

LIVING ON DISPLAY:

Colonial Visions of Aboriginal Domestic Spaces

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NOTIONS OF DOMESTICITY were central to colonial projects around the globe. They were part of the fray when metropole and colony collided and transformed one another. As Jean and John Comaroff put it, “Colonialism was as much about making the center as it was about making the periphery. The colony was not a mere extension of the modern world. It was part of what made the world modern in the first place. And the dialectic of domesticity was a vital element in the process.”¹ The colonial desire to order domestic space had its correlate in broader attempts to impose discipline in the public sphere.² On the late-nineteenth-century Northwest Coast, this process took shape for Aboriginal people who increasingly lived not only overseas from, but within, the society of the colonizing metropolises. Aboriginal people experienced extreme pressure to bring their lives into conformity with Victorian expectations about private, middle-class, bourgeois domesticity. This pressure came not only from isolated missionaries posted in lonely colonial outposts but also from a broad swath of colonial society. So intense was the interest in Aboriginal domestic arrangements, however, that colonial society brought Aboriginal domestic space into the public domain as never before, even as it urged Aboriginal communities to adopt the Victorian values of the domestic private sphere. While missionaries and government officials pressured

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¹ John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 293.

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?” *Representations* 37 (1992): 13.

Aboriginal families to replace multifamily longhouses with Victorian-style nuclear family dwellings, anthropologists and tourists invaded Aboriginal homes, alternately in search of a rapidly receding (“savage”) past or a slowly dawning (“civilized”) future. Missionaries encouraged such voyeuristic investigations in the hope that the object lessons of everyday Aboriginal life would generate a flow of funds from Christian pocketbooks into missionary society coffers. Anthropologists such as Franz Boas fed their own form of economic necessity with these displays, which they hoped would encourage benefactors to provide funding for additional anthropological fieldwork and collecting. In a sense, as they transformed Aboriginal domestic spaces into spectacle, all of the members of these non-Aboriginal groups became sightseers.

Domestic space was transformed into spectacle, and attempts to effect greater separation between private and public spaces simultaneously blurred the two, creating a hybrid public/private domain. Colonialism is riven with such invariably ironic contradictions. But the importance of such contradictions runs deeper than postmodern irony. While with one hand colonial society held out the promise of assimilation, with the other it impressed upon Aboriginal people its lack of good faith. The history of Aboriginal people in North America is replete with “sweet” promises gone sour; with “final” promises turned final solutions.³ How did colonizers reconcile these contradictions, these “tensions of empire”?⁴ A review of their views of Aboriginal domestic space provides an opportunity to address this question.

When curious, often nosy, sometimes aggressive members of colonial society entered Aboriginal homes, they brought the things they needed to make sense of the room around them. The significance of cultural practice may lie in the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, but the insight that the metropole has been defined by the colonies, and the “self” by the “other,” forces us to acknowledge that culture is also the story we tell ourselves about others.⁵ The colonial preoccupation with the domestic spaces of Aboriginal people provides a window onto stories that worked in both of these ways simultaneously. The stories that members of colonial society told themselves about Aboriginal people were also stories they told themselves about themselves. The stories that Canadians and Americans told themselves differed, as did specific policies and conditions on both

³ J.R. Miller, *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

⁴ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 448.

sides of the border. However, during the late nineteenth century, public interest in “authentic” Indians and pride in successful Indian policy were important components of both countries’ sense of nationalism. Differences in policy did not preclude continuities in attitudes and assumptions. Colonizers’ fascination with the domestic spaces of Aboriginal people offer us an important moment of cultural convergence.

The colonial narration of Aboriginal domestic space as spectacle generated a multiplicity of stories about, among other things, Aboriginal savagery, White civilization, colonial legitimacy, and modernity. Two assumptions of colonial thought recur in these stories. First, from their various, and admittedly diverse, vantage points, members of late nineteenth-century colonial society cast domestic spaces and domestic goods as material markers of civilization. But this alone cannot explain the sway that these markers of domesticity held over the colonial imagination. The second assumption takes us this additional step. The evidence suggests that members of colonial society assumed that the significance of these markers was more than skin deep. They assumed that the markers were straightforward reflections of the inner state of the individual’s soul and the family’s moral state. They extrapolated from fixed material form to fixed immaterial self. If the space was civilized, then likewise its inhabitants; if the space was uncivilized, then so were its inhabitants.

Aboriginal domestic spaces were put on display in a variety of contexts and along a continuum of consent. Some Aboriginal people willingly participated in the public performance of their private lives, while others submitted somewhat more grudgingly to the public gaze. Sometimes Aboriginal people did not have the opportunity to grant or withhold consent at all, when non-Aboriginal viewers invaded their private homes without bothering to ask permission. All of these interactions were infused with relations of power. Whether they suffered public scrutiny willingly or not, most Aboriginal families could ill afford to forgo the material benefits that accompanied submission to the colonial view. Some form of direct or indirect remuneration usually accompanied the performance of everyday life. This sometimes came as wages, at other times it came from the sale of souvenirs to sightseers hoping to commemorate their excursions into Aboriginal domestic space.

In this article, I explore a selection of domestic spectacles that fall along various points of the aforementioned continuum of consent, and I also address the nature of some of the stories that these spectacles enabled colonizers to tell themselves. I conclude with some brief considerations of the quite different stories that Aboriginal people told themselves about domestic spaces. The transformation and narration of everyday

life were central to colonial policy and culture alike. This article takes preliminary steps towards considering why this may have been so.

EXPOSITION SPACE

The world's fairs and expositions of the late nineteenth century provide some of the clearest examples of Aboriginal people voluntarily submitting to living on display. Beginning with the Paris Exposition in 1889, colonized peoples became important attractions at world's fairs and expositions. In many respects, exhibit organizers intended these so-called "live exhibits" to display and legitimate colonial narratives of modernity and progress. Early examples of mass advertising that helped generate public support for foreign and domestic policies, the expositions were themselves grand stories that members of colonial society told themselves about themselves.⁶ While live exhibits at European fairs tended to come from distant overseas colonies, North American fairs, beginning with the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, featured displays of internally colonized Aboriginal people. While most of these performers spent at least some time in scripted song and dance performances, the bulk of their time as live exhibits was given over to the performance of everyday life.

