

LETTER FROM THE INTERIOR:
James Teit and the “Injustice of Displacement”

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IN WENDY WICKWIRE’S recently published biography of early twentieth-century ethnographer James Teit, *At the Bridge: James Teit and an Anthropology of Belonging*, she questions “the authority of mainstream history and historiography” to determine “who is celebrated and who is not and why” (22). Providing Teit a much deserved and long overdue moment in the spotlight, the book aptly surveys his immeasurable contributions to the written record of British Columbia’s Indigenous people.¹

Her observations on the questionable authority of history link directly to a case currently under review at the Supreme Court of Canada involving a BC Indigenous tribe – the Sinixt, or Arrow Lakes Indians. This tribe’s identity, sovereignty, and Aboriginal rights under section 35 of the Canadian *Constitution Act* have all been questioned for decades as a result of their lack of status under the *Indian Act*. The lack of bureaucratic status has served as an authoritative force that confuses and confounds the accuracy of Indigenous history in the southeastern corner of British Columbia, where Sinixt traditional territory is situated.

It is in this context – the problematic nature of historical authority and its tendency either to exclude or to promote – that I encountered with great disappointment a small fragment of error in Wickwire’s book. It was only one moment in her intricate and far-reaching tapestry of Teit’s life as a travelling BC ethnographer. A book as ambitious and excellent as hers could not be expected to be flawless. As an author myself, I understand, and ask her forgiveness for pointing out and correcting this one error in her important book, a book that is bound to be widely read and cited.

¹ Wendy Wickwire, *At the Bridge: James Teit and an Anthropology of Belonging* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).

According to Wickwire, in 1909 Teit undertook “a trip to the mouth of the Kootenay River in southeastern British Columbia to interview the resident *Ktunaxa* people” (135, emphasis mine). She is right that Teit made the trip that year. She is right that he went to visit Indigenous people on the banks of the Kootenay River, at its mouth, where it joins the Columbia River. The misstep: in 1909, Teit was not visiting the *Ktunaxa*. A careful review of his letters and subsequent published materials identify these people as *Sinixt*. Fur traders and colonial governments labelled them Arrow Lakes Indians, or “Lakes,” in a frequently shortened version. The correct identity of these people is an important matter to all who care about land, about Indigenous rights, and about setting the colonial, historical record straight. The information and analysis I provide here is limited to this stated goal. It is not meant to be an exhaustive summary of contemporary or historical *Sinixt* identity.

One could guess at the source of the book’s error – that is, the conflating of a regional name with a colonial term for Indigenous people. The *Ktunaxa* have been referred to widely in historical records as “Kootenay,” a name they do not use for themselves. “The Kootenays” is also a term describing the area Teit visited, though its location in the headwater mountains of the sprawling international Columbia River watershed suggest that “upper Columbia” might be a more accurate geographical reference to the region.²

The primary homeland of the *Ktunaxa* – as well as their reserve lands marked out and in use by the time Teit made his visit – was further east, around the *upper* Kootenay River, in the Rocky Mountain Trench, not on the lower river at its confluence with the Columbia. Yet, if one consults contemporary maps of the First Nations of British Columbia, the confusion does not end. The area Teit visited is demarcated clearly on many maps today as being associated exclusively with the *Ktunaxa*, the Okanagan Nation Alliance, and the Secwépemc First Nations. All three are claiming portions of the upper Columbia region in their negotiations with the government. The *Sinixt* are not on the contemporary map.

Teit referred in his notes and financial statements to an elderly woman named Antoinette and to her son Baptiste Christian, the local headman for the *Sinixt* people who lived at the confluence, at the edges of the developing settlement of Castlegar. Antoinette had likely been born beside the Columbia River, around the time of first contact in the region (1807–11). Baptiste’s brother Alex may or may not have participated in

² Eileen Delehanty Pearkes, *A River Captured: The Columbia River Treaty and Catastrophic Change* (Victoria: Rocky Mountain Books, 2015).

