Natives and Pioneers

Death and the Settling and Unsettling of Oregon

Has the night descended?
Was the road of late so toilsome? did we stop discouraged nodding on our way?
Yet a passing hour I yield you in your tracks to pause oblivious,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

— Walt Whitman, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” (1865)

MYTH AND LEGEND have cast Oregon as an Edenic wilderness peopled through the nineteenth-century migration of pioneers across the Oregon Trail. But, of course, the place had long been the home of Native people, who have lived rich lives here for millennia and who have persisted through the region’s conquest and transformation, confounding that pernicious fable of America’s “frontier” past — the myth of the Vanishing Indian. As Warm Springs washat leader Wilson Wewa testifies vigorously, “we aren’t a vanishing race. We are still here.” For Native Oregonians, as well as for newcomers, the American settlement of Oregon proved profoundly unsettling. Oregon’s history has been punctuated by violence and death by conspicuous public mortality through epidemic disease and warfare, by collective death and even genocide. We are attuned to this as historians, and yet, the implications of such developments are often overwhelming. Death on a large scale is particularly potent, unsettling, and socially dangerous. Historically, it can be so threatening that we sometimes act to control or neutralize its effects, deny or obscure the death itself, or put it to work politically. Dead men tell no tales, but the living tell lots of them.

Death is a serious subject, so serious and inescapable that it can provoke whimsy or even humor. The French surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), for example, chose to inscribe on his tombstone, “D’ailleurs c’est toujours les autres qui meurent” [“In any case, it’s always someone else who dies’]. What is inevitable is nonetheless practically unimaginable, as suggested by the Duchamp epitaph as well as the odd title of the British contemporary artist Damien Hirst’s most famous and controversial installation — a very large tiger shark preserved and displayed in a steel-and-glass, formaldehyde-filled case: The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991). In his Reflections on War and Death (1918), Sigmund Freud articulated the same impossibility:

We cannot . . . imagine our own death; whenever we try to do so we find that we survive ourselves as spectators . . . [A]t bottom no one believes in his own death[,] . . . in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his immortality.

But if we cannot imagine our own deaths, or what happens after we take our last breaths, we see and personally experience the deaths of others — as a rupture and loss — and struggle to make sense of them. Through death we focus on life — what life means or has meant, and what the future will bring for us and our children as survivors. We do indeed “survive ourselves as spectators” of the mortality of others, if we are willing to look, to witness, and perhaps to account for the dead.

In a sense, this work of witnessing and accounting was the object of the Oregon Historical Society’s November 2013 symposium convened to assess the role of death — as a historical reality and as a powerful narrative trope —
in the settling and unsettling of Oregon. An opening discussion, “Honoring the Sacred,” by washa! leaders Wilson Wewa (Northern Paiute, Warm Springs) and Rex Buck, Jr. (Wanapum, Priest Rapids), commenced the symposium. The day continued with six scholarly presentations and concluded with an evening address by writer and University of Oregon journalism professor Lauren Kessler on Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act, its implications, and its ironies.1 In this special issue of the Oregon Historical Quarterly, revised versions of selected articles appear with an edited recording of Wewa and Buck and commentary by four other scholars, allowing the valuable and provocative contributions of the symposium to endure.4

History is important not merely because it chronicles what has happened but also because it can inform and instruct us in the present, keeping the past alive in successive futures. The idea that others will persist after we die gives shape, meaning, and value to much of what we do in the present. In his recent brilliant reflections on Death and the Afterlife, the philosopher Samuel Scheffler argues that the value of our terminal lives and actions depend on their immersion in a history of human life that sweeps far beyond us into the future. In an earlier essay, Scheffler explored the relationship between tradition and mortality: “In subscribing to a tradition . . . one seeks to ensure the future. In an earlier essay, Scheffler explored the relationship between tradition and mortality: “In subscribing to a tradition . . . one seeks to ensure the survival over time of what one values, one diminishes the perceived significance of one’s own death.” It is not merely that we want all we value to survive; the present worth of much of what constitutes our lives depends on the continuation and development of our culture long after we are gone. Scheffler offers two counter-factual thought experiments that ask us to imagine a terrible absence: a doomsday scenario in which the world ends when we, as individuals, die; and an infertility scenario in which those currently living cannot reproduce. Both scenarios are terrifying, and both seem likely to drain meaning, purpose, and value from our lives. To what extent did the near genocidal impact of American colonization in Oregon set into motion some version of these doomsday scenarios for Oregon’s Native people? What gave them the strength to endure and continue to imagine and cultivate a collective afterlife, into the present and beyond? How might such doomsday feelings have affected a dying pioneer generation and way of life in the elegiac moments of the late nineteenth century in Oregon? The articles and comments in this special issue of the OHQ address such questions and tell us something significant about Oregon’s history, focusing particularly on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They demonstrate that before and during the so-called settlement of Oregon Territory by white pioneers, there was a devastating unsettlement — that Oregon in the 1840s and 1850s was not a Virgin Land but a Widowed Land, where new birth commenced only with and through death. Alongside the transformation there was a demolition, and too often we focus on the former at the expense of the latter. Articles by Wendi Lindquist, Chelsea Vaugh, Peter Boag, and David Lewis offer a means of understanding how this alchemy occurred, turning base stories into golden narratives. They collectively suggest how history and memory are not merely ways of recollecting the past but are also means of obscuring or forgetting it. Inevitably, remembering implies forgetting, as we recall selectively, valuing and emphasizing some facts or fancies at the expense of others.