The live exhibits at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair invariably revolved around domestic dwellings. Millions of tourists flocked to see Aboriginal people supposedly living "under ordinary conditions and occupying a distinctive habitation."⁷ These dwellings fed into the fair's organizational theme: progress. They offered a relief against which visitors could measure the architectural achievements not only of the rest of the fair but also of dominant society in general. As one reporter wrote, the Aboriginal dwellings stood "in amazing contrast to the white palaces stretching away to the north, that evidence[d] the skill and prosperity of their successors in this western domain."⁸ Against this backdrop of modernity, the Aboriginal dwellings lent themselves to a social evolutionist narrative that legitimated colonial endeavours.

Anthropologists and other exhibitors erected a "great Aboriginal encampment,"⁹ consisting of the living spaces of Aboriginal people

⁶ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6, 8; E.A. Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society during the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 7.

⁷ "The Man Columbus Found," *New York Press*, 28 May 1893, Scrapbook, vol. 2, Frederic Ward Putnam Papers (hereafter FWPP), Harvard University Archives (hereafter HUA).

⁸ *The Dream City* (St. Louis: N.D. Thompson Publishing Co., 1893), n.p.

⁹ "All Kinds of Indians," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago), 20 June 1893.

from across North America. While newspaper reporters might concede that Aboriginal people lived in “stone, brick and frame houses”¹⁰ when they were at home, they imagined “authentic” Aboriginal dwellings as something quite different. For the duration of their time at the fair, Inuit families lived in skin tents; Penobscot families in birchbark wigwams; Navajo families in hogans; Menominee families in skin tepees; Winnebago families in “sugar-loaf” woven reed mat wigwams; Chippewa families in birchbark longhouses; Iroquois families in elm and birchbark huts and longhouses; and Kwakwaka’wakw families in cedar plank longhouses.¹¹ Anthropologists simultaneously created and fulfilled expectations of authenticity among visitors to the fair by carefully stage-managing the forms of dwelling put on display.¹²

The Kwakwaka’wakw performers from northern Vancouver Island were, in several respects, typical of the live exhibits. Frederic Ward Putnam, Harvard professor and organizer of the anthropology display, explained that the sixteen Kwakwaka’wakw participants would “live under normal conditions in their natural habitations during the six months of the Exposition.”¹³ In order to reinforce the aura of ordinary life, Putnam and his assistants worked to ensure that the Kwakwaka’wakw troupe consisted of family units. This principle was applied to most of the live exhibits, although the definition of “family” in this context was a non-Aboriginal one. Organizers attempted to limit the performers to couples and their children, even when would-be performers expressed a desire to travel in larger groups.¹⁴ The coordinator of the Kwakwaka’wakw troupe, George Hunt, arranged for his brother and his brother’s wife to join the group, although his own wife did not come to Chicago.¹⁵ Hunt’s son and father

¹⁰ See, for example, *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago), 9 July 1893, Scrapbook, vol. 2, FWPP, HUA.

¹¹ Clipping, 8 February 1893; *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago) 9 July 1893; *Pioneer Press* (St. Paul, MN), 15 March 1893, Scrapbook, vol. 2, FWPP, HUA.

¹² In a strange wrinkle in the authentic fabric of the fair, the Midway included Sitting Bull’s “log cabin.” The presence of the log cabin was unusual, as all other Aboriginal performers lived in dwellings that fair organizer’s deemed “traditional.” Perhaps Sitting Bull’s fame imbued the cabin with the necessary aura of authenticity that, in other cases, only a tepee could have offered. Or perhaps the log cabin conveyed a grudging respect for the Sioux chief. *Official Catalogue of Exhibits on the Midway Plaisance* (Chicago: W.B. Conkey Co., 1893), box 38, FWPP, HUA; Gertrude M. Scott, “Village Performance: Villages at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition, 1893” (PhD diss., New York University, 1991), 329–30.

¹³ Rossiter Johnson, ed., *A History of the World’s Columbian Exposition Held in Chicago in 1893* (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1897), 1: 315.

¹⁴ See, for example, Antonio, an Apache, to F.W. Putnam, 25 July 1892, box 31, FWPP, HUA; F.W. Putnam to Antonio, 4 August 1892, box 31, FWPP, HUA.

¹⁵ For the most complete account of the identities of the Kwakwaka’wakw performers that I have been able to compile, see Paige Raibmon, “Theaters of Contact: The Kwakwaka’wakw Meet Colonialism in British Columbia and at the Chicago World’s Fair,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, 2 (June 2000): 175.

also came. The group included two other couples and two small children. Another performer came with his brother. Hunt seems to have made an effort to meet the desires of his employer, anthropologist Franz Boas, by recruiting people in such a way as to approximate nuclear families. While the final group was not quite a Victorian nuclear family unit, neither was it an extended family of the kind that would have lived in a cedar longhouse.

Putnam's fixation with producing authentic, "normal" conditions extended to his insistence that the domiciles be originals rather than faux reproductions. Thus, when the Kwakwaka'wakw from Vancouver Island arrived at the Chicago World's Fair, they reassembled the planks of a cedar longhouse that had been disassembled at a Nuwitti village on the northern coast of Vancouver Island before being shipped by rail to Chicago. The house's authenticity was heightened by the report that, when it was chosen for the exhibit, it had actually been occupied by a Kwakwaka'wakw family.¹⁶ The house may even have been the property of one of the performers, which would have added an extra layer to the exhibit's patina of everyday life. The Kwakwaka'wakw house was situated alongside the fairground's South Pond, which stood in for the waters of the Johnstone, Queen Charlotte, and Hecate Straits. The houses faced a sloping "beach" upon which canoes were pulled ashore.

The display of everyday life was about domestic goods as well as domestic space. "Traditional" domestic goods completed the tableaux of Aboriginal domesticity presented by the familial scenes. Visitors could see the Kwakwaka'wakw living among items representative of everyday and ceremonial life, including canoes, house poles, totem poles, masks, and regalia. And if they strolled past the dairy exhibit to the nearby anthropology building, visitors could inspect hundreds of other implements integral to Northwest Coast Aboriginal life. Like other human performers, the Kwakwaka'wakw were living appendages of the vast displays of ethnographic objects, many of them drawn from domestic life.

