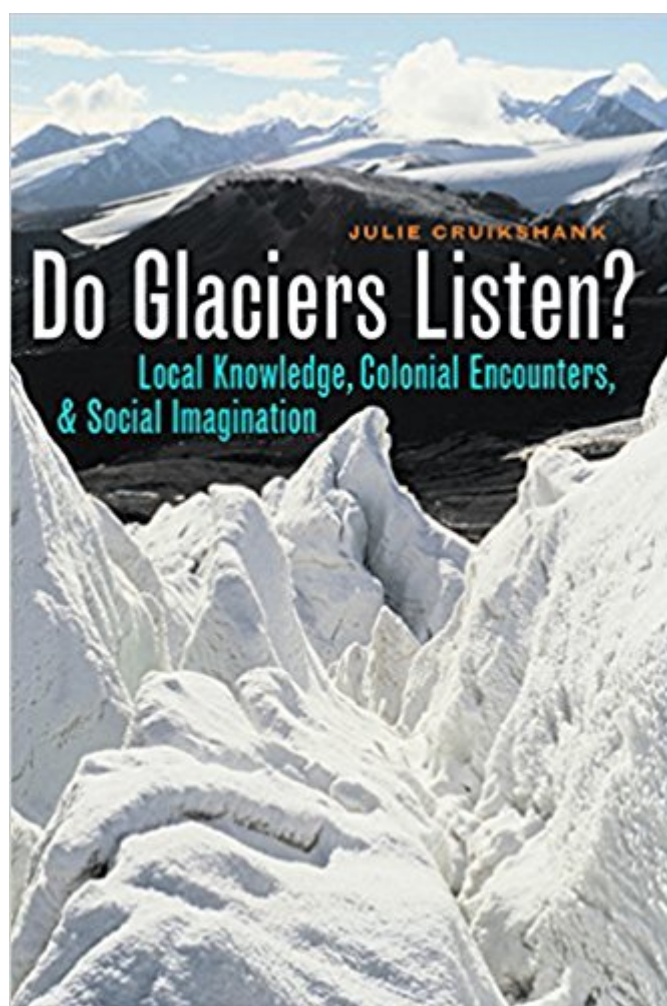


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# Do Glaciers Listen?: Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, And Social Imagination (Canadian Studies Series)



## Synopsis

The glaciers creep Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains, Slow rolling on. — Percy Shelley, “Mont Blanc,” 1816

Glaciers in America’s far northwest figure prominently in indigenous oral traditions, early travelers’ journals, and the work of geophysical scientists. By following such stories across three centuries, this book explores local knowledge, colonial encounters, and environmental change. *Do Glaciers Listen?* examines conflicting depictions of glaciers to show how natural and social histories are entangled. During late stages of the Little Ice Age, significant geophysical changes coincided with dramatic social upheaval in the Saint Elias Mountains. European visitors brought conceptions of Nature as sublime, as spiritual, or as a resource for human progress. They saw glaciers as inanimate, subject to empirical investigation and measurement. Aboriginal responses were strikingly different. From their perspectives, glaciers were sentient, animate, and quick to respond to human behaviour. In each case, experiences and ideas surrounding glaciers were incorporated into interpretations of social relations. Focusing on these contrasting views, Julie Cruikshank demonstrates how local knowledge is produced, rather than “discovered,” through such encounters, and how oral histories conjoin social and biophysical processes. She traces how divergent views continue to weave through contemporary debates about protected areas, parks and the new World Heritage site that encompasses the area where Alaska, British Columbia, and the Yukon Territory now meet. Students and scholars of Native studies and anthropology as well as readers interested in northern studies and colonial encounters will find *Do Glaciers Listen?* a fascinating read and a rich addition to circumpolar literature. Winner of the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing, 2006

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In part a work of environmental history juxtaposing orally transmitted tribal memories and knowledge with modern scientific perceptions of climate change and landscape transformation, Cruikshank's text makes a strong case for the privileging of orally constituted local knowledge in present-day management decisions." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* "Reading this book was as exhilarating as taking a raft trip down the Alsek River." Although this book will particularly delight those familiar with cultures of Alaska and the Yukon, it holds much interest for a broader audience. *American Anthropologist* "Julie Cruikshank's book on the connections between glaciers and human history and imagination could not be more timely." *Reading Do Glaciers Listen?* is a thrilling and sobering experience. Cruikshank combines splendid scholarship and majestic descriptions in a cross-disciplinary tour-de-force. Readers will come away with a new appreciation of the meaning of glaciers. *Journal of Folklore Research*

"Do Glaciers Listen? is an exploration of nature and culture in encounter that builds upon Julie Cruikshank's deep and unrivalled knowledge of indigenous tradition. It focuses on an area that is, by most people's reckoning, off the beaten track and probably thus, by extension, unpropitious space for such an inquiry. But this is its triumph. It brings liminal space to the very centre of several important concerns of contemporary scholarship." *Graeme Wynn, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia*