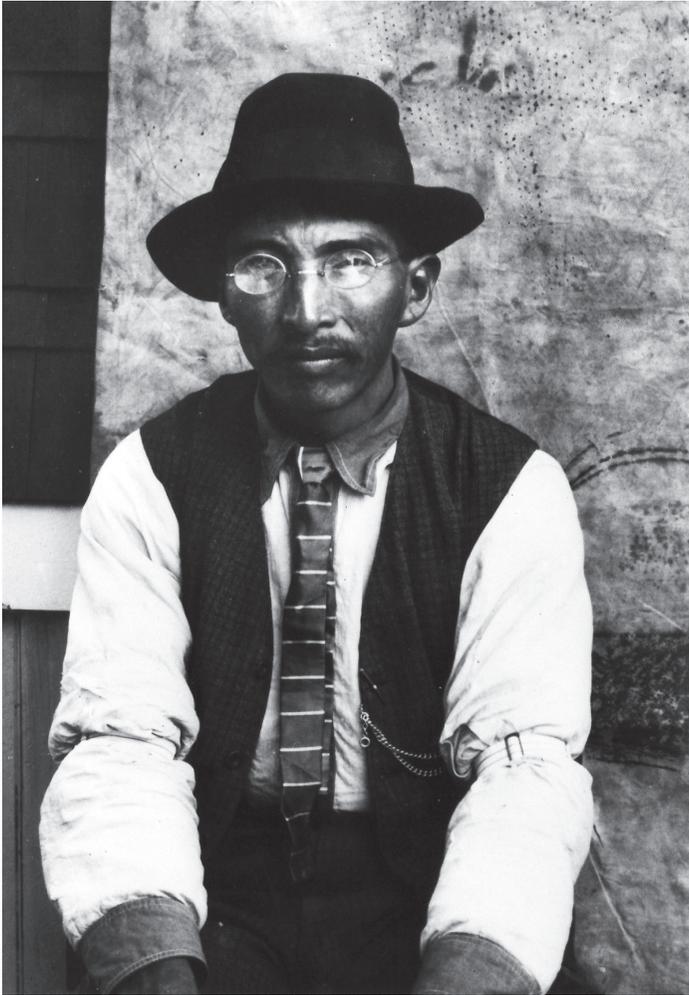


Figure 1. Photo of Alex Christian was taken by James Teit, possibly during a political meeting at Spences Bridge in June, 1914. *Source:* Canadian Museum of Civilization, no. 11616.

Teit's visit. He was well known by settlers in the Castlegar area. Teit paid Baptiste twenty dollars to make a traditional pine-bark canoe and paddle, a request from Franz Boas.³ Teit also accounted for payments for language information, baskets, and other work from Mary, Paschal,

³ Franz Boas gifted this canoe to the Berlin Museum in 1910. The canoe is identified in that collection as "Bark canoe from the Kutenai" – another misidentification. The canoe was almost certainly lost in the Second World War. Personal correspondence, Stephanie Fischer, 11 November 2019.

Tsoltélks, and an unnamed woman.⁴ There is ample evidence to demonstrate that the Christian family was there and that its members were Sinixt. If they indeed had deep roots in the landscape, then why isn't this tribe still listed on BC First Nations maps?

For the answer, one must leap forward in historical time to 1956. That year, the Canadian government, through an order-in-council filed in Ottawa, declared the Arrow Lakes Indians, including the Christians and all their relations living south of the international boundary, "extinct."⁵ It is the only such extinguishment of living, breathing Indigenous people in Canada. That same year, the government of British Columbia published an atlas in which one map accurately demarcated the transboundary territory of the Lakes people.⁶

At the end of her book (decidedly my favourite part of the whole magnum opus), Wickwire offers a rigorous critique of federal and provincial Indian policies through the lens of Teit's biography. Earlier, she had detailed how colonial ideas led to the establishment of "small scattered reserves" for British Columbia's Indigenous peoples between 1860 and 1880, and how the reserves today possess an "ironic double edge" because, in some cases, they are all that remains of "the old communal land and social base, however inadequate and fractured" (53). Her framing of these reserves within the wider intellectual context of Canadian policies of oppression is both intellectually progressive and important. "The imposition of Western rules and truths on other cultures – its scientism – was not only wrong, but destructive," she states (272). I would add that this scientism continues to exist in some circles and that it has an oversized impact on the truth of history with regard to the Sinixt.