What tales do dead men tell? Rather, how do the living speak on behalf of the dead? Why do such tales leave so much out, or purvey partial truths, or willfully (or ignorantly) misrepresent the past? The historian Jill Lepore has defined “History” as “the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story accountable to evidence.” Many of our death-centered stories, however, seem to be more artful than factual, and to craft arguments that, in the face of historical evidence, seem convenient, tendentious, or exclusionary. As we recall the ways in which Oregon was colonized, and the costs of that conquest on people and landscapes, we would do well to examine how our selective memory or amnesia about those events — such as the Whitman incident, or the lonesome journey of David Lewis’s ancestor, Hattie Sands, from homeland to reservation — is produced as stories. History requires vision along with facts, and it can help us re-imagine our present and future. The articles in this special issue contribute to that important enterprise.

DAVID LEWIS’S ARTICLE briefly recounts the violent process of conquest, removal, and relocation of southwestern Oregon’s Native people in the first half of the nineteenth century and, significantly, offers a new assessment of the aftermath of conquest and Indian resilience. The history of conquest in Oregon is grim, well documented, and well known, at least among Native people and scholars. Indeed, we might characterize it as “genocidal,” even though Native people did not disappear; as Lewis, Wewa, and Buck demonstrate, they survived, found ways to reconstitute themselves, and have shown remarkable strength into the present. The deadly story of conquest had spectators who left records; and, yet, this story was poorly told for a very long time. It was a dangerous story. Despite their collective prejudices, sense of superiority, and cultural entitlement, white Americans were unwilling to embrace the self-image of the conqueror. They wished to deny that “might makes right” and instead sought to justify their colonization of Oregon (and the West more generally) on nobler terms, or to obscure it by the way they imagined and told their own glorious story as pioneers.
Wendi Lindquist analyzes one means of obscuring or naturalizing that act of conquest, by examining “the changing ways in which nineteenth-century whites in the Pacific Northwest interpreted, interacted with, and stole from Native burial grounds.” They did so first in the interest of the rising pseudo-sciences of phrenology and craniology, which sought to classify “races” in hierarchical fashion and to establish a “history of man” that placed whites on top. Although fully aware that stealing from Native burial grounds caused pain and harm to living Native people, men such as Meredith Gairdner nonetheless raid ed mortuary sites and procured “specimens,” including the skull of the Chinook Chief Concomly, in the interest of “science.” Of course, they did more than steal bones and burial items: they exhibited the arrogance and superiority of conquerors, assimilated Oregon and its Native peoples into an empire of science, and provided a biased logic and rationale for Native subordination and eventual extinction through death or assimilation. This conceptual conquest, conditioned by racist assumptions about the hierarchy of peoples, helped justify the physical conquest that decimated not merely the dead but also the living. The notion that Indian decline was scientifically inevitable would function as a self-justifying prophecy, enabling a destruction that was not natural or predestined but premeditated and preventable. Such assumptions continued to inform later grave robbing by white settlers, some of whom, like the missionary Margaret Bailey, construed their theft as acts of salvage — efforts to preserve “ornaments” or traces of the dying race. Through expressions of nostalgia and regret about the Indian (now safely dead or removed), furthermore, white Oregonians could feel better about themselves as a blameless, feeling people. Others simply purloined Native bones and other grave objects as self-indulgent souvenir collection, a respectable means of trophy-taking (or a way to obtain commodities for the trade in “curiosities”) that documented Native dispossession and asserted the legitimacy of white dominion. The ultimate imperial act would be the erasure of Native burial grounds, treatment of Indian remains not as relics but as trash, and erection in the Oregon landscape of new cemeteries that interred the expiring white pioneer generation, thus transforming Oregon into someone else’s homeland.\footnote{Boag’s layered treatment of the death of Oregon’s pioneer generation brings to mind another quotation from Freud, from his Reflections on War and Death (1918), on how, in the face of mortality, we are drawn to whitewash memory: “We assume a special attitude towards the dead,” Freud wrote, “something almost like admiration for one who has accomplished a very difficult feat.”}

