

# Native Lands and Livelihoods in British Columbia

*Cole Harris*

The allocation of Indian reserves in British Columbia defined two primal spaces, one for native people and the other for virtually everyone else.<sup>1</sup> By the 1930s, the space set aside for native people comprised more than 1,500 small, scattered reserves, totaling one-third of 1 percent of the land of the province—a reserve geography with no close North American equivalent. Fundamentally, this geography was the product of the pervasive settler assumptions, backed by the colonial state, that most of the land they encountered in British Columbia was waste, waiting to be put to productive use; or, where native people obviously were using the land, that their uses were inefficient and therefore should be replaced. Such assumptions, coupled with settlers' self-interest and a huge imbalance of power, were sufficient to dispossess native people of most of their land.

The native people of British Columbia were located in many small reserves rather than a few large ones (as many had advocated) for a variety of reasons. The provincial government argued that small reserves would force native people into the workplace to learn the habits of industry, thrift, and materialism, thus becoming civilized, and (less often stated), to provide cheap seasonal labor for burgeoning industries—arguments that depended on both colonial self-interest and altruism. In the early years of colonial resettlement there was concern that concentrations of native people could pose a military threat to settlers. Moreover, government officials soon found that native people were intensely attached to their habitual places and that there was not the military and bureaucratic power at hand to move them or to make the moves stick. Given that reserves would be located within traditional territories, there was some attempt, more at some times than at others, to allocate the places that were most precious to native people, such as their villages, gravesites, cultivated fields, and fishing sites—none of which required much space. Native people identified such places to the reserve commissioners charged with allocating reserve lands. They never convinced the provincial government to allocate larger reserves that could accommodate traditional resource procurement, commercial logging or, for that matter, to allocate much agricultural land. Nor was the dominion—the legal custodian of native rights but also a partner in the Canadian confederation—ever quite prepared to take the prov-

---

Cole Harris holds the position of Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. *Historical Geography*, Volume 30 (2002): 15-32.

ince to court. Thus the reserve map of British Columbia reflected the agenda of the provincial government, backed by the prevailing values of a settler society.

This reserve geography functioned as intended. It opened almost all provincial land to capital and settlers (insofar as access and topography allowed) and effectively extinguished the rights of usage, custom, and native law by which, not long before, the human geography of the northern cordillera had been defined. Another geography was quickly emerging, one dependent on a different regime of property. This geography hailed primarily from Britain and from that nation's long struggle, essentially over by the mid-19th century, to detach ownership of land from use rights to it and, thereby, make it more accessible and responsive to the market.<sup>2</sup> By the time British Columbia was being resettled, most immigrants took a regime of private property rights, backed by the state, for granted. The policy that Indian reserve commissioners could not interfere with the rights of private property, legally obtained, was neither deviated from nor debated. Settlers assumed these rights to be at the heart of a civilized society in which owners should be entitled to do what they wished with their lands—evict trespassers, fence their holdings, or sell them at will. If these rights were transgressed, the law and the state were at hand to punish the transgressors. Such, very generally, was the regime of property/law/state that had repossessed the former native lands of British Columbia and constituted the legal and geographic matrices in which the province's many small Indian reserves were situated.

In colonial settings like British Columbia, the long struggle between the rights of private property and what historian Janet Neeson calls “the economy of multiple occupations” had been recontextualized.<sup>3</sup> In Britain, arguments over land were essentially class arguments within societies that recognized themselves as such, whereas the confrontation between settler society and native peoples over land in British Columbia involved different societies and cultures that had only recently encountered each other. British settlers met a much more other ‘other’ than any stratum of British society, one that easily could be racialized (and usually was), and that, assumed to be savage, was thought to have nothing to say to civilized people. And so the argument against allowing custom, multiple occupations, and the constraints of lifeworlds to affect the rights of property and the free play of the market became, in a colonial setting like British Columbia, not an argument between classes about the distribution of wealth. Rather, in the colonial mind, this debate reflected a far more elemental, polarized, and characteristically racialized juxtaposition of civilization and savagery. In such circumstances, the property rights of a different and, in settlers’ eyes, a lesser people, were essentially invisible, and a regime of private property rights in an open-market economy flowed into the province.

Accompanying this regime of property rights and providing a degree of social cohesion in the absence of local custom was a complex apparatus of surveillance—what French philosopher Michel Foucault called disciplinary power that he associated with “bio-power,” the control of bodies. Essentially, Foucault thought that state-sponsored disciplinary power provided the means

to reduce multiplicity (difference, variety) to manageable and useful order—ultimately to what constituted social “normalcy”—and that this new “machinery” of control was deeply spatial. He held that “...discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions.”<sup>4</sup> Some years before Foucault, Frantz Fanon made similar points about colonialism in North Africa, an indication, perhaps, that Foucault’s thought has some purchase in colonial settings.<sup>5</sup>

