

"SHUT THE PROVINCE DOWN": *First Nations Blockades in British Columbia, 1984-1995*

NICHOLAS BLOMLEY

We stand in the position of sovereignty against International Forest Products (Interfor) and the British Columbia and Canadian governments' unlawful trespassing and destruction of Nuxalk territory. As the Nuxalk Nation we have the sovereign right to jurisdictional rule within our territory. This right comes from Tatau, the Creator. It is not granted nor subject to the approval of any other nation. Our land has NEVER been ceded, sold or treated. We cannot and never will, as the Nuxalk Nation, compromise this position. It is our obligation to Tatau, the Creator, to care for and protect our lands.¹

FIRST NATIONS BLOCKADES HAVE BECOME SO commonplace in British Columbia over the last two decades that they have, ironically, slipped from view. Every summer, it seems, brings another round of roadblocks, closely followed by the predictable round of condemnation and fulmination on editorial pages and in the provincial legislature. Even when relative peace reigns on the logging roads and access routes of the province, the threat of blockades is ever-present.² Perhaps it is this very frequency and predictability that explains why blockades have not received much scholarly attention as a political phenomenon. As a consequence, our understanding of blockades is largely framed by the media, which tend to treat each blockade as a singular and often sensational event, paying little attention to the context within which it is deployed or to its relation to similar tactics.

¹ Nuxalk Nation/Forest Action Network media release, 27 September 1995 (copy with author). Members of both groups collaborated on a blockade/occupation at Fog Creek, near Bella Coola, from 4 September to 27 September 1995, when the RCMP enforced an Interfor injunction, leading to fourteen arrests.

² Native leaders frequently invoke the threat of roadblocks and confrontation when warning of the consequences of government failures to take Aboriginal concerns seriously (see, for example, *Vancouver Sun*, 13 January 1996, A14).

This is unfortunate; not only does it distance us from the underlying problems that engender blockades, but it also makes it easy to dismiss them as aberrant and those behind them as illegitimate.

In this article, I offer an introductory overview of blockades in British Columbia over the last fifteen years. I first document and describe blockades, then point to some of the underlying grievances that prompt them, before considering why the blockade, as opposed to other forms of protest or direct action, is such a powerful tool. I close with a brief consideration of the response of the non-Native community to blockades.

My impressions are based on a collation and analysis of all BC blockades reported in the media since 1980 and are supplemented by readings and interviews. Some caveats are in order. First, this survey is introductory; the subject demands further, more thorough investigations. Blockades and the forces that beget them are as complex and as varied as are the First Nations that occupy the land now called British Columbia. My reading tends towards a broad overview rather than towards a detailed investigation of the issues I raise. However, the importance of the blockade and the paucity of other academic analyses suggest the need to offer an initial survey. Second, I have not attempted an extended historical analysis. The evidence suggests, however, that the blockade has long been part of the tactical armoury of First Nations. Certainly, the grievances that underlie its use are deeply rooted in the Native colonial experience. Finally, I cannot speak of First Nations grievances or strategies with the authority of a Native commentator; to the extent that I seem to attempt to do so, I venture into dangerous waters. However, the blockade, in both its effects and its meanings, is directed outwards; it is aimed at the dominant culture — my culture. As such, it would seem to demand my attention. To the extent that the blockade speaks graphically of generations of friction, grievances, and lost opportunities, it deserves attention and analysis from whatever quarter. And to the extent that the blockade is often surrounded with misinformation and racist hysteria, the need for that attention has never been more urgent.³

At a broader level, I will not attempt a theoretical analysis of the blockade. Ideally, I wish the blockade to speak for itself. In these poststructuralist times, such a claim is difficult to sustain, so I should lay my scholarly cards on the table. I view the blockade through the

³ Extreme examples of “racist hysteria” may be found in the letters-to-the-editor pages of many Interior newspapers (see, in particular, those papers published during the summer of 1990). Here, many of the familiar Native stereotypes are dusted off and exhibited by irate non-Native residents.

prism of my discipline, geography. Recent scholarship in geography and cognate fields has centred on the exploration of power and space. Much of this has centred on the importance of space in the regulation and organization of dominated populations. A smaller literature has considered the geography of counter-hegemonic struggles. Struggles that centre on mobility have received less attention. In my own work, I have argued that mobility plays an important part in political relations, operating at both a functional and a representational level.

Suffice it to say that the study of blockades provides rich ground for those interested in theoretical questions. As I shall note, blockades are intensely “spatial” tactics at both an instrumental and a symbolic level. I shall suggest that their efficacy, in part, also rests on the scattered geography of colonization. At the same time, the regulation and representation of mobility is significant. I suggest that the restrictions upon personal movement occasioned by blockades must be counterposed to the forced mobility visited upon Native communities through economic and cultural dislocation. However, other representations of mobility, such as the putative individual right to unfettered movement, have been used to delegitimize such collective “mobility claims.” At whatever level, contending practices and representations of space seem critical to an informed understanding of the politics of blockades.⁴

If it is hard to avoid questions of social theory in the context of postcolonial politics in British Columbia, it is even harder to avoid ethics. It will be clear from the discussion below that I am not attempting a bloodless analysis of blockades. Like anyone involved in the discussion, I hold a number of views and beliefs. Some of these, no doubt, are submerged and only indirectly visible to me. Some may be contradictory. However, it seems self-evident that my present well-being as a British Columbian — as a professor, as a landowner, as a recipient of social benefits of various sorts — is significantly sustained by wealth forcefully expropriated from Native peoples through generations of oppression and marginalization. No amount of legal legerdemain or rhetorical sophistry can convince me that the process

⁴ For a general, if sweeping, treatment of the power/space nexus, see, for example, H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell 1991). For one discussion of the centrality of space in the colonial project, see T. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1991). An informative example of the geography of resistance is given by D. Mitchell, “Iconography and Locational Conflict from the Underside: Free Speech, People’s Park, and the Politics of Homelessness in Berkeley, California,” *Political Geography* 11 (1992): 152-69. A more self-consciously theoretical treatment of blockades is given by Ken Brealey, “First Nations Blockades: Spaces within the West,” unpublished paper (Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1996).

by which the original inhabitants of what is now British Columbia were dispossessed — economically, politically, and culturally — was anything but unjust and immoral. I also have grave concerns about the symbolic portrayal of First Nations and their affairs by the dominant culture. Racist characterizations of Native peoples abound — whether they appear as noble savages, as peoples without history, or as irrational and amoral. In part, this article is an intervention that seeks to counter some of those representations. Clearly, it is not sufficient. It merely represents my tentative, and no doubt partial, attempt to make some sense of one aspect of the postcolonial encounter.

HISTORY

While the Native blockade jumped to prominence with the Oka standoff of 1990, Native peoples across Canada have long used blockades in protests centring on land claims, fishery access, military manoeuvres on disputed land, and so on. Most Native blockades over the last fifteen years have been in British Columbia.⁵ In part, this is due to the high proportion of Native people in the province. More significant, however, is the long history of BC's Native activism, centred on the historical refusal of the province to countenance Aboriginal title. With few exceptions, BC bands have never signed treaties extinguishing their rights to land and self-government. Until 1991, the provincial government refused to recognize Aboriginal title. Over the last century, Native peoples have advanced long-standing concerns over such issues as the loss of Native lands and sovereignty as well as over more immediate issues, such as the designation of reserve lands. Their methods of doing so have ranged from the formal (e.g., the delegations of chiefs to Victoria in the 1880s) to the more direct (e.g., blockades). From the patchy evidence available, blockades have long been in use in BC.⁶

While there was an artificial calm for much of the first half of the twentieth century (enforced, in part, by legal restrictions on land-claims organizing), the mid-1970s saw the first extended use of blockades as a political tool in BC. The upsurge of activism that occasioned

⁵ A survey of various Canadian newspapers revealed thirty-three blockades outside BC between 1980 and 1993. The same period saw forty-nine in BC.

⁶ Examples include an 1872 Gitksan blockade of the Skeena River (an attempt to gain compensation for the burning of the village of Kitsegulka by White miners) and an 1854 blockade on Saltspring Island (an attempt to deny White settlers from Victoria access to Native lands). There is an urgent need for a history of Native direct action in British Columbia. For one treatment, see R.M. Galois, "The Burning of Kitsegulka, 1872," *BC Studies* 94 (1992): 59-81.

blockades — as well as other modes of protest — was due partly to a growing Native radicalism in the United States and partly to a deepening dissatisfaction with the province's continued dismissal of Aboriginal title. The latter was all the more objectionable given the election of a New Democratic Party (NDP) government that, many First Nations felt, had promised otherwise while in opposition. The summers of 1974 and 1975 saw a number of instances of direct action that included the use of blockades. In May and June 1975, for example, at least thirteen blockades were established, their targets including public highways, logging roads, public works yards, the office of the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), and a rail line.