That repossessed homeland was the domain of Oregon’s nineteenth-century pioneers, the subject of Peter Boag’s fascinating article examining the once notorious Montgomery parricide in the context of the late-nineteenth-century economic depression, the demise of the Oregon pioneer generation alongside its valorization, and the uncertain future of modernizing Oregon at the turn of the twentieth century. Those who found a way to envision and justify the death of Oregon’s Native people now faced the impossibility of imagining their own collective death, perhaps symbolized all too graphically in the pointless, bloody homicides committed by Loyd Montgomery near Brownsville in 1895. The death of the pioneer generation inspired countless acts of public memory — commemorations, new institutions and organizations, necrologies and other publications, artifact and relic collection, even establishment of a new state historical society in 1898 — which, like earlier memorializing, obscured as well as recalled, produced silences as well as forthright statements about the past and prescriptions for the uncertain present and future.\footnote{What about that word, pioneer, so prominent in designating Oregon’s passing patriarchs and matriarchs, as in the Oregon Pioneer Association, founded 1873? The term itself is fraught, less innocent than it sounds, as it is used unselfconsciously and usually in praise of those who discovered, settled, and inaugurated something good and noble, such as the territory and state of Oregon, which they bequeathed to descendants. From the fourteenth century, in its origins in Old French, pioneer referred to “a soldier employed to dig trenches and mines”; by the nineteenth century, the word came to mean “early colonist” or “innovator.” That earlier, martial meaning remained fossilized in the term: “a member of an infantry group going ahead with or ahead of an army or regiment to dig trenches, repair roads, and clear terrain in readiness for the main body of troops”; one “specializing in digging mines during a siege; an underminer.” A pioneer is thus implicitly a colonizer, assisting conquest, if only as a pawn, which similarly derives from the same Old French root word. If a pioneer was “a person who goes before others to prepare or open up the way; one who begins, or takes part in the beginning of, some enterprise,” then one might ask: For whom? What is being undermined, who is under siege, on whose behalf? And what becomes of those pioneers once they have completed their work and launched the new settlement, colony, or enterprise?}

Boag’s layered treatment of the death of Oregon’s pioneer generation brings to mind another quotation from Freud, from his Reflections on War and Death (1918), on how, in the face of mortality, we are drawn to whitewash memory: “We assume a special attitude towards the dead,” Freud wrote, “something almost like admiration for one who has accomplished a very difficult feat.”

We suspend criticism of him, overlooking whatever wrongs he may have done, and issue the command, de mortuis nil nisi bene: we act as if we were justified in singing his praises at the funeral oration, and inscribe only what is to his advantage on the tombstone. This consideration for the dead . . . is more important to us than the truth.
White Oregonians seem to have been ill-disposed to point out the faults of the pioneer generation on the occasion of their passing, even to the point of suppressing comment on one of the most shocking events of their day — the brutal murders and internal scandals within the prominent Montgomery clan. As Boag suggests, such discussion would have challenged the cultural and political work of hagiography and nostalgia, contributing instead to the climate of fear and confusion about the future. In the name of heroic pioneers, commentators prescribed the virtues they supposedly embodied: vigor, courage, intelligence, morality, and perseverance.