Foucault was well aware that land itself could be a crucial factor in the disciplinary equation. He considered the possibility that Paris could be organized as a carceral city, reshaped in a geo-politics of disciplinary power.<sup>6</sup> He was fascinated by accounts of a vagabond—Béasse—a person of no fixed address, no timetable, no master, and no identifiable work; as well as by the judicial process that sought to normalize such indiscipline—such deviance—by tying it down to a particular place, a particular job, and a recognized station in life.<sup>7</sup> Had he worked in British Columbia, he might well have concluded that Béasse was the Tahltan chief Taku Jack, who refused to be placed because he moved everywhere across his land and who said that he lived but did not work.<sup>8</sup> Disciplining Taku Jack and Béasse became a matter of fixing both of them on the ground, but whereas Béasse, the vagabond, was a marginal character at the edge of a French society composed overwhelmingly of people who did have fixed addresses, Taku Jack was a chief, and the spatial restrictions that an Indian reserve commissioner sought to impose upon him had been resisted, in one way or another, by all native people in the province. Moreover, Béasse lived within the complex, enveloping hierarchy of a French society with a vast, intricate capacity to provide sharp, finely nuanced social definition and to monitor and punish deviance. Taku Jack lived where there was, at most, a handful of people in any 100 square miles and where the institutions of settler society and its governments were only beginning to express themselves. There were not, in such circumstances, many “disciplinary technologies” at hand. Discipline, I think, had come to rely on a few salient practices, of which, in particular circumstances, missions and residential schools—institutions of the type Foucault studied in France—were important examples. A more pervasive discipline was imparted by the reserve system and the differential allocation of land in British Columbia, backed up, of course, by laws, courts, and jails. For mobile hunting, fishing, and gathering peoples accustomed to using many different places in many different ways, the discipline imparted by a land system that defined where they could and could not go had an enormous effect. It may have been the primal disciplinary strategy in many colonial societies as, I think, it was in British Columbia.

The land system and the discipline it imparted both required and superseded maps. Indian reserves were mapped, named, usually numbered, and surveyed, thus, so treated, entered a grid of calculation. It became an easy matter to look up a reserve, check its location on a map, and fit it into a classification of land uses. The reserve acquired a fixed place in the Cartesian

space of the survey system and in the minds of officials and settlers.<sup>9</sup> Such mapping situated the reserve within an official ambit of sovereignty, surveillance, and management while, at the same time, detached it from its surroundings and the complex land uses and spatial patterns of preexisting native lifeways. In some ways, this order was an illusion—native lives were never entirely confined to these little patches—but in other ways it was real enough. The boundaries identified on the reserve maps had become legal realities. Rights differed on either side of them, as native people, Indian agents, and settlers all became well aware. From an official perspective, the map focused the disciplinary gaze, albeit from afar.

Closer at hand were the 16 Indian agents in the province by 1920. These agents were responsible for the protection of native rights, such as they were, for instructing native people in civilized ways (i.e., in agriculture), and for promoting their general well-being. However, since the province was large, the agents were few in number, and the agents were not always competent or sympathetic, many native people hardly ever saw one. Other eyes embedded in the land system usually were more insistently at hand, and from the perspective of native people, their disciplinary power was more tangible and disruptive. These eyes belonged to all those people who owned property nearby or who held land under license or lease. Some of them were absentee owners and some turned a blind eye to native activities, but in general they watched, thereby securing their rights to their properties. Such watching, backed by the law, turned native people into trespassers on their traditional lands. It defined where they could and could not go. As native people had once moved freely and widely within tribal territories, and as livelihoods and lifeways had been tied to these movements, the management of movement associated with property rights was the most essential discipline imposed on them. Foucault's metaphor of the Panopticon does not do justice to such watching; this, rather, was a decentered gaze that emanated from many eyes in many landed properties, fixed on native subjects, and tended to normalize their movement within a few acceptable channels.

Native life has come to be lived within a reconfigured geography. It was anchored on the reserves, but they were very small. Some of them contained some agricultural land, but never enough to support a band. Few reserves contained any merchantable timber. Many reserves had been set aside as fishing stations where native people with permits could catch food for their own consumption (the native food fishery). Beyond the reserves were all the resources formerly used in the seasonal round of native life, but increasingly controlled and exploited by others. This was the compartmentalized world in which native people had been fit—the thin, subsistent economies of the reserves, dwindling connections with former regional economies of resource procurement, and wage labor in the larger immigrant economy that depended on the exploitation of resources from their dispossessed lands. Living outside the mainstream of settler society, racially judged by it, and allocated a tiny fraction

of provincial lands, their livelihoods relied on precariously maintained negotiations among shifting and uncertain options in a new configuration of places.

### Reserves

Their points of personal and geographical attachment, as it were, had become the reserves. These were the places assigned to native people, who then had no choice but to explore the uses to which they could be put. The reserve commissioners who laid them out had intended almost all the larger ones for farming or ranching, and the smaller ones to serve as fishing stations (or to encompass village sites or graveyards), but had left native people to test the validity of these intentions.

In the agrarian rhetoric of the day, agriculture was a virtuous, stabilizing pursuit, a foundation of social order.<sup>10</sup> As native people adopted it, settled down, and abandoned their “wandering ways,” they would become civilized. This pervasive agrarianism hung over the province’s reserves, providing the rationale for a great many of them (which, unless suited to agriculture, had no other obvious economic basis) and setting the standard by which officials and settlers judged native industry, progress, and land use. Native people were commonly told—and taught in residential schools—that in farming lay secure and civilized livelihoods.

