

Gitxaala's Own Foods: Decolonizing Food Practices

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A long time ago, [we had] a strong connection with the nature and the body, you know, a really strong connection. Here we have a strong connection with the food we have.

(Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 20.07.2005, p.17)

Food was a central topic of discussion while conducting research on diabetes in the Aboriginal community of Gitxaala, on Dolphin Island on the north coast of British Columbia, Canada. Sam Lewis, my community research partner, and I interviewed elders, harvesters, and traditional food experts about many aspects of their relationship with food. To initiate discussions about diet and diabetes, we asked people which foods they thought of as healthy. Many participants replied “everything is healthy,” or “all our own foods are healthy.” At first I interpreted this to mean that participants did not conceive of the store-bought foods high in sugars and starches that I saw them consuming as unhealthy. But over the course of our research, I realized this answer was based not so much on Gitxaala people’s understanding of the term “healthy” as on what they categorize as “food.”

Was there a clue in the way people spoke about foods that might hold a key to healing, not just from diabetes but from the colonial practices of disenfranchisement and assimilation that lay at its root?

This chapter first discusses what it means to live and to eat in Gitxaala, before expanding on the idea of “own foods.” It then examines what the mental and linguistic category of own foods reveals about the means of production, rightful resource ownership, and Gitxaala identity. Finally, it explores the use of own foods in healing from diabetes and from colonialism.

Living in Gitxaala: The Diet Context

Gitxaala was part of a thriving regional system in the millennia before contact (*Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005[1], pp.3-6); for the approximately 400 people who live in Gitxaala, it remains the centre of the world. But colonial policies, practices and economies have isolated and marginalized Gitxaala.¹ From the village, it is a 20-minute float-plane ride or two hours by boat to Prince Rupert, British Columbia, the nearest town with a supermarket, a hospital, and industry. Because the community is cut off from its traditional resources by the bounds of the reserve system² and by colonial conceptions of ownership that deny traditional systems of land tenure and resource rights, its economy has largely depended on the fishery.

The gradual collapse of the 20th century commercial fishery resulted in community-wide economic hardship. The only steady employer in the village is the Band Council Office. Between 75 and 85 percent of community residents are on social assistance, which pays \$225 per month for a single adult (Sam Lewis, 15.06.2005, p.9). Many other community members are on Employment Insurance, which pays a minimum of \$500. Gitxaala youth must leave the community to graduate from high-school in Prince Rupert, and many choose not to. Most Gitxaala people leave the community at some point in their lives to find employment, leaving behind family, friends and home.

The tandem effects of economic marginalization and resource disappropriation – that is, of colonization – have severely curtailed Gitxaala residents' ability to access healthy foods, generating community-wide food insecurity.³ The most accessible store-bought foods in Gitxaala are not nutritionally adequate, and perhaps not even safe if one considers the sharp rise in obesity, heart disease and diabetes due to their consumption. At the same time, the healthiest foods on the planet are in the waters just off Gitxaala's shores, rendered increasingly inaccessible by colonial policy. For these reasons, Gitxaala is beginning to see the effects of the diabetes epidemic (Young et al. 2000) currently taking hold among aboriginal peoples.

1 See McDonald 1994 for a parallel example concerning nearby Kitsumkalum.

2 In the Canadian system, small parcels of Aboriginal peoples' original territories are 'reserved' for them; in British Columbia, reserves were created in the 1880s. By law, Aboriginal peoples are unable to sell reserve land, although the Canadian government felt entitled to downsize many reserves in the early 1900s (Harris 2002) selling off the pieces to settlers and industry. It is next to impossible to own land within the reserve privately; few Aboriginal individuals have access to capital from the value of their land. Some First Nations choose to challenge the size of their reserves by making a land-claim to larger portions of their original territories. Others refuse to acknowledge the restrictions placed upon their unextinguished rights by the reserve system, a choice that often results in lengthy, expensive, politicized court battles that sometimes rise to the Supreme Court of Canada. The Supreme Court often rules in favour of Aboriginal peoples' rights, but the Canadian government has frequently stalled in enacting the rulings.

3 Community-level food security may be defined as "a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice" (Hamm and Bellows 2003).

