's settlement as both a place of national and local development.

Historiographical Debates

Traditional Frontier Historiography in both Canada and America has been shaped by either Turner's Frontier Thesis¹ and the Metropolitan Thesis. Turner's perspective argues that the frontier experience transformed European immigrants into a distinct "North American" identity through their direct engagement with the wilderness. In contrast, the Metropolitan Thesis posits that Canada's development was driven by the economic and political imperatives of eastern urban centers like Toronto, Montreal, and London. Both frameworks, however, assume a Eurocentric model of agency and linear national development.

Since the 1960s, scholars have increasingly foregrounded marginalized voices—especially those of Indigenous peoples—and critiqued these singular narratives. In the 1970s, Paul Voisey synthesized these competing theses by identifying four key forces—heritage, metropolis, frontier, and environment—to illustrate how dynamic interactions shape community formation². Although Voisey treated these forces as fixed constructs, his work laid the foundation for more fluid analyses that recognize evolving networks and shifting power relations.

More modern scholars have continued to challenge the notion of Prairie exceptionalism, emphasizing regional diversity and the role of Indigenous agency. Works like Lesley Erickson's *Westward Bound* (2012) and Robert Rutherford's *Hometown Horizons* (2004) highlight the intersection of local responses and broader imperial projects. However, dominant settler narratives persist, marginalizing Indigenous perspectives and reinforcing national unity at the expense of regional complexity³. However, improvement should not allow for stagnation, there is still the need for a decolonized historiography that rejects progress-oriented accounts which often sanitize settler colonial violence⁴. Moreover, historical sociology has declined in popularity, consequently Canadian Prairies' history lacks the comprehensive analysis found in European social histories.

Reinterpreting Settlement: A Dynamic Interaction of Forces

This study builds on earlier frameworks, such as Voisey's thesis, to propose a holistic and interconnected four-point model of settlement.

1. *Culture (Heritage)*: The traditions, values, and identities that settlers carried with them, which influenced how they adapted to the Canadian frontier.
2. *Eastern Influence (Metropolis)*: The economic, political, and ideological forces emanating from eastern Canada and Europe that shaped policies and guided settlement practices and economic growth.
3. *Knowledge Creation (Frontier)*: The processes by which settlers responded to the Canadian Frontier—often reinterpreting environmental cues through the lens of both Indigenous and European knowledge systems.
4. *Environment*: The natural landscape, climatic conditions, and nonhuman factors that mediated interactions among settlers and between settlers and Indigenous peoples.

These forces do not operate in isolation. Instead, they interact, forming dynamic networks that shape and are reshaped by the process of settlement⁵. A mesoscale approach bridges macro-level economic and political structures with localized, contingent processes, thereby enabling nuanced examinations of race, gender, and class dynamics within settlement history and challenges the notion of historical agency being exclusively human⁶.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework

Recognizing that historical inquiry is inherently interdisciplinary⁷, this study employs methods and theories from History, Geoscience, Sociology, and Indigenous studies. Historically, powerful societal groups and individuals produced archives. Consequently, Colonial archives, most of the records available to me, the keeping of records is inseparable from the project of imposing and maintaining control⁸. As such, it is essential to combine quantitative and qualitative sources to mitigate inherent biases:

¹ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History 1893."

² Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community*.

³ Hunt, *History: Why It Matters*; Jones, "Nature-Culture."

⁴ Calder and Wardhaugh, *History, Literature and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies*; Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography*; Satia, *Time's Monster How History Makes History*.

⁵ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society Outline of the Theory of Structuration*.

⁶ Little, "Philosophy of History."

⁷ Maza, *Thinking about History*; Wallach Scott, *On the Judgment of History*.

⁸ Maza, *Thinking about History*; Rosenberg and X.Blouin, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authorities in History and the Archives*.

- **Quantitative:** Census records, agricultural surveys, ecological surveys, geo-data and voting statistics illuminate population, political, ecological, and economic trends on a more objective lean.
- **Qualitative:** Archival materials such as diaries, newspaper articles, paintings, music and works of art to capture the lived experiences and contextual nuances of settlement.
- **Field Work:** Site visits and creating art based on those visits are key to fieldwork. This approach aligns with Indigenous pedagogies⁹ by emphasizing personal interaction with the environment for historical understanding.

A heavily modified *Actor-Network Theory* (ANT) initially informed my approach by viewing both human and nonhuman entities as active participants. However, ANT is, at its core post-structuralist, a framework at odds with my approach to frontier history. As such, I do not include that aspect and instead look to *Structuration* theory. Structuration theory provides a dual lens to examine social structures and individual actions, asserting that neither alone explains social phenomena. Social action is a product of both structural constraints and individual agency¹⁰. Additionally, Indigenous frameworks such as *Two-Eyed Seeing*¹¹ and the *Land and Peoples Framework*¹² foster a relational understanding that blends Indigenous knowledge systems with Western analytical methods. Together, these theories challenge deterministic models of settlement and illustrate how networks of actors and structures co-create historical outcomes.

Use of R and Data Visualization

I use Excel for data organization and management in tandem with R software for its robust statistical capabilities and flexible data handling. The *sf* package enables the manipulation of spatial data, facilitating the examination of how geographic features influenced settlement patterns. Meanwhile, *ggplot2* allows for the creation of detailed, meaningful visualizations that illustrate the complex interplay between environmental and social variables.

Conclusion

This theoretical and methodological framework contributes to a more inclusive historiography that recognizes multiple forms of agency and interaction. It also highlights the importance of interdisciplinary methodologies—combining quantitative data with qualitative fieldwork—to capture the nuanced realities of historical processes. Future research could investigate the post-1918 evolution of these dynamic networks and the ongoing impact of Indigenous agency on the landscape in the face of settler colonialism.

Understanding Western Canadian settlement as a process of constant interaction not only enriches our historical narrative but also offers valuable lessons for contemporary discussions on decolonization and Indigenous rights. Recognizing the roles of all actors—human and nonhuman—and the structures they created, allows for a more holistic and just understanding of Canada's past and future.

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⁹ Battiste, "Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education a Literature Review with Recommendations: Prepared for the National Working Group on Education and the Minister of Indian Affairs Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) Ottawa, ON."

¹⁰ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society Outline of the Theory of Structuration*.

¹¹ Marshall, Marshall, and Bartlett, "Two-Eyed Seeing and Other Lessons Learned within a Co-Learning Journey of Bringing Together Indigenous and Mainstream Knowledges and Ways of Knowing."

¹² Jack, "About Land ^[T]_{SEP} & Peoples Relationship Model."

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- ¹¹ Marshall, Marshall, and Bartlett, "Two-Eyed Seeing and Other Lessons Learned within a Co-Learning Journey of Bringing Together Indigenous and Mainstream Knowledges and Ways of Knowing."
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