From the most part, however, where native farming was practiced it was usually for domestic consumption, and was combined with other, off-reserve occupations. It increased in two or three agencies in the couple of decades before World War I, but almost everywhere by 1930 native farming and ranching were subsistence activities tucked in-between other economic pursuits.<sup>11</sup>

It is not necessary to invoke culture—the argument that peoples largely dependent on fishing, hunting, and gathering were unable to adapt to fully sedentary agricultural ways—to explain why this was so. The problems associated with the small size of native reserves and, within these small spaces, the even more limited acreages that could be tilled or grazed, were far more basic. From the late 1860s, native people had protested the small size of their reserves, and as Indian agents began to be appointed in the early 1880s, they often voiced similar complaints. On most reserves in the dry belt, native people held no water rights. In these circumstances, soils were quickly depleted, yields were exceedingly low, and crop failures were common. One Indian agent put it this way:

It must be remembered that all these Indians are good practical farmers. In every tribe many of the young men have worked since they were boys on the farms of the whites and, consequently, it is not from ignorance of the proper manner in which to cultivate their land that such poor results are obtained. The reasons are, first, want of water; second, poverty of the soil; and third, area of land too small to admit of resting and summer fallowing one-half every year, which is the only way to obtain any kind of crop off such land.

These “patches” have been cropped every year without rest for the last fifteen years, and the land being at first very poor, any farmer can well understand the reason for the miserable crops.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, as transportation costs decreased, farmers faced increased price competition from better-situated farmers, usually outside of British Columbia, who worked larger tracts of better land with mechanized equipment, and who had access to professional marketing.<sup>13</sup> The efficiencies and economies of scale of such operations drove down food prices, with which local farmers could compete only by enlarging and mechanizing their operations. Often this was impossible because the purchase of expensive, specialized machines resulted in debts that small operations could not meet. Some types of agriculture were relatively shielded from such pressures, but the small, part time, semi-subsistent farm remained the most common farm type in the province on the eve of World War II. Reserve farming was a variant on this model, with the difference that native farmers usually started with less land than others, could not acquire more, rarely held individual land titles, and had less access to credit or to marketing agencies.

In summary, reserve farming could not provide stable, secure livelihoods for the great majority of native people in British Columbia.<sup>14</sup> In the mid-1950s when researchers from the University of British Columbia (UBC) undertook a large study of native society and economy in the province, they found that some 10 percent of 7,000 gainfully employed native people were farm proprietors.<sup>15</sup> Almost all of them worked small farms, most on a part-time basis. The Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) had invested heavily in native agriculture, and a great many native people had tried to farm under pressure from missionaries, Indian agents, and others. After picking stones, clearing trees, or building miles of flumes and ditches to bring a little water to a few acres—in some cases starting again after spring floods had washed away years of work—many of them had given the better part of their lives to farms that eventually failed. They had learned that farming could not provide what the missionaries and Indian agents claimed. Wage labor, when available, was more remunerative. Native farms came to be tended around the timetables of off-reserve employment and the remains of pre-colonial regional economies. Gardens, field crops, and livestock supplemented diets, and in many parts of the province they provided something to fall back on when nothing else was available.

Almost all coastal reserves, and probably the majority of those along the salmon rivers, had been allocated for fishing. Exclusive native fishing rights, however, were never accepted by the Department of Fisheries, which treated tidal fisheries as an open-access resource for British subjects, and also refused (with more dubious common-law justification) exclusive riparian fisheries.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, by the early 1890s, dominion law confined native people to subsistence-food fisheries at the discretion of the minister of fisheries, and disallowed some age-old fishing methods, particularly native fish weirs. Fishing

reserves became, therefore, places from which native people could engage in subsistence fisheries and where, at least along the rivers, anti-trespassing laws usually allowed them to exclude others. In short, beyond a little local trade in fresh fish and some sales (for example of eulachon oil) in native markets, reserve-based fishing became another component of a subsistence economy—a legally constructed native food fishery that was increasingly jeopardized by industrial fisheries associated with the canneries.

There weren't many other reserve economies. The small sawmills built on a few reserves soon faced wood shortages. Native-owned-or-run canneries, clam works, or fish oil plants on a few coastal reserves were small operations that came and went. Native-run stores were more common, and a handful of native entrepreneurs did fairly well with them.<sup>17</sup> Several missionaries established cottage industries that, as transportation costs dropped, became less competitive than factory-made goods.<sup>18</sup> As they did during the days of the maritime fur trade, some native carvers sold their work to tourists, collectors, or ethnographers. For a time, there was a native market for dugout canoes and small boats, used primarily for seal hunting and fishing.<sup>19</sup> Although combined with reserve farming and fishing and crucial at times for some individuals and families, these varied activities could not reliably support reserve populations. As a result, a good portion of the livelihoods of most native people had to be found off reserve, and as native people sought them out they encountered the disciplinary strategies and racism embedded in the Indian Act and in settler society, the shifting work environments of industrial capital, and competition from other workers. No longer able to range freely in their former territories, they situated their movements in more confined channels that, at times, took them much farther afield.

### Survivals from Pre-Settler Regional Economies

Elements of former regional native economies survived everywhere, but their vitality varied inversely with the spread of non-native economies and settlements. In the areas of earliest and most substantial colonization, former native strategies of resource procurement were most confined by alien property rights and regulations. An Indian agent described the situation on southeastern Vancouver Island in 1887:

All the younger men can find employment on farms or at the sawmills and canneries, and many families are about leaving for the hop fields of Washington Territory; but the very old people who formerly lived entirely on fish, berries and roots, suffer a good deal of hardship through the settling up of the country. The lands that once yielded berries and roots are now fenced and cultivated, and even on the hills the sheep have destroyed them. Then again, the game laws restrict the time for the killing of deer and grouse, and the fishery regulations interfere with their old methods of taking salmon and trout.<sup>20</sup>

Chiefs in the southern interior repeatedly told the Indian reserve commissioners that the whites had tied up all the land, and that they could not get at the resources on which their livelihoods had always depended. Cattle had largely replaced deer and elk on the grasslands, salmon runs had declined, weirs were no longer allowed, many freshwater fisheries had passed into private hands, and fish and game laws were increasingly enforced. Wherever native reserves were surrounded by non-native landowners and their activities, only fragments of former regional economies survived in the interstices of immigrant lives, economies, and the land rights that sustained them.