Eating in Gitxaala: From Own Foods to Sugar Diabetes

Even now, we call the inlet our grocery store. [*Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.1]

The community of Gitxaala relies significantly on its traditional food sources including: salmon, halibut, cod, oolichan (or eulachon), seal and sealion, deer and mountain goats, a variety of fowl, cockles, clams, mussels, sea urchin, sea prunes, china slippers, sea cucumbers, octopus, herring roe on kelp (ROK) and a variety of other seafood, seaweed, berries, and other forest foods. The adverse economic conditions with which First Nations people live in disproportionate measure to their non-native neighbours (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2004; Adelson 2005:S53) increases the importance of these food sources.

The cultural and nutritional importance of salmon cannot be over-stated. Salmon is so central to the diet that it is simply called 'fish.' Traditional food experts in the community stated that they jar between 20 and 140 jars of salmon to last them through the winter. This is in addition to the salmon that is smoked, dried, or frozen. One participant reported knowing only two families in the entire village who did not eat jarred salmon.

Despite the ongoing importance of these foods, there is no doubt that the Gitxaala diet has undergone a massive shift in the last 60 years. Elders participating in the research project described a cornucopia of resources and dishes from their youth, many of which are no longer available in the community due to resource depletion or the host of other reasons for diet change discussed later in this paper. Originally, the Gitxaala diet was high in fats and proteins provided by fish and meats. Plant resources also played an important role, each in its own season; seaweed and a diversity of berries were dried to ensure vegetable content through the winter. Berries were the only source of fructose; wild rice (the bulbous root of a lily plant) was most probably the only starch.⁴ Oolichan and sea mammal greases, rich in fat, non-starchy carbohydrates and other nutrients (Newell 1993:154) were staples, eaten with dried fish, vegetables, or mixed with berries for desert; these greases, laborious to prepare, are now a special treat.

It is difficult to afford nutritious store-bought foods in Gitxaala. Prices for groceries in Prince Rupert are already high compared to larger urban centers such as Vancouver due to transportation costs; purchases must then be shipped from Prince Rupert to Gitxaala at 33 cents per pound by plane, and 25 cents per pound on the ferry that runs twice a week. Store-bought vegetables are usually restricted to celery, carrots, potatoes, and onions. Each of these staples has a corollary in the traditional, locally available diet, and community members therefore know how to include them

⁴ Wapato, a starchy tuber growing a thousand kilometers away in southernmost B.C., may have been acquired by trade (Turner 1995).

in their dishes. These vegetables have also been selected for their hardiness; folks laughed when I bought lettuce and I understood why when it rotted in three days because of the humidity.

Nowadays, there is an increasing reliance on starchy carbohydrates and sugars. Candy bars, chips, and pop are the only goods sold in Gitxaala at the same price as in town (Prince Rupert). Packaged, processed foods high in starches and sugars, such as Kraft Dinner, pastas, and rice, are light to transport, easy to store in the sea air climate, and can feed a large family inexpensively.

Project participants continually expressed to me their concern about the amount of starchy, sugary foods being consumed by Gitxaala residents, particularly children: "I see a lot of our kids who, their lunch diet when I'm walking by the school, is a bag of chips, pop, candy, chocolate. Which to me, we're really setting them up for more diabetic kids as they grow up." (Cliff White, 14.07.2005, p.30)

The concern about "sugar diabetes" is a valid one. Undocumented in Aboriginal populations in Canada before 1940, type 2 diabetes has increased dramatically since the 1950s (Szathmary 1994) and now affects some Aboriginal populations at a rate 3 to 5 times higher than non-native Canadian populations (Young et al. 2000; Canadian Diabetes Association 2013). Prevalence rates among First Nations individuals living on reserve average 17.2 percent across Canada and top out at an estimated 30 percent in some communities; an additional estimated 20 percent of cases remain undiagnosed (Public Health Agency of Canada 2011). Type 2 diabetes is one of the fastest growing diseases in Aboriginal communities (Public Health Agency of Canada 2011), but there is a paucity of research on how primary health care initiatives impact the management of diabetes in these communities (Gibson and Segal 2015).