Between the 1860s and 1880s, while the scattered BC reserve lands were being set into place, an Indian agent managed to miss any sign of the people who had lived and thrived in the Columbia River Valley for several thousand years.⁷ As a result, the BC government set up no reserve lands for the Sinixt at this critical time, laying the tribe open in a unique way to the "injustices of displacement" that Wickwire articulates (79). With nowhere in their traditional territory north of the 1846 international boundary that could offer protection, the Sinixt experienced unguarded the continual blows of colonial settlement. Meanwhile, at that same

⁴ Personal correspondence, Michael Finley, 26 August 2019.

⁵ Privy Council Order-in-Council No. 1956-3.

⁶ *British Columbia Resources: Transactions of the Ninth British Columbia Natural Resources Conference* (Victoria: Government of British Columbia, 1956).

⁷ Andrea Geiger, "Crossed by the Border: The US-Canada Border and Canada's 'Extinction' of the Arrow Lakes Band, 1890–1956," *Western Legal History* 23, no. 2 (2010): 121–53.

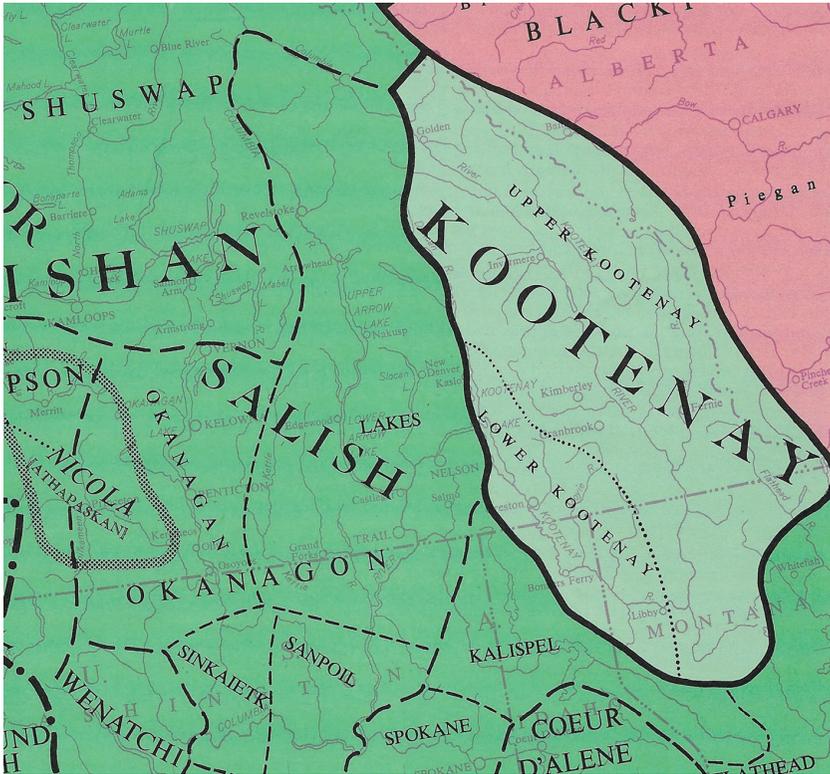


Figure 2. This government map places Lakes/Sinixt traditional territory between the Okanagan and the Kunaxa (Kootenay) peoples, along the main stem of the Columbia River. *Source: British Columbia Resources: Transactions of the Ninth British Columbia Natural Resources Conference* (Victoria: Government of British Columbia, 1956). See also Richard E. Hart, “Maps Showing Sinixt Territory, 1811–1846,” *Cartographica* (scheduled for publication December, 2020).

historical moment, the US government created a large reservation south of the boundary, where twelve different Plateau tribes in northeastern Washington were sent to live on the west shore of the Columbia River. This 1872 reservation stretched up to the boundary between the United States and Canada. It included some of the traditional territorial lands of the Sinixt. This northernmost part of the reservation was also within a few days’ paddle from where the Christian family lived in 1909.