The Kwakwaka'wakw exhibit in Chicago was an explicit realization of the colonial assumption that the "normal" – that is, "traditional" and "authentic" – state of these so-called savages was most visible in their "everyday life." The enormous trouble and expense that exhibit organizers took to ensure that the mock villages consisted of "real" houses, filled with "real" goods, was emblematic of their belief that inner meaning was inherent within outward form. They knew that the live exhibits did

¹⁶ Clipping, July 1893, Scrapbook, volume 2, FWPP, HUA. Organizers went out of their way to apply this principle to other Aboriginal groups at the fair as well. On the Navajo performers, for example, see F.W. Putnam to Antonio, 4 August 1892, box 31, FWPP, HUA.

not “normally” live beneath the intrusive eyes of millions of visitors. But they nonetheless assumed that the more subjective characteristics of everyday life could be held stable as long as outward conditions and characteristics were replicated as precisely as possible. This assumption was apparent in a number of other settings.

MIGRANT SPACE

The Kwakwaka'wakw who travelled to Chicago did so voluntarily and earned lucrative wages for their efforts. Less consensual examples of the performance of everyday life abound. When the domestic spaces of migrant labourers became spectacles, the degree of Aboriginal consent was much more ambiguous. In the late nineteenth century, thousands of Aboriginal people from British Columbia and Washington converged on Puget Sound for the fall hop harvest. Workers harvested a cash crop that was sold on a volatile world market. Yet while employers may have seen Aboriginal pickers as an emerging proletariat, many non-Aboriginal consumers of spectacle cast the labourers as remnants of a vanishing, authentic Aboriginal past, inexorably dying off to make way for the region's non-Aboriginal future. The migrant labour camps to which the influx of workers gave rise became tourist destinations for non-Aboriginal inhabitants of urban and rural Puget Sound. Entrepreneurs and sightseers converged to transform the migrants' temporary living quarters into spectacles. Although the migrant hop pickers had not set out with the intention to perform commodified versions of Aboriginal culture, their experiences in the migrant camps around Puget Sound bore striking resemblances to those of the Kwakwaka'wakw in Chicago's “great aboriginal encampment.”

The workers were sights of interest even before they reached the hop fields. Local newspapers commented on them when they travelled through urban areas on their way to and from the fields.¹⁷ The appearance of the hop pickers in Seattle was said to be as “regular as the annual migration of water fowl or the rotation of the seasons, and ... ever a source of attraction and interest.”¹⁸ The most commonly referred to centre of Aboriginal activity in Seattle during the hop season was the waterfront area known as “Ballast Island.” Aboriginal migrants began fashioning

¹⁷ “Siwashes Again Seek the Street,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 31 May 1904, 9; “Great Influx of Indians,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 10 September 1899, 6; “Indians Returning from Hop Fields,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1 October 1906, 16.

¹⁸ J.A. Costello, *The Siwash: Their Life, Legends and Tales, Puget Sound and Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: The Calvert Company, 1895), 165.

makeshift camps atop this pile of rocks and rubble in the 1870s, and by 1892, *Harper's Weekly* informed readers that Ballast Island was the place to go to see the pickers.¹⁹ Other sites in and around Seattle and Tacoma also became known for the appearance of seasonal Aboriginal camps.²⁰

Rural Aboriginal camps in the hop fields themselves provided an even greater spectacle for curious tourists. During the harvest season in late August and early September, each day hundreds of tourists descended on rural towns like Puyallup and the surrounding hop fields, travelling from Seattle or Tacoma in carriages and on the frequent interurban passenger trains.²¹ In the late 1880s and early 1890s, day-trippers turned into vacationers as businessmen opened hotels at or near the hop farms.²²

These urban spectators converged around the domestic lives of the Aboriginal hop pickers. Local papers touted the temporary villages as being “always worth a visit and study.”²³ John Muir found “their queer camps” more striking than even the natural setting of “rustling vine-pillars.”²⁴ When 400 Cowichan camped in the Puyallup Valley in 1903, visitors and residents alike flocked to watch the “mode of life and habits of these fish-eating aborigines from Vancouver island.”²⁵ For tourists, these “queer camps” were colourful spectacle with a measure of ethnographic education thrown in.

Physical conditions at these urban and rural encampments varied. Tents made of a variety of materials, ranging from cedar bark or rush mats to canvas sheeting, were common in city- and field-side camps alike. Along the urban waterfronts, some migrants erected structures on the ground, while others used their canoes as the foundation over which to hang canvas or mats.²⁶ At the fields, workers located wood with which to frame the canvas or mats that they had brought with them. Some farmers built houses or temporary huts for seasonal labourers.²⁷ Cabins, and even “wooden houses,

¹⁹ W.H. Bull, “Indian Hop Pickers on Puget Sound,” *Harper's Weekly* 36, 1850 (1892): 546.

²⁰ “Indians Returning from Hop Fields,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1 October 1906, 16; Photo NA-698, Special Collections, University of Washington (UW); Dorpat, *Seattle: Now and Then*, 45; photo NA-897, Special Collections, UW; photo 15,715, Museum of History and Industry, Seattle, Washington (MOHI); “Indian Life on Seattle Streets,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 10 December 1905, 7; “Siwash Village on Tacoma Tide Flats,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 15 April 1907, 20.

²¹ “Hop Picking,” *Washington Standard*, 24 September 1886, 2; *Puyallup Valley Tribune*, 3 October 1903, 6.

²² “A Western Hop Center,” *West Shore* 16, 9 (1890): 137-8; “Meadowbrook Hotel Register,” Snoqualmie Valley Historical Society, North Bend, Washington.

²³ “Picturesque Hop Pickers,” *Puyallup Valley Tribune*, 10 September 1904, 1.

²⁴ John Muir, *Steep Trails* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 257.

²⁵ “At the Indian Village,” *Puyallup Valley Tribune*, 19 September 1903, 1.

²⁶ Photos 2561 and 6123-N, MOHI; photos NA-1508, NA-1501, NA-1500, NA-698, NA-680, Special Collections, UW.