Diabetes mellitus involves a difficulty in absorbing and transforming ingested sugars into energy, resulting in hyperglycemia (Szathmary 1994:458). This debilitating illness is the leading cause of "blindness, kidney problems, nerve damage⁵ and erectile dysfunction" in Canada, and four out of five people with diabetes will die of heart disease (Canadian Diabetes Association 2007). Complicating risk factors include high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and being overweight or obese.

Type II diabetes⁶ (or non-insulin dependant diabetes mellitus) is the most common in Gitxaala. Five out of 22 project participants reported having type II diabetes

5 The majority of lower-limb amputations among aboriginals in Canada are due to diabetes. Nerve damage causes numbness, resulting in opportunities for gangrenous infections (Szathmary 1994).

6 "Diabetes" actually refers to several different disease mechanisms (Szathmary 1994) grouped into three "types." Type I (insulin-dependant diabetes mellitus, or IDDM) refers to the body's inability to produce insulin; its onset usually occurs in childhood and can be regulated with insulin shots. Gestational diabetes (GDM) occurs temporarily during pregnancy and is a strong indicator for type II diabetes later in life for both mother and child (Benyshek 2005).

or being prediabetic. All participants knew someone in their family who was diabetic; many have had to change their own dietary habits to accommodate them.

Type II diabetes refers to the body's inability to produce sufficient insulin to process the sugars ingested, or its inability to absorb insulin into tissue cells (Szathmary 1994:458). Symptoms often do not appear for many years after the onset of the disease (Bennet 1982). Diabetic project participants all learned of their condition due to an acute health crisis, usually catalyzed by their diabetes and involving an extended hospital stay in Prince Rupert.

While members of the scientific community debate the complex etiologies of diabetes,⁷ they all agree that a diet high in carbohydrates and sugar is one of the causes of type II diabetes.⁸ In order to maintain a safe blood sugar level, the at-risk or diabetic individual must regulate foods which the body quickly converts to glucose. These include refined sugar, carbohydrates high in starch (a type of sugar) such as rice and potatoes, and processed foods derived from refined carbohydrates such as white bread, pasta, and potato chips. Heavy alcohol consumption⁹ and tobacco smoking (Bazzano et al. 2005) can also complicate the picture. The Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA) recommends that individuals at risk for diabetes "choose" to eat more carbohydrates high in nutrients and fiber, such as vegetables and whole grains – foods in short supply in Gitxaala. The foods it recommends restricting are increasingly prominent in Gitxaala's store-bought diet

Traditional Foods... or "Own Foods"?

Our work centered on exploring the multiple reasons for the increasing importance and consequences of store bought foods in the Gitxaala diet. These discussions also brought to light complexities surrounding the way Gitxaala people use the term "traditional" when referring to foods.

7 Neel (1962) hypothesized a "thrifty genotype" which would enable fat storage in a "feast or famine" food cycle; this has been expanded into a polygenetic model (see Benyshek, Martin, and Johnston 2001, for discussion). See Fee (2006) for a critical analysis of how the genetic debate is a recasting of old racist theories of disease etiology. The "fetal origins" model proposes that both malnutrition and hyperglycemia in the fetal environment, consistent with cycles of malnutrition and over-consumption in the colonization process, can cause diabetes later in life (Benyshek 2005). Rates among indigenous populations defy genetic boundaries, and have been related to personal and community-level trauma (Ferreira 2006), individual stress levels (Surwit 1993; Korn and Ryser 2006), loss of traditional food sources (Scheder 2006a) and the means of their production (Scheder 2006b), and industrialization (Weidman 1989). This constellation of factors has led some to call diabetes a "disease of colonialism" (Scheder 2006c) rather than a "disease of civilization" (West 1974).

8 See, for example, Accurso et al. (2008); Arora and McFarlane (2005).

9 Alcoholism "can induce [type 2] diabetes through chronic pancreatitis" (Pietraszek et al., 2010). Heavy alcohol consumption may be associated with increased risk of type 2 diabetes (Howard et al., 2004), increased risk for some complicating factors (Young et al. 1984), and lack of compliance with self-care for chronic conditions. Gitxaala has declared itself a dry community – alcohol is banned – but alcohol consumption occasionally creates problems in the community nonetheless. Many project participants have struggled with alcoholism – either their own or a family member's.