Older economies survived better along most of the coast and in the central and northern interior, where industrial capital and settlers arrived much later than in the southern interior. Throughout most of the coast, native people continued to frequent familiar fishing sites and grounds where they caught and cured the bulk of their winter food. And as they always had, they commercialized some of these fisheries. Where they had access to white settlements, they often sold (illegally and clandestinely) fresh salmon, halibut, and clams. The early spring eulachan fisheries remained productive. Dogfish became a commercial commodity in native fisheries, their oil processed in small white- or native-owned plants and exported to London or used for greasing logging roads. Native hunters operating in canoes from many coastal locations intercepted fur-seal herds as far as 25 miles offshore, and in the 1880s and 1890s usually obtained more than 1,000 pelts per year (worth \$9 to \$12 each in 1893).<sup>21</sup> A few whales were also taken from canoes, and both whale oil and blubber were sold to native buyers. Along the coastline, land mammals continued to be hunted for food and furs. In the late-19th century, Indian agents reported that native people along the west coast of Vancouver Island and the central coast continued to live amidst, and enjoy the fruits of, great natural abundance.<sup>22</sup>

In the northern interior of British Columbia, there was no such abundance. The older fur trade economy, almost a century old in 1900, was protected by isolation. On the upper Skeena River in 1893 the Indian agent reported that the Indians were “nearly entirely dependent on the results of the pursuits of their forefathers; they are too remote from the intercourse of white men to gain more remunerative employment.”<sup>23</sup> On the Yukon/British Columbia border in 1910, the agent said that the occupation of the Atlin band (Interior Tlingit) was “hunting and trapping fur-bearing animals. Some of them work in the mines during the summer, but not to any great extent.”<sup>24</sup> Even in the mid-1950s, at the time of the UBC survey, there were still bands in isolated areas that depended almost entirely on trapping, and on local hunting, fishing, and gathering.<sup>25</sup> In much of the central and northern interior, the common seasonal round involved winter trapping and hunting and various summer wage work coupled with fishing and gathering. In such economies, native people sold what they could from the land; besides furs and occasionally venison, placer gold, for example, where it was found, and huckleberries, where there was a market.



Yet, even where the pre-settler economy was most robust, the resources on which it depended were passing out of native control as governments, capital, and settlers enlarged their spheres of operation. High fur prices before and after World War I began to draw non-native trappers who then competed with natives for access to a limited resource.<sup>26</sup> In the 1930s, with the advent of the bush plane, competition extended to virtually all parts of the province. In 1911, the provincial government had responded to increased pressure on the resource by banning beaver trapping for six years, and in 1925 it established a system of registered trap lines that allocated exclusive trapping rights in specified territories. Such measures extended government regulation into the recesses of the province while dividing a resource, and a long-established native occupation, between natives and whites. Overall, native access to trapping territories diminished, while the entry costs of trapping rose: a rifle, a shotgun, traps, store-bought clothing, and eventually an outboard motor. With less territory to trap and fluctuating fur prices, many native trappers were caught in much the same cost/price squeeze as small farmers. In 1956, native trappers held a mere 10 percent of the registered traplines in the province.<sup>27</sup>

The problems facing coastal pre-settler economies were similar. There, beginning around 1900, industrial fisheries moved beyond the river mouths into the ocean where they sought more species and displaced more native fisheries. Native people were commonly left with depleted resources and subsistent food fisheries that were the last claim on fish stocks and the first to be questioned if supplies to the canneries diminished.<sup>28</sup> Since 1894, native food fisheries had depended, loosely, on the permission of the Minister of Fisheries and, in 1917, the chief inspector of fisheries was given the power to fix their location, duration, and means.<sup>29</sup> Together with the expansion of the industrial fishery and the decline of fish stocks, such regulations removed native people from the control and management of what, not long before, had been exclusively theirs. In one of the most productive marine environments in the world, fish had become the property of capital and the crown, and native people were left with residual food fisheries that, year in and year out, no longer supported them.

### The Larger Economy

In effect, neither the reserves nor pre-settler regional economies, such as they remained, nor the two combined, could provide reliable livelihoods for native people in most parts of the province. In 1875, then-Premier George Walkem maintained that small reserves had the promising advantage of forcing native people into wage work in the larger society.<sup>30</sup> That they did, and out of necessity many native people sought out the new employment presented by industrial economies and settler society.