²⁷ “Hops in Washington,” *Pacific Rural Press*, 3 January 1891.

built after the style of the white man,"²⁸ could also be found along urban waterfronts. Some Aboriginal people found the living arrangements substandard – even uncivilized. Twana subchief Big John visited the Puyallup hop fields and commented that the people living there had “small huts, not like our houses, or even barns, but more like chicken coops, while we have houses and are civilized.”²⁹ For Big John, as for colonial viewers, domestic form and domestic character were interlocking.

For the non-Aboriginal viewer, the fact that these were migrant labourers living in temporarily erected tents did not detract from the attraction of the spectacle. The notion that they were viewing “real” everyday life rather than reproductions (as they would at a world’s fair) likely appealed to many. In the hop fields, they could believe that they were one step closer to the real thing than even Putnam, with all his attention to authentic details, could offer.

The transitory quality of the structures themselves also corresponded with common assumptions about Aboriginal people, who were presumed to be shiftless and wandering by nature. The assumption that Aboriginal people were incapable of permanently possessing property shrouded the self-congratulatory stories immigrants told themselves about the improvements they wrought with their transformation of the Pacific Northwest landscape from primitive (Aboriginal) to modern (non-Aboriginal). As railway investor, amateur ethnographer, lawyer, and (later) judge James Wickersham put it, “the Indian doesn’t care [about retaining reservation land] – clams, a split cedar shanty on the beach, a few mats and kettles, leisure and a bottle of rum once in a while are all he wants – anybody can have the land that wants it. Really why should our govt [sic] go to such enormous expense in trying to make a white man out of an Indian?”³⁰ Wickersham’s bluntness may have been somewhat unusual, but his sentiment was not. North of the border, in British Columbia, newcomers applied a different land policy than that used in Washington, but it, too, systematically deprived Aboriginal people of the land base required to remain self-sustaining.³¹ The scene that Wickersham described was much like the ones that non-Aboriginal viewers in Washington and British Columbia, or at the Chicago World’s

²⁸ “Indian Life on Seattle Streets,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 10 December 1905, 7; “Siwash Village on Tacoma Tide Flats,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 15 April 1907, 20.

²⁹ Myron Eells, *The Indians of Puget Sound: The Notebooks of Myron Eells*, ed. George Pierre Castile (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 270.

³⁰ Quoted in George Pierre Castile, “The Indian Connection: Judge James Wickersham and the Indian Shakers,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 81, 4 (1990): 126.

³¹ Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2002), 88, 109, 111.

Fair, found when they sought out spectacles of Aboriginal domestic space: picturesque object lessons featuring the notion of the vanishing Indian. The hop pickers reinforced several dearly held assumptions for tourists who ventured forth to view the workers en route or in camp: Aboriginal people used land and resources sporadically and unsystematically; they were inevitably disappearing in the face of civilization and modernity; and investment in an Aboriginal future was an oxymoron.

These assumptions were apparent in popular assessments of how the pickers spent their hard-earned wages. Here again, domestic goods as well as domestic space came under scrutiny. Although Indian agents commented that Aboriginal pickers often returned with “useful” goods such as furniture, harnesses, sewing machines, and stoves, tourists and reporters focused on items they deemed ridiculous and frivolous.³² The belief that outer form mirrored an inner subjective state informed these assumptions as well. It elevated the brief glimpses non-Aboriginal viewers had of Aboriginal lives from anecdotal evidence to generalized and authoritative judgment.

Casual viewers who made afternoon or weekend excursions to the hop fields or waterfront did not see the rough migrant labour camps as a component of a hard-working and highly flexible Aboriginal economy, which is what they were. They read the seasonal itinerancy of the migrant workers as evidence of an underlying lack of connection to any fixed locale. The notion that Aboriginal people had no use for land or resources was a fiction; however, in the hands and minds of a growing non-Aboriginal population, it was a powerful one. As in Chicago, spectacles of Aboriginal domestic space provided a jumping-off point for the stories viewers told themselves about themselves.

HOME SPACE

As migrant labourers, the hop pickers faced constraints on the level of privacy they could maintain over their domestic spaces. The circumstances of travel would have subjected their spaces and processes of domestic life to a degree of public view, even without tourists’ obsession with “vanishing Indians.” Their presence as travellers was noticeable to local residents. As in Chicago, it had been temporary structures that were on display at the hop fields. Yet, along the late nineteenth-century

³² Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1886. (Sessional Papers 1887, no. 6), lx; W.H. Lomas to J. Johnson, Commissioner of Customs, 3 November 1886, Cowichan Agency Letterbook, 1882-1887, vol. 1353, RG 10; Bull, “Indian Hop Pickers,” 545-6; E. Meliss, “Siwash,” *Overland Monthly* 20, 2nd ser. (Nov. 1892): 501-6.

Northwest Coast, even inhabitants of Aboriginal villages who remained at home had to deal with the intrusions of non-Aboriginal viewers. With the advent of tourist steamship routes along the Inside Passage in the early 1880s, adventurous non-Aboriginal travellers could now journey along the coasts of British Columbia and southeast Alaska. As Sitka, Alaska became one of the prime ports along the Inside Passage tourist route, the Tlingit residents faced one of the most intrusive forms of assault on Aboriginal domestic space. For tourists the “performances” of everyday life in Sitka seemed among the most “authentic” to be found; the Tlingit, meanwhile, found themselves cast in the role of involuntary “performers.” This latter point is of course not unrelated to the former. In Sitka the Aboriginal people stayed put; thus, the display of Tlingit lives falls among the least consensual examples of “living on display.”