By the mid-1980s, the majority of BC First Nations had submitted their formal statements of land claim to the federal government. Political frustration grew with the glacial pace of federal negotiations. At the same time, the provincial government continued to insist that Aboriginal title did not exist. This proved too much for many First Nations, especially in light of the continued resource extraction that was occurring on traditional territories. The consequence was a number of blockades, the most significant of which were at Lyell Island on Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte Islands, involving the Haida, and at Meares Island in Clayoquot Sound, involving the Clayoquot and Ahousaht. The campaigns in both areas were sophisticated and protracted, involving injunctions by resource companies and counter-injunctions by First Nations. In both cases, blockaders permanently halted resource extraction. Their success must have proved an influential model to other First Nations.

The summer of 1990 saw the most extensive round of blockades ever. Nearly thirty blockades occurred, involving some twenty different groups. Unlike the blockades of the 1980s, which had often been placed on remote logging roads, many were now placed on public routes, including major roads and rail lines. At their peak, Vancouver newspapers even began publishing traffic advisories for travellers, detailing Interior blockades. Some of these blockades — particularly the Lil'wat People Movement's Duffey Lake blockade from July to November — were protracted and controversial, sparking protests and counter-blockades by non-Natives.

Although many of the blockades were sparked by the Oka standoff in Quebec,⁷ the reasoning and form of each must be related to local

⁷ Native leader Georges Erasmus noted that "Oka could have happened anywhere. It was something that everyone identified with. The only difference between us, in the end, was that

factors. Increasingly, Native anger was directed at BC's Social Credit government, which continued to deny Aboriginal title and to engage in scaremongering about its likely consequences. Typical was the dismissive claim of Forests Minister Claude Richmond, who complained that "a few militant Indians have chosen to draw a map the size of many European countries and proclaim it as theirs."⁸ In July, however, the province grudgingly recognized "certain aboriginal rights and interests" — though Premier Vander Zalm refused to acknowledge Aboriginal title, which, he felt, would be to recognize Aboriginal ownership "lock, stock and barrel."⁹

With the election of an NDP government in 1991, the provincial government finally acknowledged the existence of Aboriginal title. Both federal and provincial governments have since played an active role in land-claims negotiations. A majority of First Nations have chosen to participate in the new treaty process established by the province.¹⁰ As a consequence blockade activity has decreased from the high point of 1990, as many First Nations either have opted not to blockade or have been required not to engage in such activities in order to ensure the continuation of negotiations.

If the frequency of blockades has declined, the furore surrounding them has not. The year 1995 saw a number of particularly controversial blockades, notably at the Douglas Lake Ranch, Adams Lake, and near Parksville, all of which were initiated by bands that had chosen to stay out of the treaty process. The treaty process has been rejected by a number of bands as a sellout of Native sovereignty and, in the words of one Native activist (Stuart Phillip, Penticton Band Councillor), as "a stalling process to allow corporations to rape and pillage our

some people had barricades with guns and we had barricades across the country without guns. In essence, we were doing the same thing" (quoted in Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera, *People of the Pines: The Warriors and the Legacy of Oka* [Toronto: Little, Brown 1991], 273). It should also be noted that, while the progress of the Oka siege/blockade was critical to events in BC, other blockades outside the province were also closely monitored. For example, the summer of 1990 also witnessed the actions of the Peigan Lonefighters in Alberta, who were protesting the construction of the Oldman River Dam; protests by the Innu in Labrador, who were protesting military wargames on their traditional lands; and numerous blockades and protests in New Brunswick, Quebec, and Northern Ontario.

⁸ *Globe and Mail*, 2 July 1990, A4.

⁹ See Paul Tennant, "The Indian Land Question in British Columbia," unpublished manuscript, 1992 (copy with author), for an overview and comparison of blockades in the mid-1980s and 1990. I differ from Tennant on some grounds, however. For example, he notes that "only a small minority of Indian communities [erected] blockades [in 1990]" (p. 6). My survey would suggest that the number of bands involved (around twenty across the province), while perhaps a minority, cannot be so easily dismissed.

¹⁰ The Nisga'a have continued to negotiate under the pre-existing federal Comprehensive Claims process. After twenty years, they have reached an Agreement in Principle.

resources.”¹¹ Criticism has also been levelled at the “top-down” nature of the negotiations, which involves some of the First Nations leadership but not the grass roots. Many of the older political faultlines — such as those between Coast and Interior First Nations — have re-emerged. Facing re-election, the NDP administration came under considerable fire for its supposed weak handling of these issues. Criticism of the treaty process, combined with continued resource extraction, mean that the blockade is unlikely to disappear in the near future.¹²

THE BLOCKADE

I define a blockade as an attempt to interfere with the flow of people and/or commodities through the placement of an obstruction, either partial or complete.¹³ My definition is somewhat loose, given the temporal and geographic variation in blockades.¹⁴ There is an important difference between the information checkpoint, where traffic is slowed and information (e.g., pamphlets) given out, and the full blockade, where all non-Native movement is denied. A partial blockade can also occur when select traffic (notably logging trucks) is denied access. In a few cases, tolls are collected. The duration of the blockade can vary from a symbolic hour or two to many days (the 1990

¹¹ *Province*, 16 June 1995, 25. Many of these groups are part of the emergent traditional sovereigntist movement, which holds that the state holds no jurisdiction over their lands. See K. Goldberg, “Redefining Native Politics,” *Canadian Dimension* (December-January 1995/96), 7.

¹² The newly elected NDP premier, Glen Clark, responded to complaints from chiefs that the province is allowing timber companies to continue logging in lands subject to claims by arguing: “We can’t put a moratorium everywhere that there’s a claim because that would severely restrict economic activity in the province” (*Vancouver Sun*, 25 June 1996, b4).

¹³ Note that the term “blockade” is a somewhat contested one. On occasion, other terms are used, such as “roadblock” or “road check.” This may be because of a pervasive assumption of their de facto illegality. In a judicial hearing concerning the Duffey Lake blockade, members of the Mount Currie Band sought to use the term “blocking” rather than “blockading” in order to avoid “any implication of illegality” (*AGBC v Andrew and Mount Currie Indian Band*, [1991] 1, CNLR 14, at 15).

¹⁴ This is a consequential point. All too frequently, blockades are portrayed in singular terms, as if underlying grievances, local contexts, and Aboriginal histories could be reduced to one form. Not only does this misrepresent the complexity and variability of First Nations political organizing, but it feeds into a tendency to present blockades in simplistic and problematic ways. This tendency is expressed when, for example, local politicians routinely condemn any and all blockades as somehow necessarily illegal and/or inappropriate (while, perhaps, paying lip service to the need to “address” the issues raised). On a different note, further analysis and detailed case studies need to address the highly particularized nature of blockades. Critical questions include: Why do some First Nations blockade while others do not? How do blockades relate to other political tactics? How do blockades relate to internal political tensions? How do blockades affect intra-group relations?