Still the most comprehensive survey of native work in the larger economy during the years when the reserves were laid out is Rolf Knight's *Indians at Work*, first published in 1978. Writing to counteract the stereotypes of native

people as lazy or nonchalant, Knight described a vigorous native participation in a broad array of (for them) new employment, some of which they traveled hundreds of miles to reach. Beyond the reserves and pre-settler economies, he found native people at work throughout the resource industries, in transportation of all types, and in construction (particularly as unskilled laborers, or navvies). Most of them were wage earners, some were independent producers, and others were modest entrepreneurs. Some native people, he pointed out, owned and operated sealing schooners, diesel powered seiners, or tugs. As they worked in the resource industries many of them became 'loggers' or 'fishermen,' members of an industrial working class and participants in its forms of class action. In his analysis, the native penetration of the white economy was greatest before World War I; during the 1920s some types of work virtually ended (sealing, hand logging, and packing) or were much curtailed by mechanization (women's cannery work) and in the 1930s the older subsistence economy again came to the forefront as wage work virtually closed down during the depression.<sup>31</sup>

The UBC researchers studied native economies in British Columbia in the mid-1950s, and, unlike Knight, stressed their sectoral isolation.<sup>32</sup> Native occupations were found to be sharply concentrated in a few extractive, sharply cyclic, primary resource industries—fishing, logging and sawmilling, agriculture, and trapping. Fishing alone accounted for almost half of the native work force in the commercial economy. Moreover, most of this work was taken up locally; as a group, native people were not traveling far afield and were working in sectors of the economy in which employment was declining. They were still overwhelmingly rural.

In retrospect, it is clear that the greatest opportunity for natives in the non-native economy was found in the early years, when the provincial population was low, labor was scarce, and there was relatively little competition for work. In 1875, when native people were still the demographic majority, Premier Walkem considered their labor "...invaluable in the settled portions of the province."<sup>33</sup> A short generation later, as immigrants arrived from around the world, no premier would say that. But all workers face competition in capitalist work places, and the declining relative position of native workers over the years is itself a matter for analysis.

The UBC researchers addressed this question, and concluded that native and non-native workers in British Columbia operated within different cultures and value systems. The aggressive, money-oriented individualism of white culture often did not correspond, they suggested, to native cultural objectives. Moreover, the routinized, monotonous, and usually indoor work environments that other workers in industrial societies accepted in return for a measure of job security, living wages, and some leisure time, were doubly unattractive to native people who neither were familiar with such work nor appreciated its underlying values. They implied that natives would integrate more successfully in the workforce as their values converged with those of the white world, and noted that many people from subcultures of casual work had broken out

of “a self-perpetuating poverty cycle.”<sup>34</sup> But they did not analyze the strongly racialized workplaces native people encountered, nor the constraints imposed on them by the Indian Act, nor the different circumstances (rather than the different values) out of which different sectors of the labor force emerged in British Columbia.

Most of the resource industries throughout the cordillera depended on seasonal labor that, characteristically, was highly mobile and overwhelmingly male. Miners moved through the mining camps of the inland empire. Mexican families harvested in the Great Valley of California—then were sent off quickly.<sup>35</sup> Loggers were hired on in Vancouver, shipped up the coast to work for a time, and returned to the bright lights of the city. Chinese labor brokers in Vancouver deployed immigrant Chinese workers to canneries as far north as the Skeena and the Nass. Such workers were radically decontextualized from their own former places and societies, and had few ties with their new locations. They went where they were sent, or where they found work, and left when the work was done. Native people, on the other hand, lived in the land of their ancestors. If the reserve system had taken away most of their land, it had left them toeholds in their ancestral territories. It had not mixed different native peoples on large reserves in new locations, but, spatially, had left them within their own language groups and, however altered, within their own local cultures and identities. They were still at home, still in touch with edges of the old regime of custom, and their voices as encountered in the voluminous records surrounding the reserve system attest to the depth of their attachment to the homes that they had almost, but not quite, lost.

From this base, native people searched for new employment opportunities. Some were exceedingly mobile, but eventually they would go home. They were a deeply attached labor force, one more than prepared to work away for a time—in some individual trajectories to engage in an astonishing variety of employment in different places—but expecting to return where they had come from—often abruptly because the time had come to catch a winter’s food or participate in mandatory social events.<sup>36</sup> A permanent move to the city, advocated by the UBC researchers was reasonable enough for a less-attached labor force, but was not one that more than a handful of native people were willing to make, and for reasons that may have been partly economic. A move to the city was away from a familiar support system that, however truncated, still partially functioned, and provided a fair portion of basic subsistence needs. Coupled with seasonal work away, people could hope to get along, and as long as this combination was available, it hardly made sense to risk not only the cultural isolation but also (for them) the economic uncertainty of urban life. Different cultural values towards work? Perhaps, but at least an equally deep attachment to place and to an economically rational survival strategy based on a combination of local subsistence activities and part-time work away.

Native people were known to be good workers. Some observers thought they were better at fishing than the Japanese and better railway construction workers than the Chinese.<sup>37</sup> They were said to learn the techniques of logging

faster than whites.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, their “irresponsibility” and “unreliability” were widely alleged—that is, many employers thought that they could not be counted on to stay on the job. An Indian agent, noting that some native workers abruptly quit railway construction jobs, put this down to their unwillingness to work under a foreman and to their different time discipline. “These Indians,” he said, “are industrious in their own way, but it is not the white man’s way. Thus they will get work regularly at, say, fishing, getting up at any hour of the night to suit the tides, &c., but to settle down to regular work beginning at 7 o’clock in the morning and working all day until 6 p.m., and keep this up week after week and month after month, does not come natural to an Indian.”<sup>39</sup> I would hesitate to discount such observations. E.P. Thompson has described the difficult adjustment of English peasants, farm workers, and craftspeople to the work discipline of industrial capital, dominated as it was not only by the clock but also by the distinction between an employer’s time—to be used as he saw fit and not to be wasted—and their own.<sup>40</sup>

The transition would seem far greater from a fishing, hunting, and gathering economy. But it should also be noted that work building a railway was temporary. Navvies brought from outside would work until the job was done, then leave to find work elsewhere, but native workers would not leave, and they needed to maintain the other livelihoods that would support them and their families when the railway was built. This was a pervasive problem. Japanese or Chinese workers at an isolated coastal cannery were perched at a place that meant nothing to them other than as a source of employment. They were, in this sense, unencumbered workers doing a job where there were no other demands. Native workers were far more contextualized and had to balance the opportunities of cannery-related work with older, deeply known work routines. Canneries, like railway construction work, came and went. In these circumstances and from an employer’s perspective, native labor was seen as unreliable—a judgment that worked to its competitive disadvantage in relation to more detached workers.