Sitka’s tourist industry provided visitors with a dual view of Tlingit domestic life: (1) the “civilized cottages” inhabited by Presbyterian mission school graduates and (2) the Tlingit village. The “Ranche,” as the latter was dubbed, was both the figurative and literal antithesis of the mission cottages located at the far end of town. Tourists arrived by steamer, and, as they disembarked, they had the choice of turning left towards the Ranche or right towards the mission school and cottages. This dichotomous division of domestic space was not unique to Sitka. Farther south, along the coast in British Columbia, missionary Thomas Crosby made the same distinction between what he called “Christian street” and “Heathen street.”³³

Publications for visitors to Sitka invariably featured the Ranche as a “must-see” sight. The local newspaper encouraged visitors to “get off the beaten track” and, if possible, to find a local guide: “Get some one who knows the village to conduct you through, as many places of interest will be otherwise overlooked. Don’t confine your attention to the front row only, go in among the houses and see those on the back street.” This reporter urged visitors to penetrate the inner reaches of Tlingit domestic life, claiming that “generally the natives do not object to visitors entering their houses.”³⁴ At least some visitors took this advice to heart. As Sir John Franklin’s niece wrote of her visit in 1870, “We went into several [houses], not merely to inspect, but in search of baskets & other queer things.”³⁵

³³ Susan Neylan, “Longhouses, Schoolrooms, and Workers’ Cottages: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions to the Tsimshian and the Transformation of Class Through Religion,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 11, n.s. (2000): 76.

³⁴ *The Alaskan*, 5 June 1897, 1. See also “Sitka and Its Sights,” *The Alaskan*, 7 December 1889, 1.

³⁵ Sophia Cracroft, *Lady Franklin Visits Sitka, Alaska 1870: The Journal of Sophia Cracroft, Sir John Franklin’s Niece*, ed. R.N. DeArmond (Anchorage: Alaska Historical Society, 1981), 24.

Glimpsing the interior was important because this was sometimes the most distinctive aspect of the building: “In exterior appearance [the houses] do not differ from those of the white man, but usually there is only a single room within on the ground floor.”³⁶ Although some Tlingit residents undoubtedly chafed at such intrusions, many took advantage of the situation that literally came knocking on their door. Pine doorplates appeared above the lintels of certain houses, directing visitors towards homes that gained renown in the tourist literature.³⁷

Tourists carried their assumptions about domestic space as women’s space with them to the Ranche. Although male residents such as “Sitka Jack” and the hereditary chief, Annahootz, put up such doorplates, the “palace of Siwash Town” had a matriarch on the throne.³⁸ Mrs., or “Princess,” Tom was the most sought after resident of the village and was renowned throughout southeast Alaska. Visitors never failed to scrutinize her domestic situation. In some respects, her home sounded like the epitome of domesticity: “a painted cabin with green blinds, and a green railing across the front porch.”³⁹ But it was other elements of her domestic situation that attracted the most attention from visitors in search of a savage authenticity: her excessive wealth in gold, silver, blankets, and furs; and her multiple husbands, one of whom was reported to have been her former slave.

While male and female visitors alike focused their travel writings on Mrs. Tom, they told different stories about her. While female visitors used stories of Mrs. Tom to argue obliquely for women’s economic independence and sexual freedom, male writers decried Mrs. Tom’s behaviour. Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore’s 1885 description of Mrs. Tom was the basis for subsequent writers’ accounts, and its transfiguration over time is telling. Scidmore wrote that Mrs. Tom had “acquired her fortune by her own ability in legitimate trade.”⁴⁰ Later male writers cast aspersions on her moral and sexual conduct, characterizing her as “a disreputable Indian woman” who used “doubtful methods” to amass her large fortune.⁴¹ Female writers, on the other hand, viewed Mrs. Tom’s accomplishments of domestic economy in a more positive light.

³⁶ George Bird Grinnell, *Alaska 1899: Essays from the Harriman Expedition* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 157.

³⁷ E. Ruhamah Scidmore, *Alaska: Its Southern Coast and the Sitkan Archipelago* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1885), 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴¹ H.W. Seton Karr, *Shores and Alps of Alaska* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1887), 59.

In 1890 a female traveller emphasized that this wealth allowed Mrs. Tom to support two husbands and to still live in greater luxury than Chief Annahootz.⁴² The “regal splendor” in which she reputedly lived included silk, satin and lace dresses, carpeted floors, a mirror, pictures, and a “Yankee” cooking stove.⁴³ While female writers, beginning with Scidmore, stressed the neatness of Mrs. Tom’s home and self, Frederick Schwatka characterized her as a “burley Amazon of the Northwest.”⁴⁴ When these visitors stepped inside Mrs. Tom’s house, they brought with them the narrative framework of the story they would tell.

Nearly a mile through and then beyond town, at the mission cottages, visitors could investigate the lives of the “civilized,” “modern” Indians. They lived in two rows of neat, frame cottages built by Aboriginal labour but paid for by donations from American churches. The local, Presbyterian-aligned newspaper articulated the purpose of the cottages: “With their neat and inviting appearance, they are an object lesson which strongly contrasts with the filth and squalor of the Indian huts in other parts of the town.”⁴⁵ Not only were the Ranche houses presumably dirty, they were also said to “cause trouble”; that is, to encourage uncivilized, tribal behaviour and relationships.⁴⁶ Missionaries worried that tourists’ romanticization of “uncivilized” Aboriginal life would hinder their missionary endeavours, but they also saw the money that the tourists spent on curios in the Ranche.⁴⁷ The mission came to rely on displays of domestic space in order to convince potential donors that mission work could be successful and that mission graduates had a future other than “back-sliding” into Ranche life. By putting the object lesson of the cottages on display, missionaries hoped to elicit donations for their work.

The object lesson among object lessons was the Miller Cottage (named for the pastor of the Pennsylvania Church that donated the funds), in which the mission’s star graduate, Rudolph Walton, lived. According to Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson, the Miller cottage was “a

⁴² “Journal of a Woman Visitor to Southeast Alaska, ca 1890,” fol. 4, box 7, MS4, Alaska State Historical Library (ASHL), 20. See also Anna M. Bugbee, “The Thlinkets of Alaska,” *Overland Monthly* 22, 2nd ser. (August 1892), 191.

⁴³ Bugbee, “The Thlinkets of Alaska,” 191; “Journal of a Woman Visitor,” 20.

⁴⁴ Scidmore, *Alaska: Its Southern Coast*, 176; “Journal of a Woman Visitor,” 20; Bugbee, “The Thlinkets of Alaska,” 191; *New York Times*, 3 October 1886. Quoted in Frederica de Laguna, *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 191.

⁴⁵ *The Alaskan*, 23 January 1891, 4. See also “A Visit to the Cottages,” *The Alaskan*, 30 October 1897, 2.