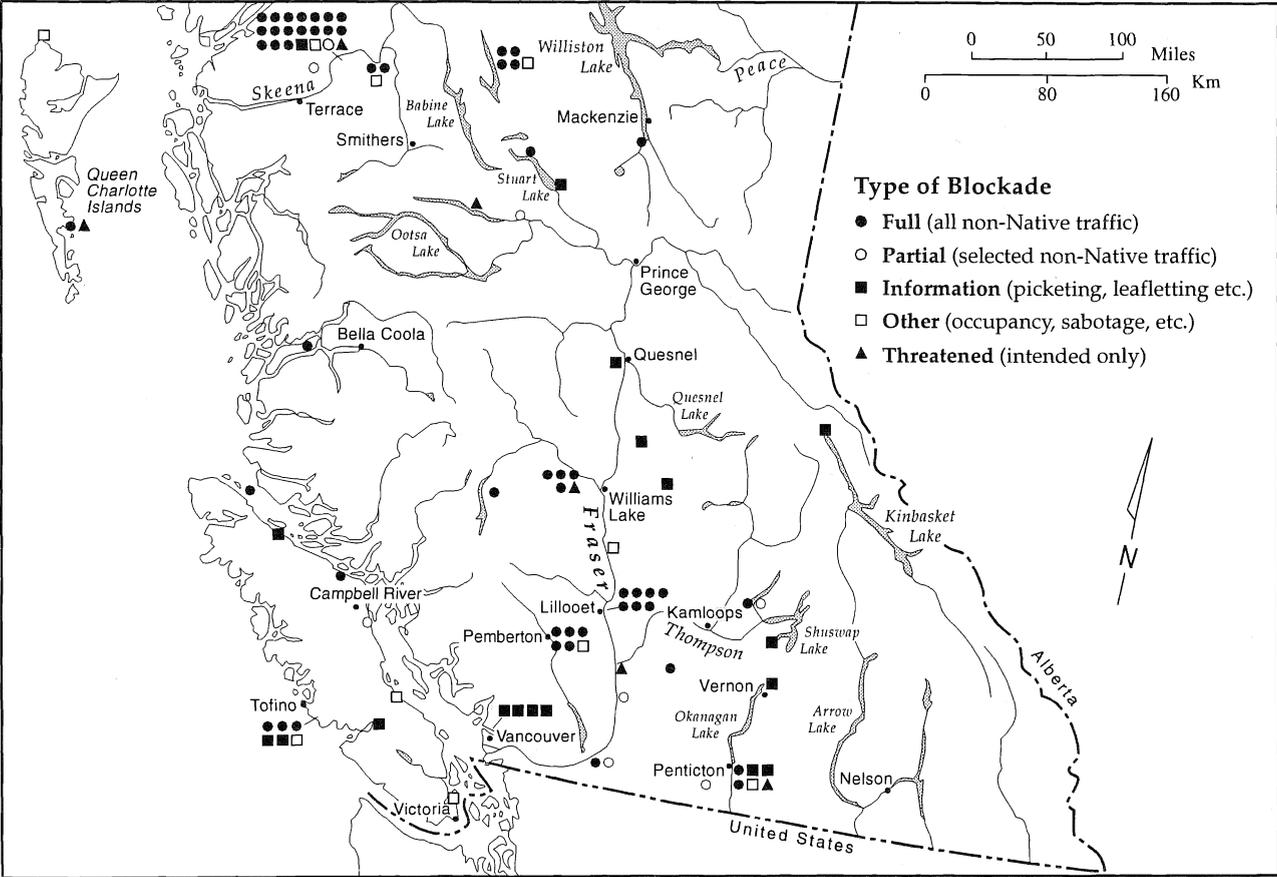
Duffey Lake blockade, at 118 days, being the longest). There seems to be considerable variation in the degree of organization associated with blockades. In some cases, they seem to be a carefully premeditated part of a long campaign, involving legal and extra-legal tactics. They can involve sophisticated media presentations and pre-arranged understandings between police and local bands. The Penticton Band's 1994 blockade of the Apex Ski Resort is a case in point. In other cases, blockades can be set unofficially by individual members of the group over some specific grievance. Figure 1, drawn from a media survey, reveals the diversity and geographical distribution of blockades across the province. Further information can be found in Appendix 1.

Generally, blockades are established on reserve land. Given the very large number of bands that have participated in such actions, they have occurred across the province, with a few clear concentrations. For example, Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en territories have long been a centre of activism and direct action. The site of the blockade can vary: of the 55 blockades that I have recorded between 1980 and 1995, for which a location was identified, 28 (51 percent) occurred on public roads, 16 (42 percent) on private logging roads and other works roads, and 9 (16 percent) on rail lines.

At the risk of oversimplification, the blockade appears to be deployed in two ways. Either the mobility of others is curtailed essentially to protest some unrelated grievance(s) or the movement into or from a traditional territory is itself at issue. In the first case, a First Nation's ability to place restrictions on movement is used in an attempt to attract media and government attention and, thence, to negotiate redress; in the second, that very movement is the cause of contention. By my estimate, two-thirds of the blockades fall into the latter category,¹⁵ while the summer of 1990 saw many examples of the former, as information blockades were established across the province in support of Oka and to advance local land claims. An example would be the "information picket" established on Lions Gate Bridge on 30 July 1990 by members of the Squamish Nation, who handed out invitations to a long house discussion on Oka and BC land claims to rush-hour motorists. As the Lions Gate Bridge is the most direct connection between downtown Vancouver and the North Shore

¹⁵ In this, I depart from Radha Jhappan, who characterizes Native direct action essentially as a "publicity seeking strategy." While publicity is a central concern, as evidenced by media-savvy blockaders, it is also critical to consider the blockade in terms of its instrumental and symbolic effects. See C. Radha Jhappan, "Indian Symbolic Politics: The Double-Edged Sword of Publicity," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 22 (1990): 19-39.

FIGURE 1 Map of blockades in BC



suburbs, commuters were powerfully reminded of the often forgotten fact that the bridge crosses the Squamish Reserve.

The blockade is also used to regulate movement where movement itself is in dispute. More often than not, the massive and unsustainable out-movement of capital and commodities from traditional territories is the focus of the blockade. The ease and the speed with which the resources of traditional First Nations territories are stripped from traditional lands by corporations are matters of grave concern.¹⁶ The blockade is frequently seen as a means of physically halting that flow. In 1989, Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en spokesperson Don Ryan described being forced into "freezing the land . . . Everything — logging, mining, forestry, lands, water."¹⁷ There are many examples of such actions, including the 1985 Haida blockade on Lyell Island (which was set to prevent logging trucks from entering an area of great cultural significance) and two blockades in 1993 and 1994 (which were established by the Penticton Band to prevent construction crews from working on the expansion of a ski resort that local bands considered to be both environmentally unsustainable and an encroachment on claimed lands).

Frequently, both "protest" and "access" concerns are behind a blockade. For example, several Ts'ilhqot'in bands shut down the only road through the Chilcotin region for two hours in July 1990. In part, the blockade was to protest military manoeuvres north of the Toosey Reserve; in part, it sought to slow the pace of logging west of Williams Lake. More generally, the aim was to attract attention to underlying grievances concerning land claims negotiations. As Toosey Band chief Francis Laceese noted: "The government better seriously start negotiations with the Ts'ilhqot'in people over the land title question, or next time the roadblock won't be just for a few hours."¹⁸

The state's reaction to such actions varies, depending, in part, on location.¹⁹ If a blockade occurs on a gazetted highway, covered by the Highways Act, the RCMP may seek to remove the barrier. On a non-gazetted road, such as a logging road, the police may play a mediating

¹⁶ The Nisga'a, for example, recently obtained an independent Price Waterhouse audit that estimated that, since colonization, non-Native industry has plundered between \$2 and \$4 billion worth of fish, minerals, and lumber from traditional Nisga'a lands (*Vancouver Sun*, 22 February 1995, b7).

¹⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 13 November 1989, b6.

¹⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 19 July 1990, a1, a2. For one discussion of this case, see Michael McCullough, "Conflict in the Chilcotin," *British Columbia Report*, 11 June 1990, 32-5.

¹⁹ The following is based, in part, on a July 1994 interview with a senior official in the provincial Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

role, seeking to maintain the peace and to bring a negotiated end to the blockade. While the RCMP have generally relied on negotiations to end a blockade, there have been instances in which confrontation has occurred, usually over the attempt to enforce an injunction.²⁰ The NDP government consistently claims not to negotiate while a blockade is in place, preferring the formal land claims process as an arena for discussion. As there are 175 First Nations with which to deal, there is a perceived need for a comprehensive approach to land claims. Blockades could allow one group to jump the queue, it is argued.

WHY THE BLOCKADE?

Observers often suggest that blockades are established over minor and frivolous grievances. Implicit here is the assumption that blockades are not principled acts of civil disobedience but actions caused by a few malcontents, seeking to foment discord. "In other words," as one commentator suggested (Rudy Platiel, author of the *Globe and Mail* article cited below), "it's pay-back time, a seductive opportunity for young natives to rebel, particularly against white authority, in the name of upholding their people's rights."²¹ In some cases, blockades can indeed be set unofficially by individual members of a group. An "unofficial" blockade can either prompt other band members to rally behind it and, ultimately, lead to the involvement of the band leadership, or, more rarely, it can lead to a diplomatic distancing of, or even an official disavowal by, that leadership.²² However, while renegade blockades do occur, they seem to be the exception. Generally, it seems, blockades are established after wide deliberations within a band and, on occasion, with neighbouring bands or a full Council.

Moreover, even if the dispute that prompts a blockade seems minor to outsiders, it seems reasonable that, given the legal risks and organizational demands, a blockade can only be sustained by deep-seated grievances.²³ Not surprisingly, the decision to blockade does not seem to be taken lightly but is often a last-ditch attempt to gain recognition for a grievance when less confrontational methods have failed. Many

²⁰ See, for example, Michael McCullough, "Law, Order and the Lil'wat: After Four Months, Police Break Up the Duffey Lake Blockade," *British Columbia Report*, 19 November 1990, 20-2.

²¹ Rudy Platiel, "Beat the drum loudly" *Globe and Mail*, 16 September 1995, di.

²² According to a councillor with the Penticton Band, the Apex blockade of late 1994 began in this fashion (interview by author with Stewart Phillip, 19 November 1994).