The ironies of such commemoration were considerable. Pious remembrance supported purposeful forgetfulness about the actual, more difficult, or more sordid, past. And such memorializing might have enabled a more general and useful prospective amnesia. Having fulfilled the obligations of eulogizing pioneers, Oregonians could embrace closure — that is, respectable forgetting — and give themselves permission to focus guiltlessly on the future. Boag quotes pioneer memorial addresses that express the wish to abandon the world altogether, giving up on the future:

Fellow Pioneers, we who remain are no longer of the young but of the Old. Life's work is almost done; Let us not therefore live repiningly, fretfully, or gloomily, but let us live cheerfully, gladly and Hopefully Expecting soon a reunion with All the Pure; the blessed and the Good, not only of our own association but of all the generations of the Past ages. 11

Termination of life seemed to imply termination of a way of life. Very quickly, in less than a generation, pioneer societies themselves became essentially moribund. Fin-de-siècle remembrance and the cult of the Oregon pioneer emphasized rupture while serving both anti-modernist and modernist agendas — on the one hand through lamentations about the irrevocable passing of a simpler, better world, and on the other hand through celebrations of a better future founded on the heroic innovations or “spirit” of the past. Boag quotes pioneer memorial addresses that express the wish to abandon the world altogether, giving up on the future:

Termination of life meant to imply not only the end of a way of life. Very quickly, in less than a generation, pioneer societies themselves became essentially moribund. Fin-de-siècle remembrance and the cult of the Oregon pioneer emphasized rupture while serving both anti-modernist and modernist agendas — on the one hand through lamentations about the irrevocable passing of a simpler, better world, and on the other hand through celebrations of a better future founded on the heroic innovations or “spirit” of the past.

Sometimes, these paradoxical tendencies found voice in a single orator or writer. Portland newspaper editor Harvey W. Scott, for example, told an audience in Astoria in 1901: “Under operation of forces that press upon us from contact with the world at large, and under the law of our own internal development, we are moving rapidly away from old conditions. Pioneer life is now but a memory; it will soon be but a legend or tradition.” The twentieth century would be a brave new world: “Modern society has no fixity. Nothing abides in present forms.” In that world to come, Scott suggested: “The story of the toilsome march of the wagon trains over the plains will be received by future generations almost as legend on the borderland of myth, rather than as veritable history.” Just as Scott seemed to lament the transformation of Oregon Trail experiences from history to legend, he nevertheless participated in the work, offering a timeless narrative of inevitability: “No longer can we understand the motives that urged our pioneers toward the indefinite horizon that seemed to verge on the unknown... It was the last effort of that profound impulse which, from a time far preceding the dawn of history, has pushed the race, to which we belong, to discovery and occupation of Western lands.” Scott’s sentiments echoed those of Frederick Jackson Turner, whose frontier thesis expressed admiration for American westward expansion and concern for the future as that “frontier” was closing. Like Turner, Scott’s narrative privileged some — white Americans — at the expense of others and saw those actors exclusively as the makers of history. 12

But what about the future? Perhaps embodying the ambivalence of his day, Scott simultaneously praised and criticized the “Spirit of the Pioneers,” the title of an 1899 essay he published in the Oregonian. “The charge against the pioneer spirit... is that it is an influence unfavorable to a highly organized and cooperative industrial development... The demonstration of it, we think, is found in the tardiness of the Willamette Valley in the matter of industrial progress,” which Scott complained, “moves along in the old grooves, being today in essentials largely what it was thirty years ago, namely, a pioneer country.” Ultimately, Scott sought an interpretive reconciliation that would allow Oregonians to move beyond their pioneer heritage while retaining its “spirit”:

We have now at the end of the century a very different Oregon from the Oregon of the “fifties”; but it has been wrought out by evolution, not by revolution. The Oregon of today is the true child of the earlier Oregon, with the family likeness strong, with the family traits predominating. The pioneer makes, now as ever, the spirit of the country. Others have prospered, in a material sense, more largely than the pioneer. But from him have come, broadly speaking, the lawmakers, the teachers, and the preachers of the country. This is the pioneer’s land, and his spirit rules it. And the land might be far worse. 13

With hope and some anxiety, Scott thus sought to reconcile the past with the present and future, and in the transition to a modern world, he hoped, the soul of the pioneer would endure and assist twentieth-century Oregonians. Pioneers remained available and potent as icons, used to construct particular memories and stories in the twentieth century, as Chelsea Vaughn’s evocative article, “Killing Narcissa,” demonstrates. What tales might dead women tell? In books, plays, operas, film, and pageants, Narcissa Whitman’s life and death were employed to tell a complicated — and sometimes contradictory — set of stories. The theme of one of these tales was clearly conveyed in its title: How the West Was Won. Here, Whitman symbolized the success of colonial conquest, represented simplistically in the 1923 Walla Walla pageant as the happy advent of civilization in the Pacific Northwest. As the first white
woman and a founding mother in the region (along with Eliza Spalding), Whitman embodied traditional womanhood, the passive emblem of successful domestication of the landscape and reproduction of civilized social life. Her very presence — or the womanly presence her martyrdom supposedly made possible — signaled the triumph of God, civilization, and nation. Depictions of Whitman as a passive representative of American civilization, rather than as an active agent of conquest, conformed to traditional norms of womanhood. Such an image helped characterize the colonial process as tender and peaceable, obscuring its aggressiveness and violence.