⁴⁶ Brady to Rev. J. Gould, 30 December 1905, J.G. Brady, *Letters Sent*, vol. 9, November 1905– May 1906, files of the Alaska Territorial Governors, roll 7, Microcopy T-1200, National Archives Microfilm, AR25, ASHL.

⁴⁷ “The Orthodox Indian Temperance,” *The Alaskan*, 10 July 1897, 1.

better and more comfortable house” than those of 90 percent of the Americans in Sitka, “one of the best dwelling houses in the place.”⁴⁸ But the donors were disappointed. When Walton sent them a sketch of the finished cottage, they complained that the structure did not look to have the character of a \$500 house.⁴⁹

The donors’ concern with appearances makes sense in the context of the assumption that outer form reveals inner state. This non-Aboriginal assumption was as apparent in Sitka as it was at the Chicago World’s Fair and in the Puget Sound hop fields. Visitors invariably subjected the domestic arrangements of cottage residents to close scrutiny and paid close attention to the bourgeois furnishings. When the mission doctor wrote an article about the Miller cottage he detailed everything from the furniture to the behaviour of the children. He commented on “the neat board walk and gravel walks around the side”; the “parlor and sitting room, about twelve feet square – carpeted, sofa at one side, rocking chairs, table and book case, as we should find in any comfortable home.” Continuing, he noted, “in a small room adjoining this sitting room we find a cabinet with some pretty china and a few odd trinkets treasured by the family. The dining room and kitchen in the rear though less pretentious are neat, while upstairs the two bedrooms are furnished with bedsteads and the usual furniture.”⁵⁰ Such details were evidence that the family within had escaped the “contaminating influences of the Ranche.”⁵¹ Other cottages received similar evaluations by visitors. “In many of their homes are phonographs, pianos, and sewing machines,” wrote local schoolteacher Dazie M. Brown Stromstadt in her promotional book on Sitka.⁵² For Stromstadt, these items were evidence that their Tlingit owners were “living a ‘civilized life.’”⁵³ The cottage settlement was meant to stand as objective material proof of the subjective spiritual transformation that had taken place in the lives of the resident Tlingit. The material circumstances of the cottages were critical measurements of civility and modernity. Missionaries and tourists alike assumed that the geographical and structural opposition between Ranche and cottages extended to the inner lives of the residents.

⁴⁸ J. Converse to W.H. Miller, 30 August 1888, Sheldon Jackson Correspondence, Reel 97-638, Sheldon Jackson Stratton Library

⁴⁹ J. Converse to W.H. Miller, 25 July 1888, Sheldon Jackson Correspondence, Reel 97-638, Sheldon Jackson Stratton Library.

⁵⁰ B.K Wilbur, “The Model Cottages,” *The North Star* 6, 8 (1895): 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Dazie M. Brown Stromstadt, *Sitka, The Beautiful* (Seattle: Homer M. Hill Publishing Co., 1906), 9. See also *The North Star* 5, 8 (August 1892) in *The North Star: The Complete Issues*, 228.

⁵³ Stromstadt, *Sitka, the Beautiful*, 9.

Needless to say, reality was not as simple as this idealized picture would have it. Close attention to the written descriptions of Ranche and cottage life reveals that some of the similarities are as striking as the differences. Much like the cottage settlement, the Ranche too had neat boardwalks and a general tidiness about it.⁵⁴ Ranche homes also contained modern domestic goods such as furniture and stoves (often of the “modern type”).⁵⁵ The cottages too were less severed from Ranche life than many missionaries liked to admit. While living in the cottages, Rudolph Walton and other Tlingit residents sustained familial ties with Ranche residents and participated in important Tlingit ceremonies and community events.⁵⁶ They also followed similar cultural practices. The family unit within Miller cottage was not a nuclear one but, rather, included Rudolph Walton’s widowed mother and grandmother, who spoke Tlingit to Walton’s children.⁵⁷ Moreover, it was not just Ranche residents who were likely to offer baskets, carvings, or “curios” for sale to visitors but also cottage residents.⁵⁸ However, in the minds of White observers, the larger context – either Ranche or cottage – of each domestic interior seemed to carry overriding importance.

The notion that outside mimicked inside was less a statement of the status quo than it was a wishful prescription – an interpretation that observers attempted to impose, against the natural grain of the evidence before them. It was the story they *wanted* to tell themselves. Not surprisingly, the contradictions inherent within such an exercise frequently broke through to the surface, rending the oppositional social fabric of Ranche versus Cottage. At such times, observers worked hard to repair the damage and to restore the impression of easy opposition. Visitors might attribute the “civilized” signs of cleanliness and order in the Ranche to the influence of White discipline (through the police and military) or White blood (through interracial sex).⁵⁹ Either way, they countersunk their narratives in the common plank of domestic space as social text.

⁵⁴ “President’s Message,” *The Alaskan*, 9 December 1905, 3; Bertand K. Wilbur, “Just about Me,” box 1B, no.8, MS4, ASHL, 220-1.

⁵⁵ Wilbur, “Just about Me,” 220-1; J.G. Brady to Geo. C. Heard, Attorney at Law, Juneau, 19 June 1905, fol. 86, box 5, John G. Brady Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁵⁶ For examples, see Rudolph Walton, “Diaries,” 1900-1904, 1910, 1919. Private possession of Joyce Walton Shales.

⁵⁷ *The North Star*, 6, 1 (1895): 1.

⁵⁸ Wilbur, “The Model Cottages,” 1.

⁵⁹ Scidmore, *Alaska: Its Southern Coast*, 175; “Journal of a Woman Visitor,” 24; E. Ruhamah Scidmore, *Appleton’s Guide-Book to Alaska and the Northwest Coast* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1896 [1893]), 120; Francis C. Sessions, *From Yellowstone Park to Alaska* (New York: Welch, Fracker Co., 1890), 92; Wilbur, “Just about Me,” 221.