²³ One anonymous provincial official with the provincial Department of Aboriginal Affairs notes that it is critical to deal with a blockade quickly, as, once it is established, what might have been a small, discrete issue can balloon into a broader range of grievances, making it increasingly intractable (interview by author, July 1994).

feel that the provincial government's denial of Aboriginal title prior to 1991, along with suspicion concerning subsequent treaty negotiations, have provided First Nations peoples with no other outlet. To the extent that it signals a deliberate defiance of the established codes of political conduct (the petition, quiet diplomacy, etc.), combined with a deliberate attempt to draw public and state attention to a specific set of concerns, the blockade can best be thought of as a form of "strategic militancy" rather than as a random and unplanned act.²⁴

However, if the blockade is thought of simply as a tactical decision in a rational political struggle, then we miss some of its significance and its importance to those involved. For the decision to blockade is further sustained and justified with reference to a complex set of cultural understandings inherent to Native peoples. If a blockade serves to deny logging trucks access to a disputed area, in other words, that action may be justified not only in terms of the protection of a disputed economic resource, narrowly defined, but also in terms of the innate right of a people to manage its own affairs and a non-negotiable mandate from the Creator to protect lands that it holds in trust. To that extent, the blockade is frequently sustained by much more than an immediate set of instrumental concerns.²⁵

With that in mind, the reported reasons for blockades (on the basis of a partial survey conducted between 1980 and 1995) suggests a wide range of concerns, with land claims and the protection of timber resources topping the list (see Table 1). The two are closely related: given the lack of treaties, land-**use** disputes have frequently escalated into struggles over land **ownership**.

As indicated above, the blockade is frequently chosen as a political tactic by many (although not all) First Nations. This raises an obvious and important question — why the blockade, as compared to other tactical options (such as the occupation of official buildings or private lands, public protests, etc.)? Blockades have been used many times by other oppositional groups — the case of the Clayoquot environmental blockade of 1993 and the use of the union picket line are cases in point.

²⁴ David Long, "Culture, Ideology, and Militancy: The Movement of Native Indians in Canada, 1969-91," In *Organising Dissent: Contemporary Social Movements in Theory and Practice*, ed. William K. Carroll (New York: Garamond 1992), 118-34, especially 127. See also Steven Point, "Understanding Native Activism," *BC Studies* 89 (1992): 124-9.

²⁵ See, for example, the testimony of Diane Brown opposing the application for an injunction prohibiting Haida blockades on Lyell Island in Haida Gwaii in 1986. She speaks of the Queen Charlotte Islands as being "our place, given to us . . . We were put on the islands as caretakers of this land" (quoted in N. Ruebsaat, "Speaking with Diane Brown: A Text-in-Progress," *Border/Lines* [Fall 1989]: 18-23, see pp. 20, 21).

TABLE I
*Reasons for Blockades, 1980-1995*²⁶

To advance land claims	22
To protect timber resources threatened by logging company	13
Solidarity with Mohawks at Oka	7
Dispute over public right of way through reserve	4
To prevent cultural despoliation	6
Resisting environmental damage	4
To prevent closure of local mill, employing First Nations	2
Fishery related	3
To oppose water diversion	1
Compensation for expropriated reserve land	1
Opposing military manoeuvres	1

However, the frequency and intensity of Native blockades in BC suggests that it is seen as a particularly effective form of direct action. Indeed, the blockade need not be established to be effective; its threatened use may be enough.²⁷

The reason for choosing the blockade is complex, but it must surely rest on the fact that blockades “work”: that is, that they often advance Native goals. This is particularly significant given the politically disadvantaged position of First Nations in British Columbia. Interestingly, blockades seem not only to overcome many of these obstacles, but to turn them to advantage. This occurs at both a material and a symbolic level. Let me treat each of these issues in turn.

²⁶ This table is based on media search. These figures should be treated with caution. Not only do they reflect reporting biases, but there are often several reasons underlying a blockade. The media tendency seems to be to reduce the complex cultural claims, noted above, to more immediate expressions. Also, as noted, one grievance may snowball into a wider set of claims (as in the case of the 1993 Stó:lō blockade, when the DFO’s [Department of Fisheries and Oceans] seizure of Native fishing equipment escalated into a wider set of concerns relating to the management of the Aboriginal fishery), or one stated concern may act as the surrogate for several more complex grievances (as in the Penticton Band’s blockade of 1994, when a protest over the ownership of the right of way through the reserve may have reflected deeper concerns about a land claim).

²⁷ Even when a blockade is dismantled following a court injunction it may be counted a success from the perspective of the blockaders, as the resultant publicity can throw a favourable light on their cause. A striking example is afforded by the Lyell Island blockade in 1985, when dignified elders, resplendent in button blankets and other traditional regalia, were arrested before TV cameras in what was described as “a polite little drama in remote BC” (*Montreal Gazette*, 27 November 1985, b1, b8). Even the provincial attorney-general, Brian Smith, who was far from sympathetic to the Haida, noted that “any of us who watched television in the last week or ten days would feel a certain sympathy towards them — it’s impossible not to” (“\$200,000 Police Bill Mounts in Lyell Clash,” *Vancouver Sun*, 3 December 1985).

Most of British Columbia's scanty population live in a few urban centres, most notably, of course, in the extreme southwest of the province. This population is dependent on an attenuated transport system made up of a few major road and rail routes. The low-density population and the rugged terrain mean surprisingly few transport connections. At the same time, the provincial economy is still largely dependent on gaining access to increasingly isolated pockets of resources, such as timber. Vast amounts of usually unprocessed raw materials are then hauled out for delivery to distant export markets. The result is that the closure of one or two transport routes can have profound consequences. While many blockades have been on relatively minor routes, such as logging roads, a well-placed blockade on a major transport route can have profound consequences. Of special significance were the closures of the Duffey Lake Road in the summer of 1990 (which cut off the towns of Pemberton from the east and Lillooet from the west) and the Stó:lō blockade on the main CN Rail line into Vancouver in 1993 (which cost CN around \$3 million a day). The Gitksan have also become very adept at the rail blockade, blocking the main CN Rail line on several occasions to disrupt the movement of minerals and forest products. In this context, the reported threat by Native leaders to "shut the province down" is not as far-fetched as one might suppose.²⁸

The vulnerability of the transport system is further aggravated by the fact that road and rail lines frequently pass through reserves, which are, as noted, the usual location for blockades. Not only are such transport corridors an obvious focus for First Nations, given their proximity and their strategic importance to the provincial infrastructure, but they are themselves a frequent source of irritation, given the presumptuous manner in which they were established. For example, temporary access routes, such as logging roads, can become so used by non-Natives that, over time, the assumption becomes that they are public rights of way, although access may, in law, be entirely at the discretion of a band council. Denied access by a blockade, aggrieved non-Natives may condemn Native actions as a violation of their right to travel when, in fact, they may themselves be in trespass. This was at issue, for example, in the dispute at Adams Lake in early 1995.

Even the designation and use of supposedly public rights of way

²⁸ The comment was made by Gitksan leader Wii Seeks at a 28 May 1990 gathering of Native leaders to discuss direct action. There were a number of calls for province-wide civil disobedience, seizure of resources, and armed preparedness. Wii Seeks suggested that: "We should plan to shut the province down. We should do it" (*Vancouver Sun*, 29 May 1990, B1 B2).

through reserves is often disputed by bands and can become a catalyst for blockade action. A Carrier-Sekani chief recently commented that there were up to 500 such disputed rights of way across the province, any of which could flare up into a blockade.²⁹ Provincial officials put the number of disputed rights of way at 225, noting that 900 public roads cut through reserves.³⁰ One means by which the province claims the right to expropriate rights of way on reserve land is under Order-in-Council 1036, which provides for the “resumption” of reserve lands for the purposes of making roads, providing that the lands so resumed shall not exceed one-twentieth of the whole reserve. The constitutionality of this provision is, however, unclear. Far from constituting an illegitimate denial of the mobility rights of others, a number of decisions suggest that many blockades may be justified denials of illegal trespass. A turning point, judicially speaking, was the extended dissent of J.A. Southin in *BCAG v Mount Currie Indian Band*.³¹ In this view, the blockade is as far from an act of “civil disobedience” as are the actions of a householder who is defending her property against trespass.³² In other words, if anyone is engaged in civil disobedience, it is the non-band members and the provincial government.

The vulnerability of the transport system is further aggravated by the provincial topography. The rugged terrain ensures that valley bottoms become transport corridors. Reserves are also often located in valleys, near rivers. The official position is that, in many cases, either there was no way around the reserve or a road was built to connect reserves with other settlements.³³ A more cynical reading might suggest that the expropriation of reserve land, as opposed to privately held land, offered the path of least resistance to a province long mesmerized by road and rail as an instrument of development.

Rail lines are often the target of Native blockades. Again they are an easy target because they frequently bisect reserves. BC Rail lines, for example, run through or beside twenty reserves in British Columbia.³⁴ The existence of such routes, and the process by which they were

²⁹ CBC Radio, 22 September 1995.

³⁰ Stewart Bell, “Battle Over Apex Road May Set Precedent,” *Vancouver Sun*, 9 November 1995, a1-a2, see, especially, a1.

³¹ [1991] 54 BCLR (2d), 156

³² As the lawyer for three Native bands seeking a declaration that they have exclusive ownership of every road on their reserves (located near Penticton) argued in court, the province has “been building roads all over Indian reserves without consideration for the Indian Act . . . They have been in trespass since 1901” (*Globe and Mail*, 28 November 1995, a6).