In Gitxaala, tradition is understood as adaptable and responsive rather than static – traditions must be relevant to be maintained. People use the term “traditional” to refer to a variety of culturally important foods, some of which have emerged from the community’s interactions with non-aboriginal cultures. These include chow mein, often served at community feasts and made with either beef or seal meat; *eets’m anaay*, a home-made flour-based dough that is deep-fried and served with syrup, much like a doughnut; and of course, the potato, a starch that gained a place of prominence in Gitxaala’s gardens and diets since it was obtained from the Haida in the late 19th century (Garfield 1939:329), after Euro-Canadian traders introduced it to the Haida. The term “traditional foods” was too inclusive to refer to the original Gitxaala diet free of starchy, sugary introductions.

When I asked people about their favourite foods, many answered, “I like all our own traditional foods” or “all our own foods.”

People were very consistent in their use of the terms “our foods” and “our own foods”; these terms referred to a class of food resources that could be harvested within Gitxaala territory or be exchanged as part of a traditional economy, and could be preserved or “fixed” by traditional as well as modern means. The terms “our foods” and “our own foods” were never used for store-bought foods or semi-traditional foods such as chow mein or *eets’m anaay*. I began to pay close attention to the use of the term “own,” to see if I could glean a greater understanding of the Gitxaala mental category “food.”

“Own foods” have three qualities or aspects that set them apart from other food-like substances, and that reveal complex relationships between diabetes, colonialism and community.

Firstly, foods categorized as own foods are those for which Gitxaala people own the means of production. They are the food resources that Gitxaala people maintain, harvest, preserve, exchange, prepare, and consume themselves.

Secondly, the possessive “own” is used liberally in the colloquial to indicate ownership, in statements such as “that’s my son’s own toy” or “we went out in Jimmy’s own boat.” When Gitxaala people use the term “own” to refer to a particular category of foods in their daily parlance, they are making an ownership statement about resources the colonial government has taken every opportunity to appropriate.

Finally, the possessive “own” is also used to indicate one’s “own” people, that is, family on the mother’s side or one’s tribe (what anthropologists usually refer to as the clan; Garfield 1939; Dunn 1984:43). These are the people to whom one belongs. Thus, a father will refer to his children as “my wife’s own children” as they belong to his wife’s tribe. To apply the term “own” to a category of foods indicates the sense of belonging associated with these foods. Own foods, like one’s own family, are building blocks of identity.

The Means of Production: A History of Colonial Economies and Foods

Since time immemorial, Gitxaala people have nourished themselves with the products of their own labour. Harvesting and preserving foods such as those listed above, and managing food resources so that they continue to produce, is hard work and time intensive; a collective effort is necessary to render it efficient. Over the millennia, Gitxaala people perfected their processes until their skill at transforming their territory's seasonal salmon runs and other bounty into preserved food, available year-round, made them a wealthy and powerful nation. They exchanged this bounty for products and delicacies not available within their own territory but produced by the labour of their neighbours – such as the superior oolichan grease made in nearby Kitimat, moose meat from Gitksan territory, or the wapato tuber grown in distant southeastern British Columbia – thereby establishing the fruitful relations that contribute to peace and prosperity between nations. This powerful connection to food through labour, and the control of and responsibility for every link in the chain of production, determined many aspects of life: the seasonal round, the extent of Gitxaala territory, family affiliations, international relations, the *ayawwk* (laws), life and death.

However, the strength of Gitxaala people's connection to food through labour was undermined as they became entangled in the colonial economies encroaching on their territories. Colonial policies began to restrict Gitxaala people's traditional economic activities. At the same time, compelling new goods became available, but they could only be acquired through a novel kind of exchange. The wage labour economy had come to Gitxaala shores. Control of the means of production shifted, entailing a shift in the kinds of foods Gitxaala people consumed.