The stakes of sustaining domestic space as transparent social text become clearer when we realize that challenges to the Ranche-Cottage dualism came not only from Aboriginal people but also from White frontier residents. While interracial sex and marriage might explain signs of civilization found within Tlingit homes, they might just as easily engender new contradictions when White “squaw-men” adopted the domestic habits of their Aboriginal wives. In places remote from White settlement such behaviour could be attributed to the poverty that prevented the men from travelling to find White wives.⁶⁰ Such rationalizations were less tenable in busy settlements like Sitka. There, the Russian fur trade had given way to American settlement, and the domestic choices of “squaw-men” became increasingly difficult to reconcile with the standard colonial dualisms of Indian and White, primitive and modern, savage and civilized. Too many White men failed to enact the bourgeois values that middle-class society worked to impress upon Aboriginal people. The narrative power of domestic space could justify the marginalization of men whose race ostensibly should have ensured them a measure of colonial privilege. It could likewise broadcast the price that would-be “squaw-men” faced if they failed to conform to the bourgeois values of the modern settlement frontier.

Non-Aboriginal viewers used Aboriginal domestic spaces as a trope through which to tell themselves stories about themselves. Even when Aboriginal people did not intentionally or willingly place their homes and goods on display, non-Aboriginal viewers sought them out, often penetrating the inner reaches of Aboriginal home life. The contradictions of such a situation run deep. While the forces of colonial society urged Aboriginal people to adopt bourgeois values of privacy and domesticity, they simultaneously transformed Aboriginal homes and private spaces into public spectacles. Even missionaries, who were among the most aggressive proponents of bourgeois domestic values, encouraged the public to view the Aboriginal domestic space of “civilized” Christian converts. The homes of families who became mission success stories were as subject to enquiring eyes as were those who resisted missionary overtures. While missionaries promised that Aboriginal converts could earn equality through outward conformity to colonial, Victorian values, they broke this promise from the very start. Aboriginal homes – whether civilized or uncivilized – were *always* subject to different rules than were non-Aboriginal ones. Voyeurs implicitly judged *all* Aboriginal domestic space as savage when they subjected it to a degree of scrutiny that they

⁶⁰ *The Alaskan*, 5 August 1893, 2.

would never have tolerated in their own homes. The display of domestic space became not just a story White people told themselves but also a story they told *to* the Aboriginal spectacles.

ABORIGINAL STORIES

Non-Aboriginal viewers were not the only ones who narrated domestic space. They were not the only ones telling stories. While the display of domestic space did not always begin with Aboriginal consent, Aboriginal people invariably took advantage of the situation when they could, catering to tourists' desire for souvenirs and "curios," thus creating added income opportunities for themselves. "Traditional" Aboriginal domestic goods circulated as commodities, the returns from which sometimes allowed the vendors to purchase "modern" domestic goods that tourists would later judge, depending on the context, as either material markers of civilization or laughable markers of pretence.

Aboriginal people did not tell themselves the same stories as non-Aboriginal people told themselves. Aboriginal transformations of domestic spaces, and the adjustments they made to nineteenth-century colonialism, suggest a storyline out of keeping with any straightforward correlation between outward form and inner nature. Sometimes cottage life was literally a facade concealing traditional practices. For residents of Sitka's cottage community, the outer trappings of civilization fit easily over sustained hereditary obligations and practices. Similarly, the Christian homes in Metlakatla, British Columbia, looked, from the street, like workers' cottages. Past the door, however, they opened up into large communal spaces with sleeping areas to the sides, just like the interiors of old longhouses.⁶¹ Sometimes, when the main floors of houses were conjoined (with only the second storey separate), the communal space extended to more than one "house."⁶² The model Christian Indians of Metlakatla also refused to relinquish the longhouses they kept at Port Simpson.⁶³ The outward forms of Christian life at Sitka and Metlakatla distracted missionaries from the continuities of practice and value within cottage walls. Cottage residents could live in accord with Aboriginal values and simultaneously placate missionaries, thus reaping the material and spiritual benefits that accrued to converts.

It seems likely that chiefs mimicked Victorian architecture in order to speak to both colonial and Aboriginal society. When Christian

⁶¹ Neylan, "Longhouses, Schoolrooms, and Workers' Cottages," 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 82.

Tsimshian chief Alfred Dudoward built himself a Victorian mansion, he moved in with a large lineage-based group and continued to fulfill his hereditary obligations.⁶⁴ His wife, Kate, confused missionary women with her syncretic domestic habits. On one occasion, she concluded a respectable afternoon gathering with a slightly suspect biscuit give-away. When the White women returned the following day, they watched, shocked, while Kate and other Tsimshian women performed in front of them, “painted and dressed in their skins blankets and other old fixtures,” before sending them off with more tea biscuits.⁶⁵ Like Dudoward, Musqueam chief Tschymnana built a colonial house; his was in imitation of Colonel Moody’s residence. When Bishop George Hills visited the house in 1860, he found the chief’s *three* wives at home.⁶⁶ These prominent chiefs’ houses engaged colonial notions of form and content as well as indicating Aboriginal awareness of colonial scrutiny. They also demonstrate a degree of confidence and flexibility that culture inheres not in the post-and-beam structure itself but in something else: the idea that form can change without foreclosing continuity. Indeed, the forms of these houses may have offered an added measure of prestige within Aboriginal communities.

With the advent of colonialism, high-ranking individuals sought new ways of displaying power and status.⁶⁷ Engaging with “modern” colonial culture is one example of this. Shingles, hinged doors, milled lumber, and windows functioned as status symbols.⁶⁸ They marked new forms of expression within an age-old system. This hybrid facility extended to domestic goods as well as to structure. Nineteenth-century photographs reveal Aboriginal interiors to be “contents displays” of status items of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal origin.⁶⁹ These new styles and objects joined older symbols of wealth and power that marked the status of Aboriginal homes and their residents. Crest art painted on

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁵ 28 and 29 January 1884, Kate Hendry, Letterbook, 1882-1889, EC/H38, British Columbia Archives.

⁶⁶ Roberta L. Bagshaw, ed. *No Better Land: The 1860 Diaries of Anglican Colonial Bishop George Hills* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1996), 75. Even allowing for the distinct possibility that Hills misinterpreted the exact nature of the relationship between the women and the chief, this domestic space clearly housed an extended rather than a nuclear family.

⁶⁷ Judith Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past: Reconstructing History in Northwest Coast Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 31.

⁶⁸ Neylan, “Longhouses, Schoolrooms, and Workers’ Cottages,” 79-80; Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past*, 32.