³³ Bell, “Battle Over Apex,” a2

³⁴ *Globe and Mail*, 23 August 1990, a6.

established, often remains a point of disagreement for generations, thus resulting in rail lines often being seen as logical sites of protest.³⁵ One striking case, for example, was the 1985 one-man blockade established by a Gitksan chief who stood in front of trains from Prince Rupert to demand compensation for 100 acres of land that the Gitwangak Reserve lost to the Grand Trunk Railroad in 1910. Stó:lō leaders chose to block a certain section of the main CN line running through the Cheam Reserve in a 1993 protest over salmon quotas, as the site was part of a century-old property dispute between the band and the railway.³⁶

The association between blockades and the provincial transport system is double-edged. Transport systems imposed upon reserve land become an obvious focus for protest, particularly as resources extracted from traditional territories pour down the roads, logging routes, and rail lines. Yet the ability to regulate movement along those very transport corridors can become a powerful political tool. Cole Harris has described the historical development of the province's system of transportation and communication as "the capillaries of colonial appropriation. They allowed non-Natives into the land, not as explorers, visitors, or passers-through, but as users and settlers." Not only did this facilitate the direct dispossession of Native peoples and the development of an economy dependent on the plunder of Native resources, but the changing conceptions of space and time that underpinned these new transport systems also, he suggests, colonized Native consciousness.³⁷ While this was undoubtedly the case, it can also be argued that the impact of the transport system was, as I have said, double-edged. Paul Tennant has shown that the emergent transport system helped to facilitate grass-roots organizing within and between the various First Nations.³⁸ The geography of the blockade also suggests that the transport system has served as a critical and successful site for resistance. The ability to reconfigure such modern systems of domination gives the lie to those who find Native political tactics locked in a premodern past. In the case of blockade activity, a system of colonization has itself become the focus and the weapon in a counter-colonial struggle.³⁹ Transport lines are vulnerable due to the

³⁵ One area of dispute centres on rights of way regarding abandoned rail lines.

³⁶ Interview by author with Clarence Pennier, Chair, Stó:lō Tribal Council, 29 August 1993.

³⁷ Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1996).

³⁸ Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1990), 72-3.

³⁹ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

export orientation and resource base of the provincial economy, the dispersed nature of the transport system, and the location of transport corridors relative to reserves. The configuration of Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en blockade activity, for example, is closely linked to the geography of transportation corridors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 also reveals the close connection between the location of reserves and blockade activity. The fact that the reserve is the usual focus for the blockade is important when one remembers its scattered distribution. Unlike many of the Native peoples in the US, Native peoples in British Columbia were dispersed into a large number of small, isolated reserves. The province has over 1,600 reserves, with an average size of less than one square mile.⁴⁰ Ironically, while such dispersion could be seen as an obstacle to united action, it makes the blockade particularly telling. Blockades, being scattered, are very disruptive and hard to regulate. When several are in place simultaneously (as in the summer of 1990), the effect can be striking. As one is resolved, another emerges; much as do the forest fires that flare up across the Interior as the summer storms sweep across the mountains. Similarly, with a few exceptions, blockades have been non-coordinated.⁴¹ Although there have been some calls for collective action, most blockades appear to be established either by individual bands or by the larger tribal grouping to which a band belongs. Individual councils, bands, or band members take the decision to blockade. The lack of a clear political "centre" makes the blockade potentially unpredictable and, thus, powerful as a tactical tool. As with the case of the transport system, adversity can be turned to advantage .

Finally, blockades are not necessarily tied to an individual location but, on occasion, can be reallocated, more or less at will, along a given transport corridor. This is especially the case given that, in most cases, a blockade is little more than a symbolic line marked, perhaps, by a flag or spiked board. This flexibility can be of great consequence, and it distinguishes First Nations blockades from those that are necessarily tied to a specific site, such as the union picket. A striking, if somewhat

⁴⁰ Robert White-Harvey, "Reservation Geography and the Restoration of Native Self-Government," *Dalhousie Law Journal* 17 (1994): 587-611.

⁴¹ There have been few attempts at coordination. In May 1990, it was proposed that the direct action of one group would be supported by other tribal groups ("Indians Consider 'Direct Action,'" *Vancouver Sun*, 29 May 1990, b1, b2). The year 1995 also saw an attempt to develop a direct action support network amongst sovereigntist groups. However, the important cultural and political differences between Native groups seem to have made such alliances rare and, at best, symbolic.

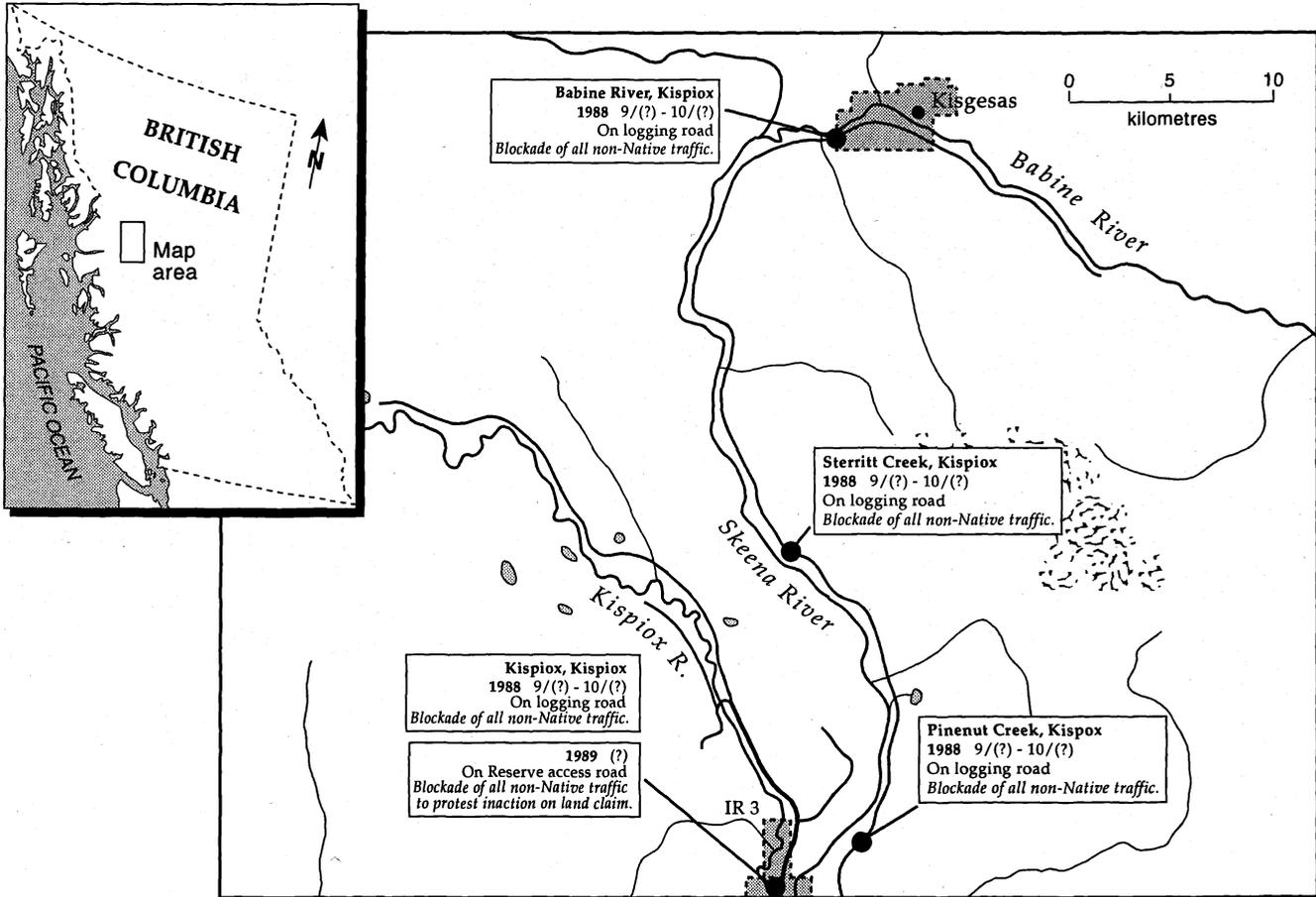
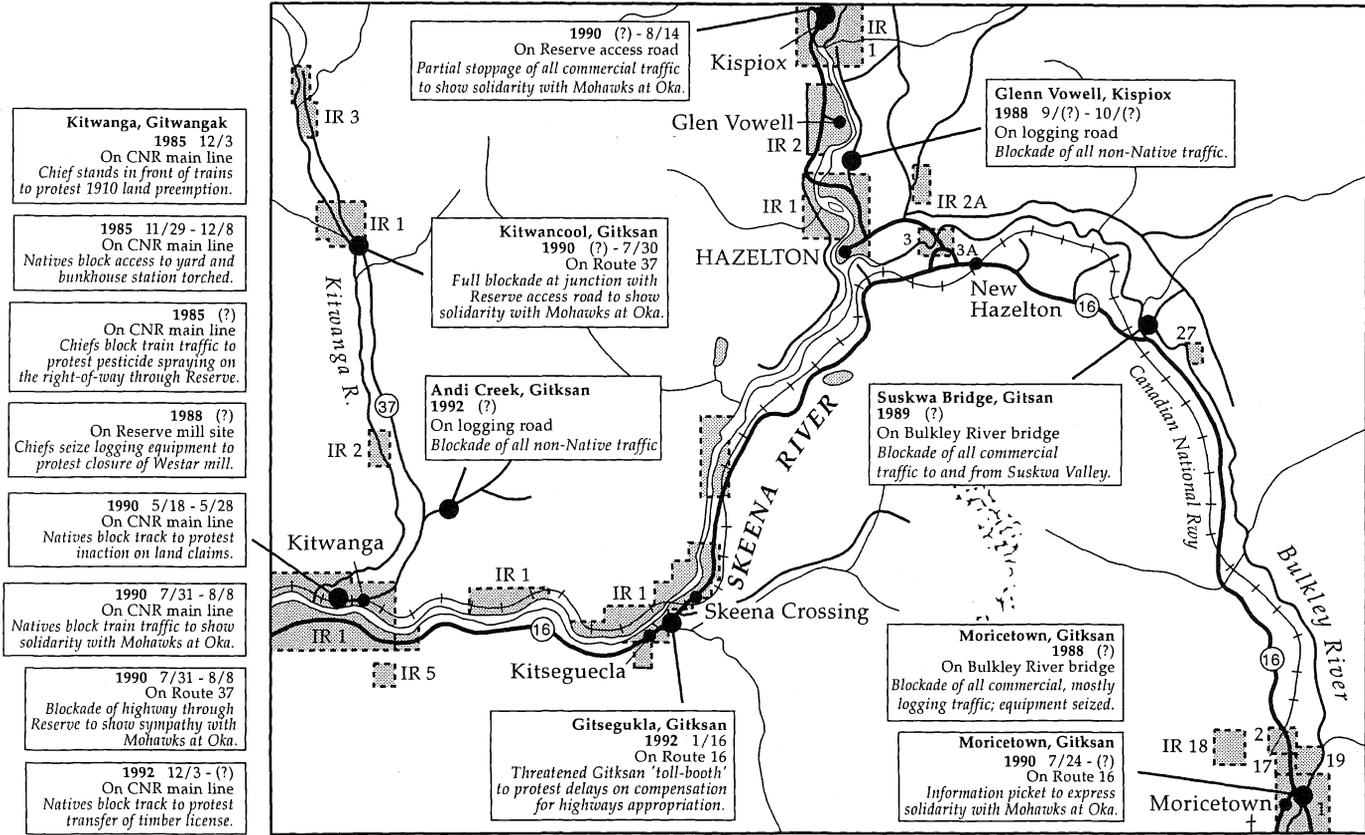