In short, although native people found a great variety of employment, some of it quite remunerative, in the economic order that was settling in around them, their connections with wage work were unstable and ultimately fragile. They were dealing with systems of commercial and industrial capital that were far more responsive to market fluctuations, technological change, and changing input costs than to the needs of workers, particularly native ones. Moreover, the resource industries in which most of them worked were particularly unstable—because the natural cycle of resource availability varied greatly from year to year, because resources could be quickly depleted (and often were), because the logic that fixed employment in one location for a time would likely change. Trees were cut and a mill closed, fish processing become more efficient elsewhere, railway work ended because the line was built. The spatial economy was fluid, the locus of work shifting, and from capital’s perspective a mobile labor force largely composed of single men was the efficient response to such instability. Like other workers, native people operated within a mov-

ing economic geography that they could not control, but they were particularly affected by its fluctuations because, basically, they were where they lived, not where they worked. Moving permanently away—accepting the long-term spatial logic of employment in capitalist society and breaking entirely from the regime of custom—was not yet an option. They also experienced the racism that fell differentially on the labor force. In common white estimation, this placed them far below white workers, if perhaps a notch above the Chinese and Japanese who were judged (in part because of their sheernumbers on the other side of the Pacific) to be more threatening. And in different combinations in different places, they operated at the interface of two economies, each with its own logic and temporal/spatial demands. In their circumstances, the risks of abandoning either were enormous, yet a strategy that depended on both complicated their accommodation with wage labor, weakened their competitive position in the labor market, and, from the perspective of settler society, perpetuated their marginalization.

The result was their uncertain, fluctuating connection with the non-native economy. Usually it yielded some work at some seasons and in some years, and virtually none at others. Behind it was what remained of pre-settler regional native economies on which had been superimposed the narrow world of the reserves. These were the spaces in which native people lived, and in which their livelihoods were composed. Alone, none of them was adequate, and the combination was an improvised balancing act that native people struggled to hold together.<sup>41</sup>

Their channels of movement had become much more circumscribed. The reserve was now the principal locus of native life, occupied for much more of the year than the winter village had ever been. By the beginning of the 20th century, most people lived in detached log or frame houses that were intended for nuclear families and for year-round occupancy.<sup>42</sup> From the reserves they still moved out to local resource procurement sites, but to far fewer such sites than before because so many of them had become private properties where native people were considered trespassers. The disciplinary power of the land system worked its exclusions, eliminating many former trajectories and curtailing others; it was often safer, even if one did fish, hunt, or gather off-reserve, to return quickly to the reserve which, whatever its shortcomings, was recognized as native space. Nevertheless, people moved from the reserves into the white economy and found a great variety of employment in the early years, some of which was near at hand and some of which was hundreds of miles away. Over time, however, as the diversity of employments diminished, the axes of off-reserve travel tended to become more defined. People moved to a cannery or to a hop field, worked for a time, and returned to their reserve. Although still seasonal, still “an economy of multiple occupations,” and still primarily situated in ancestral territory, this was far from the pre-settler livelihood of custom, although it contained a few of its elements. It was, rather, what the small reserves, the detachment of native people from most of their former lands, and an array of new but uncertain employments had permitted,

and it was the livelihood on which almost all native people in British Columbia had come to rely.



The interests of the DIA and its officials were served by positive assessments of the condition of native people in British Columbia. The department would not be viewed as doing its job if the quality of native lives and livelihoods were found to be deteriorating. Moreover, officials in the department believed in its programs and anticipated improvements resulting from them. Whether from the Indian agent in the field or from the superintendent general of Indian affairs in Ottawa, annual reports tended to depict native people who were doing well and adapting to white ways—in the process becoming more industrious, prosperous, and progressive—and who were the beneficiaries of the ministrations of the DIA and the ways of civilized society.

For all such rhetoric, the reports themselves, if read attentively, begin to suggest another reality. The words “destitution” and “starvation” appear. Agents fairly frequently noted that without assistance from the department, the elderly would starve. Whole bands, in some cases, were thought to have trouble “pulling through” the winter; others faced “a hard struggle for existence.” There are many mentions of disease and of populations that were stagnant or declining. The canneries were often said to be particular sites of contagion. Indian agents sometimes reported that families returned from them with dead and dying children. Others occasionally noted that malnutrition made native people particularly susceptible to infectious diseases. The impression that emerges, although somewhat between the lines, is less of progress and prosperity than of disease, poverty, and struggle. Occasionally an Indian agent would blame poverty on the Indians themselves, claiming that they inhabited bounteous environments in which they could live with little effort and, as a result, were incurably lazy.<sup>43</sup>