In her symposium presentation, Vaughn quoted Whitman College President Stephen Penrose’s introductory verses that opened the pageant: “Where woman goes, / Peace and the gentler arts of human kind / Go to.” Pageant organizers and other storytellers’ reticence to depict actual violence against a white woman on stage or the printed page, self-consciously in the interest of good taste, subconsciously reinforced the message of white civility and amity. In turn, Whitman’s story, narrated in this fashion, inverted the roles of victim and victimizer and encouraged audiences to sympathize with the supposedly weak, blameless white Americans and to feel a certain revulsion toward aggressive and murderous Indians. Viewers could thus interpret the latter’s ultimate demise not as a violent colonial conquest but as just retribution for their savagery. And yet, as Vaughn shows, the new pageantry, drama, and cinematography presenting this revised saga with Whitman at its center was more subtle and complicated than older narratives of Manifest Destiny. Genuine concern and imperial nostalgia for Native people conjured positive, sympathetic depictions of Indians, some of whom found employment in these spectacles. Alternative narratives emerged that questioned the cost and the justice of imperial expansion, even as they affirmed the triumph of U.S. nationhood and civilization.

In nuanced fashion, Vaughn demonstrates how gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and modernity combined to produce a new pluralist understanding of and justification for American empire.

While helping make the case for American colonial conquest, Whitman’s story also struck some as useful in promoting their more radical causes. Vaughn’s article suggests that, on the one hand, the new Narcissa Whitman persona performed important political work for feminists hoping to promote white woman suffrage in the West. On the other hand, her story was enlisted by reactionary forces, such as the resurgent Ku Klux Klan, to advance its racist (particularly its anti-Catholic) agenda. Although the former use might now strike us as positive and the latter as repulsive, and although each was contested, both in fact joined in the larger project of promoting and celebrating white American conquest of the Pacific Northwest, which occurred through settlement and unsettlement, through real and symbolic death and rebirth.

WHAT HAPPENS AS MEMORY FADES and time passes and the conditions of life alter immeasurably in our own time, the twenty-first century? We often say in the face of tragic or catastrophic events that we will never forget. It is usually not true. And if we do not forget, we often devalue, compartmentalize, or trivialize the past. These articles contest such decline in our history and public memory through their perceptive analysis of deaths critical to the history of Oregon. With so much settled, the stakes or costs are lower today for Euro-American acknowledgment of the destructiveness of colonialism in the region. Nevertheless, historical testimony remains important and has ongoing political consequences, especially for Native people, as David Lewis’s article exhibits, helping protect treaty rights, uphold sovereignty, and underwrite appeals for justice.

The Oregon pioneers, who expired more than a hundred years ago, for the most part lack a modern constituency. How many citizens of Oregon today, beyond the readership of the Oregon Historical Quarterly, can or would choose to link themselves genealogically with those early-nineteenth-century settlers? According to the 2000 census, only 46 percent of those living in Oregon were born in the state, a minority trend that is consistent with all previous censuses. The high for native-born Oregonians occurred in 1960, when the number reached 48 percent. This long-term and persistent remaking of the state population suggests that very few Oregonians can trace their heritage to the pioneer generation. And yet, the pioneer remains an important Oregon icon, at the heart of state tourism, as the inspiration for Oregon’s beloved NBA franchise, the Portland Trail Blazers, and as a popular moniker for businesses (Pioneer Roofers, or Pioneer Pizza), boulevards (Pioneer Street, or Pioneer Parkway), and innovators statewide (Oregon’s wine pioneers, or Nike founder Phil Knight, “a pioneer in the world of athletic shoes”).