FIGURE 2 Gitsan blockades

FIGURE 2 continued



unusual, example of this occurred between 24 July and 26 August 1990, when the Seton Lake, Fountain, Pavilion, and Mount Currie Bands blockaded the BC Rail main line to show solidarity with the Mohawk at Oka and to air their grievances over unresolved land claims. The first rail blockade at Seton Portage was dismantled when it was reported that an RCMP riot squad was en route to the site, but it was then re-established at a Mount Currie location. The track was again blocked at Seton Portage, and an RCMP raid led to several arrests. This prompted the re-establishment of the blockade at Mount Currie, which, in turn, was dismantled when it was learned the police were en route. The Seton blockade was set up a third time; this time the only road access route to Seton Portage was also blockaded in order to prevent the RCMP from serving an injunction.⁴²

THE MEANING OF THE BLOCKADE

The blockade does not operate only in the material world of physical movement. It must also be considered in terms of the meanings it endows and with which it is freighted. As a blockade reflects deeply rooted disputes, it is not surprising that the blockade itself will be cast in different ways by opposing groups. And to the extent that a blockade relates to questions of mobility, rights, and space, it is to be expected that these will be contested in turn.

For those behind it, the blockade has a symbolic effect to the extent that it marks out two spaces. In an immediate sense, it maps out a boundary and, in so doing, distinguishes an "Indian" space from a "Euro-Canadian" space. Presumably, there are two audiences to which the claim of such a demarcation is directed. To the dominant society, the claim is an assertion of place, implying a Native rejection of generations of systemic racism, territorial dispossession, and economic marginalization. To the First Nations, the claim is one of shared aspirations and identity as well as principled defiance. To be able to assert some claim to, and control over, space (albeit temporary) through a blockade both relies upon, and further sustains, First Nations claims to unabrogated sovereignty over specific territory. As Terri John, one of the Duffey Lake blockaders, put it: "The road that we're blocking is in our own territory and we are protecting our sovereignty and our land. We're asserting our own rights so the police

⁴² In a different action, members of six Okanagan bands were involved in a "mobile information roadblock" along Highway 97 in the summer of 1990 (*Vancouver Sun*, 20 July 1990, a2).

don't have any jurisdiction in our territory so they can't tell us to take our roadblock down."⁴³

Such an assertion — symbolic and material — is a claim about place. As a statement concerning sovereignty and place, a blockade must be of profound importance for people who have long been denied them. Systematically dispossessed by settlers, crowded onto marginalized reserves, confronted with legalized and informal forms of oppression and racism, a First Nations claim to place through a blockade marks not only an assertion of ownership, in the narrow sense, but a spiritually laden assertion of "being."⁴⁴ As long ago as 1910, Native leaders described how they had lost "any real home in this our own country," noting that "gradually, we have become regarded as trespassers over a large portion of this, our country."⁴⁵ Hereditary chiefs and elders of the Nuxalk Nation, engaged in a blockade at Fog Creek near Bella Coola in September 1995, justified their action as a reoccupation of traditional lands.⁴⁶ "Be on watch for the land that our people of the past lived at," urged an elder who participated in the blockade. "These places were named by the Creator. Our people have never forgotten these names, and this proves this land still belongs to the Nuxalkme."⁴⁷

Moreover, the temporary ability to control the movement of others must also be particularly significant. Mobility has all too often been something visited upon First Nations — for example, through the residential school program or the displacement of entire communities (such as the Cheslatta, whose village was destroyed by an Alcan hydro-electric scheme, or the Mowachat people of Friendly Cove, who were forced to move to a substandard site once funding for their own school was discontinued). More subtle, but no less destructive, is the Native diaspora caused by endemic unemployment on reserves. The economic displacements of reserve life sit uneasily alongside the

⁴³ *Western Native News*, July/August 1990, 3.

⁴⁴ C. Radha Jhappan suggests that Canadian First Nations, like many other subordinated groups, have engaged in "symbolic politics." Denied the political, economic, and legal resources with which to prosecute their demands, they "concentrate their efforts on the pursuit of rights and securities which will allow them to realize their goals . . . They are eager to sculpt . . . the symbolic order of society, or to refashion the symbolic order and their place within it" (Jhappan, "Indian Symbolic Politics," 21). Given my caution noted above, this comment seems relevant here.

⁴⁵ The comments were made by the chiefs of several Okanagan-area bands in a letter, dated 25 August 1910, to Wilfred Laurier (cited in *British Columbia Report*, 6 August 1990, 11).

⁴⁶ Forest Action Network media release, 26 September 1995 (copy with author).

⁴⁷ Comments of Sq'cwlikwana (Luck Mack), Forest Action Network media release, 27 September 1995 (copy with author).

fabulous natural wealth of traditional lands, systematically strip-mined by transnational forest and mining corporations. One can see why the disruption of the outward flow of those dollars and jobs must seem an appealing, even necessary, option. Lavina White, a Haida elder, describes the tension: "The barges are going out; about three loads of timber [a day] is going out past our reserve, and yet we have to live. There's no jobs for anybody — 93 per cent unemployed, or 97 per cent in some instances."⁴⁸

Further, controls over, and representations of, Native mobility have been frequently used against First Nations — with pernicious results. One particularly insidious characterization by the dominant society has been that of the "wandering Indian." Deemed nomadic and shiftless, First Nations people had no real claim to place and title due to the "unstructured" nature of their society.⁴⁹ The success of market names such as Winnebago, Cadillac, and Pontiac all attest to this association between wild, free movement and the "imaginary Indian."⁵⁰ However, if mobility was traditionally part of Native societies, it was not unstructured but closely attuned to the cycles of the environment and the traditional resource economy. This sustainable mobility is a long way from the extractions of resource-based capitalism.