⁶⁹ Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past*, 30. See also Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in *Representing the Nation: A Reader*, ed. David Boswell and Jessica Evans (London: Routledge, 1999), 333.

house fronts or carved on house posts has long asserted the status and hereditary rights of the inhabitants.⁷⁰ A house's size, materials, and position relative to other houses rendered the intravillage hierarchy visible – a pattern dating back over 4,000 years on the Fraser River.⁷¹ The spatial distribution within pre-contact longhouses designated the relative status of the family units within,⁷² and, similarly, the styles of pit houses can be correlated to wealth and status.⁷³ Such examples hint at the contours of Aboriginal narratives of domestic space.

PRESENT SPACE

Through the twentieth century, agents of colonial policy continued to target Aboriginal homes for transformation. Reserve houses constructed by the Department of Indian Affairs continued in the “cottage” tradition of attempting to reshape Aboriginal domestic life socially as well as architecturally.⁷⁴ At the same time, twentieth-century Stó:lō families who had the means continued to build European-style frame homes that could accommodate the large extended family and community gatherings of Stó:lō social tradition.⁷⁵

The preoccupation with “traditional” Aboriginal domestic space has likewise survived. The “Indian house” has remained the ethnographic artifact par excellence, somehow imbued with an unstated yet assumed ability to speak for Aboriginal culture and history writ large. When the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal looked to define a project in Alaska in the 1930s, it chose, at the urging of the local non-Aboriginal population, to undertake a meticulous and authentic restoration of Chief Shakes's house at Wrangell.⁷⁶ Some members of Wrangell's Tlingit population initiated a further restoration of four house posts in 1984.⁷⁷ When the Canadian Museum of Civilization designed its Grand Hall, which opened in 1989, it decided to construct a composite Northwest Coast “village” with houses and totem poles from various nations placed side by side, although still in geographical order.⁷⁸ The similarity in form

⁷⁰ Neylan, “Longhouses, Schoolrooms, and Workers' Cottages,” 79; Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past*, 9.

⁷¹ Keith Thor Carlson, ed., *A Stó:lō Coast Salish Historical Atlas* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2001), 36, 41.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 43, 45.

⁷⁶ Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past*, 33-9.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 39-43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

with Chicago's "great Aboriginal encampment" is too striking to ignore. However, unlike the world's fair, the Grand Hall intends to celebrate rather than to condemn Northwest Coast culture. The difficult question comes in deciphering the relationship between this colonial form and its postcolonial message. To pose a familiar question: can new meanings transcend old forms?

CONCLUSION

More than just an ironic contradiction of private turned public, an analysis of the spectacle of Aboriginal domestic space reveals some underlying colonialist assumptions. The audiences of Aboriginal people living on display defined themselves as modern through a dialectic of stories: stories they told themselves about themselves; stories they told themselves about others; and stories they told others about themselves. Colonial society presumed that civilization and modernity were as easy to read as an open book. This assumption, although false, shaped myriad interactions. Various groups, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, have had an interest in the spectacle of Aboriginal domestic life, with money and prestige always at stake. Missionaries' and anthropologists' interests dovetailed in the contrasting displays of uncivilized and civilized domestic spaces. For missionaries, the former demonstrated that reform was needed while the latter demonstrated that it was possible. Anthropologists focused on the former to display the ethnographic strangeness and value of their work and on the latter to establish that such work was urgent because Aboriginal disappearance was imminent. For many other non-Aboriginal members of colonial society, the display of domestic spaces reinforced comfortable stories about themselves and their position in a colonial world. The souvenirs they brought home to their "curio-corners" played a role of their own in bringing middle-class status to Victorian homes.⁷⁹

Aboriginal people also linked domestic and social space to individual and group identity. Traditional elites might manipulate domestic forms to shore up their personal power and status over other Aboriginal people as well as in relation to colonial society. Ambitious nouveaux riches might play with old and new markers of domestic space in their move to climb the social status ladder. It seems certain, however, that Aboriginal people

⁷⁹ As one writer put it, "every well-appointed house might appropriately arrange an Indian corner." George Wharton James, "Indian Basketry in House Decoration," *Chautauquan* (1901): 620. See also Lloyd W. MacDowell, *Alaska Indian Basketry* (Seattle: Alaska Steamship Company, 1906).

conceived of the connections between domestic space and identity in a radically different manner than did colonizers. The form and content of domestic spaces did not obviously offer the key to the interior of residents' sense of self and community responsibility. The links that existed were not clearly visible to outsiders. Looks could indeed be deceiving, at least for those with colonial eyes.

Colonial society from the nineteenth century through to the present has focused on houses as representative material forms of culture – as culture in practice. And Aboriginal people have consistently inhabited their houses in ways that prove the simplistic nature of this assumption. Still, scholars today continue to find it remarkable that Aboriginal people can proceed with traditional values and practices in “untraditional” contexts. Twentieth-century Tlingit potlatches held in “Western-style buildings” indicate to one writer, for example, that “the presence of proper joinery and other architectural devices that refer to past form, the ‘classic building blocks,’ are not required for traditional practice.”⁸⁰ The history of Aboriginal domestic spaces suggests that we should not be taken aback by the realization that the presence of “knowledgeable people” and witnesses from other clans is more important than are the specifics of a particular architectural form.⁸¹

The endurance of domestic space as a trope for the narration of Aboriginal culture gives rise to many questions. Why has domestic space proven such a powerful symbol? What is it that imbues domestic spaces with the power to shape judgments about inner selves? How did the fixed material forms of houses and household goods come to signify fixity of character and culture? Perhaps we are more prone to naturalize the values and arrangements of domestic spaces because they are the most familiar environments we have. The intimacy with which bourgeois domestic space has been experienced since the Victorian age may set off the alleged strangeness of other ways of living. And perhaps it is the very changelessness of material form that lends itself to rendering accessible the otherwise amorphous concepts of self and culture.

Members of colonial society have been searching for the location of culture since they first arrived on the Northwest Coast. Just when we think we have it cornered, it escapes out the back door. Maybe what these stories of domestic space tell us is that we should begin looking somewhere other than architectural plans.

⁸⁰ Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past*, 39.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*