What role does the public memory of Oregon pioneers play in molding the self-image of Oregonians today? The earliest settlers continue to attract the attention of historians and historically minded Oregonians, and among the public, some no doubt continue to venerate pioneer forebears as avatars of an imagined better, simpler time, or as inspirations for the future. But if the value of the pioneer brand is broad, one might wonder about its depth. Bronze statues of The Pioneer and the The Pioneer Mother sit today on separate sides of Johnson Hall on the University of Oregon campus, for example, but few pause to look, pay their respects or lodge their protests, or even ask whence they came. In a sense, such concrete remembrance gives us permission to forget, and these monuments become “second nature,” simply part of the landscape. Generic pioneers, whether in the form of laudatory labels or campus and town-square furniture, do not teach us about or connect us with the actual historical actors in Oregon’s pioneer era. Mostly, they confer...
an abstract value on the people and landscapes they grace, or at best, they represent a latent aspiration toward real historical engagement.2

Pioneers in Oregon and the West function today most prominently as props for boosters hoping to promote small communities and their economic livelihood, as accessories for fairs and festivals or pioneer days, latter-day versions of the pageant Vaughn examines in 1920s Walla Walla. With time, both the pride and the embarrassment of the past can fade, leaving decontaminated versions of locally famous or infamous (now "colorful") characters and events to become potential commodities to market local communities. Bogue suggests that Brownsville’s claim to fame might ironically reside in the celebration of its worst moment, inviting it to assert status as the site of the most hideous, horrible, heinous murder ever committed in the entire Pacific Northwest. We are not likely to see a Brownsville booster event organized around a whimsical celebration of the Montgomery homicides.3 But the tragic past sometimes reappears as farce, particularly when it helps someone make money.

This has been a common occurrence in American culture. The best example of this sort of thing might be Salem — not Salem, Oregon, but Salem, Massachusetts, the infamous site of the most famous witch-hunt in American history, in which some twenty innocent and unfortunate people were executed as “witches” in 1692. For a time, the Salem Witch Crisis was a profound embarrassment to New Englanders, and one of America’s most important authors, Nathaniel Hawthorne (whose own ancestor presided as one of the magistrates), wrote some of the country’s most significant literary works as a sort of penance. Today, however, Salem markets itself as “Witch City USA.” City police sport the silhouette of a witch riding a broomstick on their uniform patches and squad cars, and Salem High School sports teams, without shame, call themselves The Witches — bad taste but good marketing and somehow a point of pride.

Such whimsy paradoxically preserves the past — recalling death — and inoculates us against its full, dreadful meaning. Closer to home, we might invoke as Exhibit A: “Dead Guy Ale, Oregon Brewed” by Rogue Brewery in Newport, Oregon, the label tells us, “dedicated to the Rogue in each of us.” Or we might consider a T-shirt worn by some that pays quirky homage to The Oregon Trail video game, depicting a cartoonish wagon and oxen over the words, in a fluorescent green, old-fashioned computer font: “YOU HAVE DIED OF DYSENTERY.” My own children, who played the game in the 1990s, found such messages scary and disconcerting when they made their first virtual treks, but as young adults, they might now laugh and indulge their own nostalgia — not for nineteenth-century pioneer ancestors but for their own late-twentieth-century childhoods.

The November 2013 symposium did move into the more recent past, but not in whimsical fashion or in a way that exhaustively examined our vast and complex topic: death in Oregon. The evening lecture featured Lauren Kessler’s thought-provoking discussion on “Death with — and Without — Dignity,” a reflection on the paradox presented by the simultaneous existence in Oregon of laws allowing both humane physician-assisted dying and inhumane capital punishment. Other sorts of death in Oregon also present themselves for historical consideration, but were beyond the scope of the symposium. Focusing on Oregon’s rich environmental history, for example, we might have discussed the twentieth-century “death” and restoration of Oregon’s rivers, which inspired an environmental activism and reform in Oregon during the 1970s that became a model for the United States, and which fueled the political rise of Oregon’s most beloved governor, Tom McCall; the threat of extinction facing the Pacific Northwest’s iconic salmon; or the daunting prospect of global climate change, famously billed as The End of Nature, which confronts Oregon, the United States, and Earth. Oregonians, like all others, will continue to find death inescapable, and yet they will persist in aspiring to a prosperous collective afterlife, to rebirth. History, and in a small way articles like those presented here, can aid us in that future.

NOTES

1. Wilson Wewa and Rex Buck, “‘We Are Created From this Land’” Oregon Historical Quarterly 115:3 (Fall 2014): 298.

2. The Death With Dignity Act, Oregon Revised Statutes, sec. 128.00 (1994).


4. I want to acknowledge and thank all those participating in the symposium, as well as those who contributed articles, comments, revised articles, and critiques. Most of all I want to thank Eliza Canty-Jones for inviting me to join her as co-organizer of the symposium and for her tireless work to ensure its success, which culminates with the publication of this special issue of the Oregon Historical Quarterly.