Such a reading of blockades is far from that of many non-Native observers, whether local loggers or provincial officials. The territories and the resources that the blockades seek to preserve are not freighted

⁴⁸ Interview with Lavina White on CFUV FM, Victoria, 1993 (copy with author). Such comments, not surprisingly, are common, given the mobility of resources. Native leader Georges Erasmus notes: "We know we've never given up those mountains or forests, and yet they're being mined every day. We see those big trucks running by, taking the logs out, and we know there's no benefit to our people" (quoted in York and Pindera, *People of the Pines*, 274). At the same time, the mobility of capital investment, and the ever-present threat that multinational resource companies will switch their activities to other jurisdictions, is often cited as a reason that First Nations — along with workers and other groups — must be kept docile. Insurgency threatens the stability of the investment environment. The need for "certainty" has played a central role in the provincial government's willingness to open negotiations over land claims. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

⁴⁹ "Just because a bunch of Indians wandered up and down the Rocky Mountain trench for a few hundred years, doesn't mean they own it" (attributed to Allan Williams, Attorney-General under the Social Credit government, 1975, and quoted in N.J. Sterritt, "Unflinching Resistance to an Implacable Invader," in *Drumbeat: Anger and Renewal in Indian Country*, ed. Boyce Richardson [Toronto: Summerhill 1989], 292).

⁵⁰ The phrase is borrowed from Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp 1992). For an international treatment of the representation of Aboriginal peoples, see Chris Tennant, "Indigenous Peoples, International Institutions, and the International Legal Literature from 1945-1993," *Human Rights Quarterly* 16 (1994): 1-59.

with the same cultural and political meanings for non-Natives as they are for Natives. This is not to say, I hasten to add, that there are no examples of consensus between Native and non-Native. Under-reported (perhaps because they detract from the media tendency to seek confrontation and to ignore concord), there have nevertheless been cases in which non-Native communities have either supported blockades or even "put their bodies on the line."⁵¹ The shared concerns have been environmental and economic. However, there are also many cases in which blockades have been opposed by local non-Native people who have seen the resources behind a blockade as a source of jobs and income vital to the survival of marginalized single-industry towns. The blockade, in this sense, speaks of radically different conceptions of space. The Mount Currie blockade pitted the Li'wat Peoples Movement, which sought to protect ancestral gravesites, against local loggers, who felt their jobs and way of life were being threatened. The different "geographies" invoked by opposing interests were as much a cause as an effect of this blockade.

One side says the latest round of skirmishes in BC's land claims war is taking place within the Ure Creek Drainage basin, Pemberton-Soo Timber Supply Area, Vancouver Forest Region.

The other side says the battle is taking place at A7xa7 (pronounced A'huh'ah), near the shore of the lake of the two headed serpent that can take human form, at the place where ancestral ghosts welcome the spirits of the dead into the afterlife.⁵²

At the more removed levels of the state and the media, representations of blockades cover a wide range. For a minority of observers, a blockade is often the principled act of a desperate people. This claim can often become romanticized, as Native peoples are essentialized as noble guardians of the primeval forest. More common is the negative portrayal of a blockade, considered primarily in terms of its effects on

⁵¹ There are a number of examples of such collaboration between Natives and non-Natives. For example, Glavin documents attempts at bringing together Native people and non-Native resource workers in Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en territories (Terry Glavin, *A Death Feast at Dimlahamid* [Vancouver: New Star 1990]). In July 1990, a number of roadblocks were established by Native and non-Native protestors (*Vancouver Sun*, 24 July 1990, 24). Similarly, when establishing a blockade in late 1994, the Penticton Band noted expressions of support from local municipalities and ranchers (interview by author with Stewart Phillip, Penticton Band Councillor, 19 November 1994). During the summer of 1990, a Vancouver-based solidarity group (the Vancouver Blockade Support Group) was established, involving artists, students, and musicians (*Vancouver Sun*, 20 July 1990, 21).

⁵² Terry Glavin and Mark Hume, "Roots of the Claims," *Vancouver Sun*, 16 February 1991, b1.

the movement of non-Natives. Given the liberal tradition of the Canadian polity, it is usually framed in terms of an individual's right to move, unchecked by illegitimate constraint. As such, a blockade is often regarded as problematic, if not illegitimate. For example, the then-minister of the environment suggested in July 1990 — at the peak of blockade activity — that while demonstrations should be permitted for “short periods,” that being a “privilege of democracy that we enjoy,” it should

also be possible for any British Columbian or any Canadian or any tourist from anywhere else to get on any public road and drive anywhere they want in the province of British Columbia, hindered by nothing except the regulations of the road, stopped by no one and diverted by no one. In my view, they've got an absolute right to drive on the highway unobstructed. I don't see that there can be much doubt about that.⁵³

While there is no doubt that blockades do, quite deliberately, interfere with the free movement of individuals, there are selective silences in this account. While there is a common-law right to travel on a public highway, the legal status of many putatively public routes through reserve lands may mean, as noted, that “free movement” is, legally, “trespass.” Furthermore, although liberal notions of mobility rights are necessarily hostile to the blockade (as it contradicts the individual citizen's right to move), a case can be made for considering mobility rights as collective and, therefore, as resting, not only on the right to move, but also on the right to stay and to resist forced mobility. To that extent, the action of a First Nation in seeking to control its economic destiny (through blockades, for example) could constitute a form of positive mobility right — that of staying in place and resisting the mobility forced upon it by cultural and economic dislocation.⁵⁴

However, the effect of construing mobility rights narrowly is to render this alternative reading invisible and to cast the blockader as

⁵³ Province of British Columbia, Official Report of Debate of the Legislative Assembly (*Hansard*), vol. 19, 18 July 1990, p. 1135.

⁵⁴ Articulating this claim to place, in juxtaposition to the mobility of the dominant society, a member of the Nuxalk Nation, involved in the Fog Creek blockade of September 1995, noted: “Our people need a place to live in the future . . . We are not like the white man moving around the country. You think about all the logging companies, they come and go” (quoted in Forest Action Network media release, 15 September 1995). For a further discussion of this point, see Nicholas K. Blomley, *Law, Space and the Geographies of Power* (New York: Guilford 1994): 150–222, and “Mobility, Empowerment and the Rights Revolution,” *Political Geography* 13 (1994): 407–22.

engaged, at best, in illegitimate action. As seems often the case in such instances, the blockade is demonized and dismissed.⁵⁵ On occasion, as noted above, a blockade is regarded merely as a “demonstration.” Thus degraded, it clearly cannot be allowed to trump the individual’s right to free movement. Yet, to the extent that it *does* interfere with the mobility of citizens and workers, the blockade is condemned as a criminal conspiracy or as a form of random terrorism.⁵⁶

Groups that oppose or are highly sceptical of the treaty process in general tend to seize upon blockade activity as an expression of illegitimate dissent. Such groups include the BC Fisheries Survival Coalition, the BC Reform Party, and BCFIRE, many members of whom use the language of individual rights to oppose the granting of what is deemed “special status” or racialized “group rights” to Native peoples. Playing on fears of resource depletion and economic insecurity, such groups have often been able to direct the debate in partial and unbalanced ways. The lack of a *discursive* counter-weight to such claims — other than from within the First Nations community itself — is cause for concern.

CONCLUSION

The blockade has become an established component of the First Nations tactical armoury in British Columbia, and the last fifteen years have seen many examples of its use. This article interprets the blockade as a political phenomenon. Generalization is difficult, however, given that blockades have arisen in quite different circumstances; a significant difference, for example, exists between those before and those after 1990. Further, they can take a variety of forms. While the duration, form, and location of blockades varies, they can usually be differentiated according to their “protest” or “access” functions. I have tried to consider why blockades are so frequent in British Columbia, as compared to other forms of political action, and suggest that their instrumental and symbolic effects may make them appealing

⁵⁵ I describe a similar phenomenon in Blomley, *Law, Space and the Geographies of Power*, 182.

⁵⁶ A headline in *British Columbia Report* on 30 July 1990 read: “Indian Summer: Are the New Activists Extremists or Extortionists?” *Vancouver Sun* columnist Denny Boyd suggested more recently that “a roadblock is not just a gesture of dissent. It is an act of low-grade terrorism in that here is intimidation, there is the physical limiting of the peaceful public’s right to move freely” (*Vancouver Sun*, 7 June 1995, b1). A representative of a group opposed to the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy described the Stó:lō blockade in 1993 as “terrorist blackmail” (*Vancouver Sun*, 4 September 1993, a4). For a useful discussion of the definition of dissent as terrorism, and its confusions, see J. Coleman, *Against the State: Studies in Sedition and Rebellion* (London: Penguin 1990), especially 196–221.

to a people who feel they lack alternatives. In instrumental terms, the distribution of the transport system, topography, the regional resource economy, and the allocation of reserves play an important role. In symbolic terms, a blockade marks out a claim to place and, in so doing, challenges the dominant readings of place and the forms of mobility — both material and representational — visited upon Native peoples. In both contexts, the blockade often serves to turn adversity to advantage.