As settlement pressures in British Columbia increased along the Columbia River and its tributaries, the Sinixt, who had always passed back and forth across that invisible line, were branded more and more by BC settlers as “American Indians.” In another ironic colonial gesture,

these newly arrived settlers told the Sinixt that they needed to go back where they belonged.⁸ When, finally, a small Canadian reserve was set aside for the tribe in 1902, it was on a plot of land far upstream from Christian family burial sites. Its distance from ancestral graves; its lack of a doctor, a school, or a store; and its remote location without any road or ferry service almost immediately transformed the small reserve into a sort of geographic anachronism. The Christian family and others refused to leave their family graves and familiar fisheries for this remote afterthought. The reserve soon fell into disuse.⁹

“Teit’s was a grounded anthropology,” writes Wickwire, “motivated by the cultural resistance to settler colonialism” (272). One could argue, as Wickwire does convincingly, that Teit truly understood what it means to be local. Teit knew that landscape and people form strong bonds – bonds in which love and belonging thrive. He showed up at the doorstep of those Sinixt living in Castlegar, sat down, and listened attentively as they described their world. In a letter he wrote to his colleague Franz Boas just after, he identifies the traditional boundaries of this tribe as being from around Marcus, Washington, to as far north as Revelstoke, British Columbia, including all of the Slokan Valley, some of the Kettle River Valley, Trout Lake, and parts of the Kootenay Lake system. He also records more than nine hundred words in their language, a dialect colonial linguists have since classified as belonging to the Okanagan-Colville branch of the Salish language.¹⁰ Various dialects of the language are spoken by many Salishan tribes, including the Okanagan (Okanogan in the United States), Smalqmix (Similkameen), Colville (Skoyelpi), and Arrow Lakes (Sinixt). The non-Indigenous, scientific label “Okanagan-Colville” used for their language is at once authoritative and exclusionary. Use of this term has, over time, further diminished the cultural and tribal identities of the Sinixt people, among others.

Ironically, the same year that Teit visited the Christian family on the Columbia River, some of his earlier materials about the wider region were being published in a monograph edited by Franz Boas – *The Shuswap*.¹¹ This published work helped to further confound the truth. Its conclusion – one that Teit made *before* he visited and interviewed the Christian family – referred to the upper Columbia River region as the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Pearkes, *River Captured*.

¹⁰ Teit, quoted in Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography and Ethnohistory in British Columbia’s Lower/Kootenay/Columbia Hydropower Region* (Castlegar, BC: Columbia Power Corporation, April 2005).

¹¹ James Teit, “The Shuswap,” in *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, ed. Franz Boas (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2014), vol. 4, pt. 7: 443–758.

hometown of the Secwépemc (Shuswap). He regretted this conclusion once he visited the region later that same year. As contemporary ethnographers Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy have demonstrated in their detailed analysis of his correspondence around that time, Teit corrected his mistake to the Royal British Columbia Museum, to Boas, and to others. He endeavoured to publish the correction, though this did not happen for several more years. Meanwhile, the monograph about the “Shuswap” gained credence. The disappearance of the Sinixt from the written record began to pick up speed.¹²

Since then, and most especially since the purported 1956 extinction, the historiography and ethnography of southeastern British Columbia have continued to suffer from missteps and misunderstandings. The extinguishment of Sinixt rights under the *Indian Act* has resulted in the near-extinction of historical truth. The lack of recognition of ancestral connections, place names, and cultural traditions now weaves tightly through government policy related to the current Columbia River Treaty renegotiation and ongoing land claims discussions. Error after error about the Sinixt people has built to the point that thousands of years of human habitation and tribal identity have effectively been erased from contemporary understanding in Canada. This tragic consequence has not been for want of effort by Sinixt people.