In the early years of Tsimshian contact with European traders, Gitxaala people dominated trade and freight industries within their territories (McDonald 1984:42-45), and supplied foods to arriving Europeans. As the European presence stabilized within Gitxaala territory, so too did the presence of European foods. When the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) arrived in 1826, (Garfield 1939:169; Martindale 2003), the Gitxaala role in the fur, forestry and freighting industries (Menzies and Butler 2008) gave them the financial means to experiment with flour, rice, lard, molasses, sugar, salt, and tea, and to begin integrating them into their diet. By the close of the 19th century they were obtaining potatoes from the Haida (Garfield 1939:329); this pattern was ongoing in the 1930s (Garfield 1939:199), and began trading them to the HBC once they started producing their own (Martindale 2003:26). Flour, sugar, liquor, and tobacco gained prominence in potlatching ceremonies in the 1800s and early 1900s (Garfield 1939:208, 249).

The first cannery opened on the Skeena River in 1876, and many others followed.¹⁰ Ties to canneries restricted Tsimshian fishermen's movements over their territories during the commercial season; for their wives, cannery work became a sensible alternative to going out in camp in summer (McDonald 1984:48), waiting instead until the whole family could go out together in the fall to process their own foods. Because the harvesting of plant foods was largely women's work (Garfield 1939:199; Martindale and Jurakic 2004), women's engagement in the canneries deeply undermined this component of the diet and knowledge base. Tsimshian men's involvement in the commercial fishery, by contrast, allowed them to continue practicing their fishing knowledge.

In the early 1900s, when markets were found for species of salmon which run in the spring and late fall (Newell 1993:65), fishery and cannery work began to infringe more seriously upon time spent out in camp. However, not all family members engaged in the new cash and wage economies, and such work was still integrated into the traditional economy rather than the other way around.¹¹

In the 1920s and 30s, when this project's oldest participants were young, the foods consumed in Gitxaała were still, for the most part, foods produced in Gitxaała territory and preserved in the traditional manner. Community leader *Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill reports the late Chester Bolton estimating that 30,000 pieces of fish were dried each year for each house, that is, for thirty or forty people's regular consumption and whatever was needed for feasts, guests, and trade (*Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005, p.15). Berries were sun-dried in compressed cakes called *ga'luunax* (*Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.13). Most cooking was done by boiling, stewing, baking or roasting; any frying was done in seal grease (*kba uula*), not lard or oil (*Saygyooks* Martha Lewis, 17.06.2005).

Once or twice a year, after the fishing and trapping seasons, families would convert their labour into store bought foods and other goods. They purchased 100 pound bags each of sugar, flour, rice, potatoes and onions, and smaller quantities of salt, baking soda, tea, and lard or – if they could afford it – butter (Agnes Shaw, 04.07.2005, p.8; *Saygyooks* Martha Lewis, 17.06.2005, p.8). Salt was used for preserving meats (*Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.6). Sugar was used for preserving fruits (Agnes Shaw, 04.07.2005, p.11) and making pulled-sugar candies (*Saygyooks* Martha Lewis 18.06.2005, p.7; *Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.15). Bread-making was the primary use for flour; potatoes and rice were eaten with boiled seaweed, stews, or fish egg soups (for example, Agnes Shaw, 04.07.2005, p.4).

10 Some were built on traditional Tsimshian territories and fisheries (Darling 1955:44; Menzies and Butler 2008:138).

11 See McDonald (1984) for an analysis of Tsimshian involvement in the early commercial fishery and its impact on food-gathering.

The introduction of baloney and wieners, the only store-bought meats available in the 1920s and 30s (*Saygyooks* Martha Lewis, 18.06.2005, p.15), provide a perfect example of how a shift in the means of production affected the Gitxaała diet. Traditionally, clams were dug up in winter months and smoked or dried. Around this time, canneries began to buy them fresh for commercial use. As Gitxaała people transformed a traditional food source into a source of cash, they needed to replace this protein staple with something else – and their new income made baloney and wieners available (Agnes Shaw, 04.07.2005, p.9). The process of commercializing a traditional food source and substituting its place in the diet with a purchased, processed alternative was established; it continues to this day.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Gitxaała people relocated to centres of Euro-Canadian industry as canneries consolidated; by the 1950s, cannery unions and the mechanization of the canning process transformed fishing and canning into year-round pursuits (Newell 1993:128). These factors distanced Gitxaała people from their harvesting sites and from the traditional knowledge embodied in them. Both the popularity of canning and jarring salmon (more time efficient and less weather dependent than drying or smoking; McDonald 1984:48-49), and the importance of store-bought meats such as baloney (*Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005[1], p.26), grew as people adjusted to their displacement from harvesting sites and the time demands of the commercial fishery (*Saygyooks* Martha Lewis, 18.06.2005, p.12).