DEATH AND THE SETTLING AND UNSETTLING OF OREGON

a symposium presented at the Oregon Historical Society on November 7, 2013

OPENING CEREMONY
Rex Buck, Wanapum Washat Leader, Priest Rapids, Washington, and Wilson Wewa, Warm Springs Washat Leader, Warm Springs, Oregon, “Honoring the Sacred”

SCHOLARLY PRESENTATIONS
Wendi Lindquist, PhD candidate, University of Washington, “Stealing from the Dead”
Dr. Mark Tveskov, Southern Oregon University, “The Certain and Unerring Retribution of Their Own Waking: Indian Massacre as Pioneer Experience”
Dr. David Lewis, Grand Ronde Tribal Historian, “Our Hearts are Upon This Land, We do not Wish to Remove”
Dr. Peter Boag, Washington State University, “Death and Oregon’s Settler Generation: Connecting Parricide, Agricultural Decline, and Dying Pioneers at the Turn of the 20th Century”
Chelsea Vaughn, PhD candidate, UC Riverside, “Killing Narcissa: Death and Historical Pageantry in the 1920s West”
Dr. Jennifer Karson Engum, Cultural Anthropologist/Ethnographer, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), “The Official CTUIR Perspective on the Whitman incident”
Dr. Matthew Dennis, University of Oregon, “Comment and Synthesis”

EVENING KEYNOTE
Lauren Kessler, Professor of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon, “Death with — and without — Dignity: Oregon’s Progressive — and Regressive — Attitudes toward Ending Life”

7. Mark Tveskov’s paper, “The Certain and Unerring Retribution of Their Own Waking: Indian Massacre as Pioneer Experience,” should be acknowledged for its important contribution to the symposium through its vivid and disturbing illustrative narratives of two massacres in 1850, on the Coquille River and in the Rogue River Valley. Tveskov explained these massacres in the context of a long tradition of American frontier ideology. They would prove embarrassing to American authorities, who sought to mute and obscure the violence of conquest and justify it as inevitable and relatively bloodless, in the manner suggested by Chelsea Vaughn’s article in this issue. As Lewis makes clear, a new chapter in the historiography of Oregon began in the 1970s, especially with the work of Stephen Dow Beckham, notably in his Requiem for a People: The Rogue Indians and the Frontiersman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), followed by his numerous books and articles. It has continued with such important recent works as, for example, Gray H. Whaley, Oregon and the Collapse of Illohaee: U.S. Empire and the Transformation of an Indigenous World, 1792–1859 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Charles Wilkinson, The People Are Dancing: The History of the Siletz Tribe of Western Oregon (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).
8. Native Oregonians sought to remain in their homelands, in part to preserve the graves of their ancestors. They did not abandon such sites but, rather, were driven from them, as at least some contemporary observers knew. Consider, for example, comments in Anson Dart’s letter of April 19, 1851, quoted in David Lewis’s article in this issue, p. 424.
9. Salvage is a common but fraught term in this context, frequently used to describe in sanitized fashion the collection of Native relics — whether actual remains, material objects, or even images, as in the painting of George Catlin or Carl Bodmer — sometimes even before such objects or places have been “abandoned” or before the demise of Native communities themselves. The original meaning of salvage is “a payment or compensation to which those persons are entitled who have by their voluntary efforts saved a ship or its cargo from impending peril or rescued it from actual loss,” or “to make salvage of; to save or salvage from shipwreck, fire, etc.” or “to take (esp. euphem. by misappropriation) and make use of (unemployed or unattended property).” Note that those being wrecked are not the ones who have volunteered or who are being compensated; rather, it is the salvagers who benefit. Salvagers save, but they are not typically savors of those suffering the loss (see the Oxford English Dictionary [OED] at “salvage.”
11. Almost from the beginning, the Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society (later the Oregon Historical Quarterly), which began publication in 1900, included obituaries of and tributes to pioneers. With its volume 32 in 1931, the OHQ added a “Necrology” section, which continued through 1943. As early as 1917, for example, the Quarterly included a “Death Roll of the Society,” which that year reported, “Death carried off eighteen members of the society,” and went on to note, “The Oregon Pioneer Association recorded the deaths of 368 pioneers in the Northwest between June 1, 1916, and May 31, 1917, of whom 301 had never enrolled in the association” (OHQ 18:4 [December 1917],
301–302. The lengthy list of the deceased included, among others, a “pioneer merchant,” a “pioneer dentist,” a “pioneer journalist,” and a “pioneer hardware merchant.” The first Necrology in 1901 offered a long list of deceased Oregonians with connections to the pioneer era, including, typically, eighty-nine-year-old Mary Kelly Biles, “pioneer of 1853,” who died at Seaside (OHQ 32:1 [March 1931], 95). By 1945, the Necrology—running to four pages in 1931—had contracted to a mere half page, with only eleven listed, none of them specifically labeled “pioneers” (OHQ 4:11 [March 1945], 114).