While blockades have proved successful, their continued use should not be celebrated. They speak to a systemic and enduring failure on the part of the dominant society to accommodate the legitimate demands of colonized peoples. In that sense, the more important and, thus, more troubling blockades of British Columbia are not established by First Nations. They are those of the dominant society, established over a century ago and systematically maintained by the forces of economic marginalization, political paternalism, and cultural racism.⁵⁷ The problem, in other words, is not the First Nations blockade, but the oppression that calls it forth. If we are troubled by blockades, it is that oppression that must be confronted and challenged.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An abridged version of this paper was published in the *Bulletin of the Canadian Law and Society Association*. My thanks to Ken Brealey and Bob Beet, who helped with the research, and to Paul DeGrace, who prepared the maps (with Ken Brealey's help). Thanks also to Cole Harris, Ken Brealey, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful and insightful comments on an earlier draft. Funding for this research was made possible by the SFU President's Research Grant. All errors are mine alone.

⁵⁷ "Occupations and standoffs are apparently what pass for normal relations between First Nations and the modern democratic state known as Canada . . . [However] the real standoffs are those in the courts and the back rooms of government, in the interminable, undermining process created by the Department of Indian Affairs" (Chief Richard Kahgee, Saugeen First Nation, Southampton, Ontario, quoted in *Globe and Mail*, 20 September 1995, A21).

APPENDIX

*First Nations Blockades in British Columbia, 1980-1995*⁵⁸

DATE	GROUP	LOCATION	TYPE	GRIEVANCE
1984 Nov	Tla-o-qui-aht & Ahousaht	Meares Island	Logging Road	Logging. Concern first expressed in 1982. Injunction and counter-injunction. Park declared in 1991.
1985 Oct-Nov	Haida	Haida Gwaii	Logging Road	Land claims, culture. Forest company injunction. Environmentalists involved. 3 elders and 22 others arrested. Park declared.
1985 Dec	Gitwanga	Kitwanga	Road — CN Yard	? Involved 30 members of band, lasting at least several days. CN injunction.
1985 Dec	Gitwanga ?	?	Train Block	Protest over land lost in 1910 — solo blockader.
1985	Gitwanga	Reserve	CN Line	Oppose pesticide spraying. Chiefs block line.
1985 Oct	Lillooet	Stein Valley	Logging Road	Threatened — re: logging, land claims. Park declared 1995.
1986	Kwakiutl	Deer Island	Logging Road	Land claim. Claim treaty protection. Forest company injunction. Counter injunction.
1988	Tsawout	Saanich	Marina	Environmental damage, claim treaty protection. Injunction/counter-injunction.

continued on next page

⁵⁸ This appendix is based largely on those blockades reported in several newspapers, including the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Calgary Herald*, and others. While this list may be incomplete, it is reasonable to suppose that most, if not all, actions were reported. Not only were they of some significance, as noted, to the provincial economy and to the movement of travellers, but the First Nations involved have often shown a sophisticated ability to attract and manage media attention.

DATE	GROUP	LOCATION	TYPE	GRIEVANCE
1988 Sept-Oct	Kispiox	Kispiox Valley		Logging. One day; chiefs involved. Five blockades established. 1989 loggers file suit seeking compensation.
1988	Gitskan	Baliné River	Bridge/ Logging Road	Logging road. Gitksan injunction.
1989	Kispiox	Kispiox Valley		Logging access.
1989	Gitskan/ Wet'suwet'en	Suskaw Valley		Logging access.
1990 July	Squamish	Vancouver area	Lion's Gate Bridge	Oka, local land claims. Information picket — 1.5 hrs — 4 sites.
1990	Chilcotin	Chilcotin region	Roads	Logging, military man- oeuvres. A number of roadblocks set in early 1990.
1990 July	Chilcotin	Near Alexis Creek	Highway 20	Land claims etc. Two- hour blockade. Call for negotiations re: land title.
1990 Aug	Adams Lake	Chase	Road	Information blockade. 4 days.
1990 July	?	Campbell River	Island Highway	? - Removed 28 July after barricades crashed into by truck.
1990 Oct/Nov	Tloustatas- Mumtagila	Tsitka	Logging Access	Land claims, culture. Environmentalists and Natives. 2 proposed. Logging company obtains injunction.
1990 Aug	Necolsie	Ft St James	Highway 27	Information blockade re: Oka, land claims. Discussions between non-Natives and Natives.
1990 July	Nadleh Whut'en	Reserve	Road Through Reserve	Oka?

DATE	GROUP	LOCATION	TYPE	GRIEVANCE
1990 July-Sept	Penticton	Reserve	Road Through Reserve	Information picket — stopping commercial traffic and tourists (no access to Apex and Mascot mines). 50 involved.
1990 July	Osoyoos	#97 Near Oliver	Temporary	
1990 Aug	Cariboo Tribal Council	Lac La Hache and Red Bluff	Road	One day only, two information roadblocks.
1990 July-Aug	Seton Lake	Seton Portage	Three Blockades of Rail Line — Violently Dis- mantled. BC Rail Injunction.	
1990 July	Opetchesaht	Port Alberni	Highway 4	One hour. — Information — Oka, land claims.
1990 18 July	Fountain	Near Lillooet	Road	
1990 24 July	Fountain	Near Lillooet	Road	Land title.
1990 Sept-Nov	Fountain	Near Lillooet	Road	Right of way, logging.
1990 Sept	Nimpkish	Alert Bay	Main Street	?
1990 July	Nisga'a	New Aiyansh	Logging Access	Logging. Set by youth and some elders — on again, off again, for a few days.
1990 July	Gitskan/ Wet'suwet'en	Moricetown	Highway 16	Information blockade. Lasts for a couple of days.
1990 July	Gitskan/ Wet'suwet'en	Kitwancool?	Road	Protest at mill closure.

continued on next page

DATE	GROUP	LOCATION	TYPE	GRIEVANCE
1990 July	Gitskan/ Wet'suwet'en	Kitwancool	Road	Mill closure — replaces above. Was information blockade, then stepped up.
1990 Aug	Gitskan/ Wet'suwet'en	Gitwangak	CN Line	Tribal council stops trains moving through its territories. CN discontinues service.
1990 Aug	Gitskan/ Wet'suwet'en	Kispiox	Road	Lumber, title. Involves chiefs from Anspayaxw.
1990 Sept	Tla-o-qui-aht	Tofino	Main Road	Oka solidarity. Opposition to blockade from tribal leaders.
1990 Nov	Boothroyd	reserve	Road	?. BC gov't expropriates land to circumvent blockade.
1990 July-Nov	Lil'wat - Mt Currie	Duffey Lake	Road	Territory, culture, logging. Gov't. injunction — enforced.
1990 summer	Haida	Haida Gwaii	Boat-Plane Access	Fishing lodge. Blockader acquitted in 1992.
1990 July	Okanagan	Near Vernon	Road	Oka solidarity. Symbolic. Mobile. Not supported by band council.
1991 Feb	Lil'wat - Mt Currie	Duffey Lake	Road	Territory, culture, logging. Gov't. injunction — enforced.
1992 Fall	Gitskan/ Wet'suwet'en	Gitwangak	CN Line	Logging in land claim area.
1993 Oct	Gitskan/ Wet'suwet'en	100 km NW of Hazelton	BC Rail Line	Logging in land claim area.
1993 Aug	Stó:lō	Rosedale	CN Line Through Reserve	Fishery, DFO policy. CN injunction.
1993	Gitsegulka	Yellowhead Highway	Road	Right of way through reserve.
1993	N. Thompson Band	Yellowhead Highway	Road	

continued on next page

DATE	GROUP	LOCATION	TYPE	GRIEVANCE
1993	Penticton	Near Penticton	Road To Resort (Through Reserve)	Opposition to expansion of Apex Ski Resort — concerns over environmental effects, land claims, etc.
1994 Nov-Dec	Penticton	Near Penticton	Ditto	Ditto
1995 Mar-?	Adams Lake, Little Shuswap, Neskainlith	Near Chase	Road	Protest of RV park planned for traditional burial site. Injunction.
1995	Tsimshian	Highway 16, Near Prince Rupert	Road	Threatened — seek road and wharf to aid transport of fish.
1995 May-Mar	Upper Nicola	Douglas Lake Ranch	Ranch Roads	Access to fishing/hunting, opposed recreational development and env't. damage. Injunction.
1995 spring (?)	Nanoose Nation	Near Parksville	Access Road	Burial site threatened.
1995 Aug	Gitksan	15 km east of Hazelton	Logging Road	Land claims, forestry. Injunction sought by province.
1995 Sept	Nuxalk Nation	Fog Creek	Logging Road	With members of Forest Action Network. Blocking logging by Interfor on disputed lands; environmental concerns, archaeological sites. Defiance of injunction. Arrests.