In the 1940s – the decade in which diabetes was first recorded in Aboriginal populations in Canada – through the 1960s, the ratio of own foods to store-bought foods in household diets began to change. Elder *Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown (now in his 80s) says of his early years:

Oh, I was part of the change. I was born in '35, and there was quite a change there then. We bought most of our food from the grocery store... the sugar was very in demand then, flour, potatoes, rice ... That was the main thing in our way of life, was sugar, flour, tea, and the rest were all seasonal food. [*Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown, 22.07.2005 35:40, p.6]

Ernie Bolton, a fisherman in his 50s, reported that all he consumed as a child in the 1950s and early 60s were his own foods, only eating store-bought meats once or twice a month as a treat: “Back then we can’t afford to buy store food. So we had to rely on our own.” However, this changed when he started working for cash at the age of 16. Even though store-bought foods had to be shipped in from Prince Rupert, Ernie found that they were “easier,” that procuring them fit better with his work schedule: “Basically I guess most of us are like that at my age group, ever since we started working we depend on store bought groceries.” (Ernie Bolton, 08.06.2005, p.3). In part because he learned to cook during the years in which store-bought foods became important for him, they still constitute the majority of his family’s foods today.

Through the 1960s, families based in the village who relied on seasonal fishing and trapping for income still only purchased store-bought foods twice a year (Cliff White, 14.07.2005, p.20). But participants who were children during these decades recall sugar having a prominent place in their diets; this included its incorporation into traditional dishes,¹² the invention of new dishes,¹³ and having candies as snacks. Even the practice of drying berries into cakes in the traditional, labour-intensive manner (free of refined sugar) was replaced almost completely by the sugar-based jarring process (*Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.13).

By the 1950s, technological advances allowed the fishery to be harvested at rates unmatched even by the prosperous pre-colonial fishery, and its state of collapse was undeniable. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO)¹⁴ responded to these pressures by closing many areas to commercial drag seining¹⁵ – a practice that had fit well with the Gitxaala seasonal round – in 1964. For community elder *Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown, this meant 1964 was the last summer spent out at fish camp, where his family could harvest a variety of their own foods while he drag seined commercially; they then moved back to the village full time. It spelled the decline of community-wide relocation to family camps for the large-scale production of Gitxaala people's own foods.

In 1968, the DFO implemented the Davis Plan,¹⁶ reducing the number of salmon licenses in British Columbia. The resulting rises in license prices made it increasingly hard for small-scale fishermen to enter the fishery independently, exacerbating dependence on the canneries. As fishing technology became increasingly expensive, many fishermen bought everything with credit from the fish processors and canneries (Sam Lewis, 15.06.2005, p.7); this was especially true for First Nations fishermen who could obtain no loans against reserve land. Those who missed payments due to a bad season often had to give up their boats, their licenses, and their livelihoods (Sam Lewis, 15.06.2005, p.10).

Then, advances in refrigeration and freezing created a way to get fresh fish to market – dealing a final blow to the canneries and resulting in massive unemployment in the region. Gitxaala went from being a community in which residents owned 13

12 Such as: dipping salmon berry shoots (*ooyl*) in sugar; including it in a recipe for the leafy green *klux'otsmgyet* or cow parsnip (see Agnes Shaw, 04.07.2005, p.13); and including it in the traditional desert of salmon berries and oolichan (sometimes spelled eulachon) grease.

13 Such as: sugar dumpling soup (brown sugar wrapped in dough and boiled in water) which was sometimes served for dinner (Ken Innes, 05.06.2005 12:10, p.5); and cored apples filled with brown sugar and baked.

14 A federal Canadian regulatory body.

15 Drag seining involves dragging a net out from the beach using a boat and winching back to the beach. This technique, usually carried out at traditional title-held harvesting sites, was complimentary to families' other harvesting activities in camp. When it was banned, families had to assure their income by other means (such as work in the cannery) that did not enable them to also participate in their traditional economies.