12. This speculation about the meaning and implication of the word pioneer is inspired by the symposium discussions. 13. See the OED, at “pioneer.” Like many English words, pioneer can at times act like a “contronym,” a term having contradictory meanings depending on the context (e.g., cleave, sanction, garnish, oversight). In the Necrologies of the Oregon Historical Quarterly, “pioneer” was used widely but not uniformly in identifying those who emigrated to Oregon before 1860, often in the phrase (referring here to Harlan F. Hulbert) “pioneer of Oregon before...birth.” Turner’s classic statement of the frontier thesis came in his presidential address at the American Historical Association in 1893, published subsequently as “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in the Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the Annual Report of the American Historical Association.


20. Note, however, that some Oregonians continued to resist such pluralism and juxtaposed Oregon “pioneers” against immigrants as well as against Native inhabitants, particularly when those newcomers were not white. In an address to the legislature, for example, Oregon Governor Ben Olson in 1921 declared, “here in Oregon the pioneer blood flows more purely and in a more nearly undiluted stream than in any other state of the Union.” He particularly felt threatened by the advent of Japanese immigrants, calling the Japanese an “alien race with differing aspirations from our own.” He urged the legislature to “preserve our lands and resources for the people of our own race and nationality.” Message of Ben W. Olson, Governor of Oregon to the Thirty-First Legislative Assembly Regular Session, convened January 1921; available online, website of the Oregon State Archives at: http://arcweb sos.state.or.us/pages/records/governors/guides/state/olcott/messages02.html.

21. See “Oregonians All: Native of the State Outnumbered — Again,” editorial in the Eugene Register-Guard, Monday September 3, 2001, 10A. Any Google search nets scores of latter-day “pioneers” for the characterization of Phil Knight as a pioneer, see “Advice from Great Entrepreneurs: Phil Knight,” the Inc. Plan (USA) website at: https://www.incplan.net/blog/strategy/phil-knight-advice/ (accessed August 6, 2014).

22. The Pioneer (1918) and The Pioneer Mother (1932) are the work of the sculptor Alexander Phineas Proctor (1862–1950). The former was unveiled by Oregon Historical Society President Frederick V. Holman in 1919, who declared that the statue “symbolizes and immortalizes...the Oregon pioneer and his qualities—his courage, his determination, his instincts and his high ideals and those of the people of which the Oregon Pioneer is a fine specimen and example.” The Pioneer Mother, on the other hand, unveiled on Mother’s Day 1932, sits passively and contemplatively in old age, embodying a conservative vision of womanhood (women in Oregon had won the vote two decades earlier, in 1912), and supporting the points argued by Chelsea Vaughn in her article. As a pioneer mother, Proctor’s bronze statue underplays the violent, undermining quality of the pioneer, and as a mother pioneer, it elevates the historic role of women in progressive fashion, even if it falls short of more radical feminist expressions. Contemporaries of these bronzes are largely unaware of all this history and meaning. Quotations from Cynthia Culver Prescott, Gender and Generation on the Far Western Frontier (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 149. The Oregon Trail video game originated in a Minnesota classroom in the early 1970s and was first produced commercially in 1974. Various editions, available in various platforms, emerged in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. As of 2011, some 65 million copies of the game have been sold. See the online blog, The Digital Antiquarian: An Ongoing History of Computer Entertainment by Jimmy Maher, “The Oregon Trail,” at http://www.filfre.net/tag/the-oregon-trail/ (accessed August 4, 2014).

23. Brownsville holds an annual Pioneer Picnic over three days in mid-June. The picnic organizers claim that the event is Oregon’s oldest continuing celebration, dating to a resolution of Oregon Trail Pioneers in 1887. The earliest events included “fun, worship and fellowship,” but with the passing of time, the picnic “changed to include other entertainment and activities.” Today’s picnic features “family fun with games, food booths, a jogger jamboree, fun educational meets, shows and entertainment,” as well as a Saturday “Wagon Train Breakfast” and “Grand Parade.” See http://www.historicbrownsville.com/content/BR_pioneer.html (accessed August 6, 2014).