Much substance has recently been added to impressions of poverty and disease by Mary-Ellen Kelm in an important book, *Colonizing Bodies*.<sup>44</sup> She reports a high native birth rate, with more than 25 live births per 1,000 people (in some years approaching 40 live births per 1,000), yet stagnant or declining native populations until the mid 1930s. Until the native population slowly began to rise in the late 1930s, death rates were equivalent or higher. A fifth of native deaths were children under the age of one—the infant mortality rate was 10 times higher among natives than non-natives. Infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, accounted from some 10 percent of non-native deaths and 40 percent of native deaths in the late 1930s. The mortality rate from tuberculosis, the principal killer, was seven times higher among natives than among the total population in 1929, and some 15 times higher in 1942. Measles, influenza, whooping cough, and pneumonia were particularly deadly in native populations. The age of the smallpox pandemics was over, but other infectious diseases were taking less spectacular yet horrific tolls. In native families

and communities, death was in the air. Nor, as Kelm points out, were these any longer “virgin soil” populations with no previous exposure, and therefore no immunities, to exotic diseases.

These mortality rates, the reserve system, the increasing spatial concentration of native populations, and the restricted channels of native movement were closely interconnected.<sup>45</sup> The varied diet produced by different seasonal activities in different locations was becoming less available, and store-bought alternatives, such as refined flour, sugar, and canned goods, were less nutritious. The geographical distribution of malnutrition in native populations correlates with the places where native people were most detached from former rounds of fishing, hunting, and gathering. Moreover, native people now lived in considerable numbers in one or two locations for much of the year, a settlement pattern that largely reversed their former dispersion in small groups to many locations for most of the year. Sanitation posed different problems on overcrowded reserves or in the minimal accommodation provided for native workers at canneries and (initially) at the hop fields than it had for small, mobile groups that were rarely in one place for long. Clean drinking water was often not available, perhaps because a mill or town upstream discharged industrial waste or sewage, perhaps because a reserve had no on-site water source, or perhaps because heavy rains or a flood on low-lying reserves mixed the contents of wells and privies. Even the small, detached house, in which missionaries and Indian agents encouraged native families to live, were said to be stifling and airless compared to the long houses they had often replaced.<sup>46</sup> In sum, as Kelm has shown, the confinements imposed on native lives took their toll on native bodies. Diseases of filth, like typhoid, appeared and the high incidence of mortality from other infectious diseases was tied to malnutrition and living conditions, compounded by the efficient mechanism for disease diffusion that was the seasonal concentration of a great many native people at canneries and hop fields. From the late 1860s, native leaders had protested their small reserves in every way they could, claiming that their people would not have enough food and that their progeny had no prospects. In retrospect, they were right. The spaces assigned to native people did not support them, although the mixed economies they cobbled together, the revised diets they ate, and the accommodations and settlements they lived in had allowed some of them to survive.

Such was the legacy of the reserve system in British Columbia. In taking away almost all their land, it had very nearly snuffed native people out. Yet, in radically changed circumstances, native lives were still being lived. There were still joys as well as sorrows in native households. There were still native people taking charge of their own lives and getting along in the different world that had overtaken them. Articulate native voices spoke out on the land question, the water question, the problems of sanitation, the lack of work, the conditions in residential schools, not always without effect. They were not helpless victims, nor were they any longer confident peoples in command of their destinies. They could not be. Too much had been taken from them, most

fundamentally their land. They had not assimilated into settler society because they did not want to and because it was not welcoming. Their identities were still native—still Nisga'a, Tsimshian, Nuxalk, or Nlha7kápmx—and they still lived, for the most part, within the territories of their ancestors, although detached in the particular geographies of settlement and circulation that the reserve system had brought into being.

## Notes

1. This article is a shortened version of Chapter 9 in my recently published book, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002).
2. For a magisterial survey of these issues in Britain and overseas, see E.P. Thompson's essay "Custom, Law and Common Right," *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991). Also see Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975): 207.
3. Janet M. Neeson, "The Opponents of Enclosure in Eighteenth-Century Northamptonshire," *Past and Present* 105 (1984): 138.
4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979): 219.
5. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963). Originally published as *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: F. Mespero, 1961). Fanon, however, attributed the compartmentalization of colonized societies basically to violence rather than to a decentered disciplinary regime operating through myriad local capillaries.
6. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 306-7.
7. *Ibid.*, 290-92.
8. This example is explored more fully in chapter 8 of *Making Native Space*.
9. Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Also see Kenneth Brealey, "Travels from Point Ellice: Peter O'Reilly and the Indian Reserve System in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 11516 (1997-8): 182-4; and Brealey, "Mapping the 'Out': Euro-Canadian Cartography and the Appropriation of the Nuxalk and Ts'ilhqot'in First Nations' Territories, 1793-1916," *The Canadian Geographer* 39 (1995): 149-50.
10. On the forms of agrarianism in British Columbia, see David Demeritt, "Visions of Agriculture in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 108 (1995-6): 29-59.
11. There is some reason to believe that this reflected the supplementary role of plant food production that predated colonial resettlement. See Douglas Deur "A Domesticated Landscape: Indigenous Plant Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America" (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2000).
12. W.L. Meason, "Report of William's Lake Agency," Lesser Dog Creek, 31 August 1886, Canada, Parliament, *Sessional Papers* (1887): 81-3.
13. For a more elaborated account of the problems enumerated in this paragraph see Cole Harris and David Demeritt, "Farming and Rural Life," chapter 8 in Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).
14. For similar arguments about the inadequacy of reserve agriculture on the plains, see H. Buckley, *From Wooden Ploughs to Welfare: Why Indian Policy Failed in the Prairie Provinces* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).
15. This was the Indian Research Project, funded by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. H.B. Hawthorn, C.S. Belshaw, and S.M. Jamieson, *The Indians of British Columbia: A Study of Contemporary Social Adjustment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960).
16. In English common law, the owner of riparian land owned the riverbed to mid-channel as well as the reeds, fish, etc, above it. Ownership rights alongside navigable rivers were more complicated.
17. At the end of the 19th century, the largest concentration of such enterprise was probably at Port Simpson, where Indian agent Todd reported in 1899: "The Indians own and operate a furniture factory and shingle-mill, and have four Indian trading stores, two public restaurants, a paint shop and a glazing and blacksmithing shop, all belonging to and managed by Indians." Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended June 30, 1899," *Sessional Papers* (1900): 261.
18. Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978): 55.



19. Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended June 30, 1904," *Sessional Papers* (1905): 258. Also Knight, *Indians at Work*, 57. Shortly after 1900, the market for canoes virtually ended even in the north, as the Columbia riverboat took over the industrial fishery.
20. Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended December 31, 1887," *Sessional Papers* (1888): 105.
21. Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended June 30, 1893," *Sessional Papers* (1894): 119. In 1910, the price was \$15 to \$20, but seals were scarce.
22. George Blenkinsop, for example, agent for the "Kwawkweth" Agency, described a country "abounding with game of every description," and waters "teeming with fish of the various kinds found in this Province." Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended December 31, 1882," *Sessional Papers* (1883): 63. R.H. Pidcock, writing about native people in the same agency in 1898 said "...they have an unlimited supply of food ready to their hand in the shape of fish of all kinds, and obtain a fair amount of venison and seal meat, besides large quantities of berries in the spring and summer." Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended June 30, 1898," *Sessional Papers* (1899): 239.
23. Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended March 31, 1910," *Sessional Papers* (1911): 238.
24. *Ibid.*, 243 (also the quote on the Tahltan).
25. Hawthorn, et al., *The Indians of British Columbia*, 95.
26. The best overall account of these matters, although not focused on British Columbia, is by Arthur J. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), particularly chapter 8.
27. John Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare," (Ph.D. diss., University of Ottawa, 1994): 106. On the decline of native trapping see also James A. McDonald, "Trying to Make a Life: The Historical Political Economy of Kitsumkalum," (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1985); and Douglas Hudson, "Traplines and Timber: Social and Economic Change Among the Carrier" (Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 1983).
28. Diane Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
29. Order in Council P.C. 2539 amending paragraph 8(2) of the Special Fisheries Regulations for the Province of British Columbia, 9 February 1915. On the legal restriction of the native fisheries in the 1890s, see Douglas C. Harris, *Fish, Law, and Colonialism: The Legal Capture of Salmon in British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001): Chapter 1.
30. George Walkem, "Memorandum on Indian Affairs," Victoria, 17 August 1875. *Papers Connected with the Indian Land Question, 1850-1875* (Victoria: Richard Wolfenden, 1875): appendix, 1-9.
31. For another analysis that reaches a broadly similar conclusion, see John Lutz, "After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849-1890," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 3 (1992): 69-93. Also see his Ph.D. dissertation, "Work, Wages and Welfare," 1994.
32. Hawthorn, et al., *The Indians of British Columbia*, particularly chapters 7, 8, and 13.
33. Memorandum to the Lieutenant-Governor in Council by George Walkem, Victoria, 17 August 1875, *PCILQ*, appendix, 8.
34. Hawthorn, et al., *The Indians of British Columbia*, 91.
35. On the manipulations of migratory labor in the Great Valley of California, Donald Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (1996).
36. Robert Galois, "Colonial Encounters: The Worlds of Arthur Wellington Clah," *BC Studies* 115-116 (1997-8): 105-147. Leona Sparrow, "The Work History of a Coast Salish Couple," (master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1976).
37. Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended June 30, 1903," *Sessional Papers* (1904): 298; also for the year ended December 31, 1882, *ibid.*, (1883), 59.
38. Hawthorn, et al., *The Indians of British Columbia*, 127.
39. Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended March 31, 1907," *Sessional Papers* (1908): 247.
40. "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capital," *Past and Present* 38 (December 1967); reprinted in *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991): 352-404. Thompson was particularly sensitive to the difference between "natural time"—tidal time in this case—and clock time.
41. In somewhat different contexts and ways this point is also made by Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia, 1900-1950* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998): 34; by Keith Thor Carlson, ed., *You Are Asked To Witness: The Stó:lo in Canada's Pacific Coast History* (Chilliwack: Stólo Heritage Trust, 1996): 118-121; and by John Lutz, "Work, Wages and Welfare," chapter 4.

42. Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies*, 44-5.
43. Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended December 31, 1899," *Sessional Papers* (1900): 111.
44. Kelm provides a much-elaborated analysis of the points touched on in this paragraph in chapter 1 of *Colonizing Bodies*. Her reference to "virgin soil" populations is on page 18.
45. The fuller treatment of the matters raised in this paragraph is in Kelm, *Colonized Bodies*, chapters 2 and 3.
46. See, for example, comments from Vowell in a letter to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Canada, Parliament, "Annual Report of the DIA for the Year Ended June 30, 1901," *Sessional Papers* (1902): 285.