The book, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters & Social Imagination*, demonstrates that local knowledge and scientific knowledge differ not in their empirical outcomes, but rather, in their respective ontological and epistemological underpinnings; which, however, can strongly influence the type of spatialities that would be produced in a given place. This picture is seen in all places that have undergone European imperialism, as the social, cultural, and geophysical landscapes of these places are altered to fit those of European worldviews. Drawing on climate histories, colonial records, and Aboriginal oral histories, Cruikshank makes this picture more apparent as she examines the relationship between glaciers and the Indigenous people of northwestern North America during the little Ice Age, and how

this relationship is subsequently impacted by Western contact. In a nutshell, the book examines how the view of nature, society and culture as unavoidably entwined is contested, and a view of these components as disaggregates gradually takes center stage in Northwestern North America. The ontology of the Indigenous people of northwestern North America, particularly, Tlingit people on the Gulf of Alaska Coast and the interior Athapaskans, is that nature and society are inseparable. Hence, the native people view nature, in this case, glaciers, as sentient beings with as much agency as their human counterparts. There is mutual respect between glaciers and humans, as glaciers can respond to insolent behavior – making obscene remarks about glaciers, insulting elderly people, calling glaciers and cooking greasy food around glaciers – leading to dire consequence, such as their deluge on entire settlements. Knowledge about the behavior of glaciers – is acquired and transmitted through stories passed down from one generation to the other. These stories about glaciers, however, are given in the context of the daily material practices of humans; hence, glaciers are a determinant of the material and imaginative outcomes of the society. Humans are able to navigate their daily lives through knowledge of the behavior of glaciers, and knowledge of the glaciers is acquired through a navigation of their daily lives and transmitted through oral narratives. Local knowledge, therefore, is not static or discovered, but it is produced and reproduced through a dynamic process of nature/society interaction. On the other hand, the book reveals that European explorers, who later made contact with the glaciated lands of northwestern North America, viewed the area as “discovered” and external to human society. They did not only see clear lines between humans and the glaciers, but also, they (explorers) and the indigenous people. For instance, the French exploration leader, Jean-Francois de La Perouse, viewed the glaciers of Lituya Bay in 1786 with awe, yet he was ready with instruments to ascertain their dimensions and characteristics. The American environmentalist, Muir, introduced a definition of nature as something to be protected and preserve without regard for the already existing human population that drew its livelihood from the environment. This dualistic ontology and the epistemological hegemony of science – dismissal of oral narratives as myths, as they do not fit into the jigsaw puzzle of science – formed the base of European imperialism. The British writer and traveller, Edward Glave, who wanted to return to the Belgian Congo, needed to prove to his targeted employer that he had the requisite skill to work in his colony; hence, he changed his previous tolerance of native views of the environment during his second visit to northwestern North American. The consequence of this emergent ontology – nature/society dualism – and epistemology –

science. The process of knowledge production in northwestern North America was its annexation, demarcation, and sharing, albeit protracted disputes, which did not involve the original inhabitants; as the area was viewed, by its invaders, as though it was an uninhabited space. Much of this area now stand as protected lands, national parks, and the UNESCO World Heritage site. Traces of this dualism are found in contemporary issues of environmental governance, biodiversity and climate change globally. Nonetheless, Cruikshank makes the point that many scientific disciplines are beginning to acknowledge the importance of local knowledge in knowledge production and the interconnectedness of nature and society. A juxtaposition of oral narratives of three women who lived the Saint Elias Mountains area in present day Yukon Territory and oral histories left by early explorers demonstrates no significant differences in their stories about glaciers, except for the fact that the Native women encased their stories about the natural landscape in their social life. In my opinion, this book will be useful to students of interdisciplinary programs as it demonstrates that there are diverse ontologies and epistemologies, which may not necessarily be in conflict with each other, but can be complementary in the process of knowledge production. Also, lessons from this book can be useful to environmental policy. In an era when the looming problem of climate change may require the cooperation of all sovereign states of the world, lessons from this book can engender tolerance and cooperation among nations. Academically, this book can serve as a key text in the study of the theoretical and methodological approaches in social science research, while the imperial content can be useful to students studying the Aboriginal communities and histories of northwestern North America.

Required reading for a class. Found this book to be interesting from an anthropological standpoint and thought provoking. Great dialogue starter for professors looking to have lively discussions.

This book was one of several recommended by a lecturer when we were cruising in Alaska waters. It is interesting in a way but I had mixed feelings. There is some interesting history related which is much of what I was looking for in the book. What makes the book stand out is the relationship the writer developed with elderly natives. She directly heard some stories and picked up some cultural understanding of the relationship the native people had with the glaciers. Obviously they treated them as sentient and attributed sudden glacial movements to such things as frying meat nearby or taunting a glacier. While interesting to read about, it left me with a strange feeling. Reading the bibliography I found a book I had read and it led me to another that I have read since. If cultural background,

particularly legends, interest you this book offers that. The history interested me most and that part of the book was worthwhile.

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