In the 1980s, responding to the disturbance of burial remains in Vallican, British Columbia, the Sinixt living in the United States as the Arrow Lakes tribe of the Colville Reservation crossed the boundary to set up a protest camp.¹³ Effort to mobilize a legal path to restoring Sinixt Aboriginal rights continued when a Sinixt man named Robert Watt, appointed by the tribe to take care of the burial site, contested a Canadian immigration order of deportation in the early 1990s.¹⁴ The order was ultimately quashed, but a definitive decision on cross-border rights for the tribe remained stalled. In the following decades, the “American” Sinixt sent one of their members to hunt for an elk in British Columbia as a test case. In 2010, the provincial government charged Richard Desautel with hunting without a licence. He pleaded “not guilty” – based on his

¹² For more discussion of Teit’s corrections, see Bouchard and Kennedy, *First Nations Ethnography and Ethnohistory*.

¹³ “Remembering the 1989 blockade in the Vallican,” *Tribal Tribune*, 24 October 2016. For a detailed account of the blockade, see also Laura Stovel, *Swift River* (Revelstoke, BC: Oregon Grape Press, 2019).

¹⁴ Greg Boos, Heather Fathali, and Greg McLawsen, “The History of the Jay Treaty, and Its Significance to the Cross-Border Mobility and Security for Indigenous Peoples in the North American Northern Borderlands and Beyond,” in *The North American Arctic: Themes in Regional Security*, ed. D. Menzies and H. Nicol (London: UCL Press, 2019), 35–66.

Aboriginal rights. *R. v. Desautel* successfully tested the applicability of section 35 of the Canadian *Constitution Act* to this transboundary tribe with a 2017 judgment confirming his right to hunt. The original decision has been confirmed twice more in BC courts.¹⁵ Though the Sinixt still have no identity as sanctioned by the *Indian Act*, they now have enough existence through BC courts to have been granted some Canadian Aboriginal rights.

On 8 October 2020, Canada's highest court heard the *Desautel* case. In a decision expected sometime in 2021, the Supreme Court may well join the three lower courts in confirming that the Sinixt can hold rights in Canada as an Aboriginal people. If it does, the small error buried in Wickwire's book could result in a much larger historical correction outside its pages – one that should rightly prompt the rewriting of government maps of the First Nations in British Columbia. Wickwire's description of Teit – a fine ethnographer who suffered under Franz Boas's "invisibilizing" force – resonates strongly with the story of the Sinixt whom he visited in spring 1909 (265). The Sinixt people's own complex, transborder history spreads broad and deep across the upper Columbia landscape, despite the continued efforts to invisibilize it – and them.¹⁶ The Sinixt have not disappeared. Their cultural presence remains. Shelly Boyd, a Sinixt woman living in Inchelium, Washington, is related through marriage to the Christian family. She knows first hand the pain of the invisibilization that her husband's family fought against when they met with Teit at the confluence of the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers back in 1909. "*Púti? k'w'u alá?*," she says firmly. "We are still here."

RESPONSE FROM WENDY WICKWIRE:

I appreciate the author's close read of my book. She has indeed caught an important error: on page 135, "ktunaxa" should be "Lakes/Sinixt." The correction has been made in the e-book, and it will appear in the next reprint of the physical book.

¹⁵ *R. v. Desautel*, 2017 British Columbia Provincial Court 94; *R. v. Desautel*, 2017 British Columbia Supreme Court 2389; *R. v. Desautel*, 2019 British Columbia Court of Appeal 151.

¹⁶ Eileen Delehanty Pearkes, *The Geography of Memory* (Nelson, BC: Kutenai House Press, 2002).