16 See Newell (1993:148-180) for a comprehensive look at the Davis Plan and its implications for First Nation fishing communities.

drag seining licenses (Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 20.07.2005, p.100) and many gill-netters (Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, p.25), and there was 100 percent (seasonal) employment to one in which few people have a job or ready access to a boat with an outboard motor. The means of large-scale, commercial food production had been wrenched out of Gitxaala hands.

When Gitxaala residents had initially involved themselves in colonial economies, they had been able to integrate new colonial foods into their own diet. Purchasing sugar, flour, potatoes, and other goods presented a method of procuring, preserving, and preparing food that fit well with the new blend of traditional economy and wage labour activities in Gitxaala; many of the foods resulting from these various income and food sources are considered “traditional” today. However, as people became increasingly distanced from traditional means and places of production, involvement in wage labour turned into reliance, and the means of production shifted into colonial hands. These changes increased the importance of store-bought products: at first they became essential to the efficient preparation of traditional foods, and now, despite Gitxaala residents’ continued reliance on their own foods and the economic hardship in which many of them live, store-bought foods supply the bulk of the diet in many households.

In these circumstances, to call foods “our own” can be unpacked as a re-assertion of Gitxaala people’s reduced but tenacious independence from the colonial economies that have entangled them, undermined their traditional economies, marginalized them, and generated the food insecurity which is so directly and negatively impacting their health. The term “own foods” is a clue to the connection between ownership of the means of production, community level food security, and health.

Resource Ownership: Gitxaala’s Own Foods, Gitxaala’s Own Resources

Gitxaala people have an ancient and venerable set of *ayaarwk* (laws) that regulate access to and responsibility for food resources, formalizing a deep and meaningful connection with food and food production. The *ayaarwk* provide a set of guidelines for proper behaviour towards resources, including how much may be taken, when, and with whom it must be shared (these guidelines were referenced by almost every participant when interviewed for a parallel research project about the effects of climate change on resources; for example, see *Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill 05.07.2005). The *ayaarwk* also delineate the rights and responsibilities of a *walp* (house, or extended family) or a hereditary name¹⁷ to a particular resource (Darling 1955; Garfield 1939:174).

The traditional Gitxaala idea of “ownership” centres on the concepts of access and responsibility, allows for overlapping territories, and is maintained through activity

17 In the Tsimshian tradition, a person is given to a name, rather than the other way around; see Garfield (1939, p.192, pp.221-229) for an analysis of naming practices and the legalities surround them. See Menzies and Butler (2008) for a discussion of the harvesting practices associated with the Walp.

and recital of rights at public gatherings rather than written documentation. The colonial system of ownership did not recognize the *ayaaawk* or any of the rights laid out therein. Gitxaala people have been divested of much of their traditional rights of access to food resources by colonial restrictions and the wholesale redistribution of their lands to settlers – to say nothing of the industrial and environmental changes that have devastated those resources to which they do retain access. Hunting territories, traplines, forest food resources, and shellfish harvesting camps have all been infringed upon, but perhaps the most compelling example of the demise of a traditional food resource is the colonial appropriation of the fishery.

After Confederation, federal and provincial laws began to redraw the map of access rights and recast the legalities surrounding fishing, oblivious to pre-existing *ayaaawk*. In 1888, the Canadian government decreed that “Indians shall, at all times, have the liberty to fish ... for the purpose of providing food for themselves, but not for sale, barter or traffic, or by any means other than with drift nets, or spearing” (as in Sharma 1998:35). In one move, the state outlawed the main Gitxaala methods of harvesting salmon and the underpinning of their economic prosperity.¹⁸

Gitxaala people’s main fishing technologies were outlawed: – the drag seine, weir¹⁹ and trap, all used in rivers and at creek mouths – were banned (Newell 1993:49-51) with the side effect of dismantling a critical forum for transmitting traditional ecological and food knowledge. The need to acquire and learn new technologies was costly and destabilized community-level food security. Forcing Gitxaala people out of the creek and into the boat distanced them from the places in which salmon spawn, dismantling an important forum for the transmission of knowledge about resource stewardship and harvesting.

By making the “Indian” right to fish for food separate from a license to engage in the commercial fishery, the state created a food fishery, an artifice used to keep subsistence activities under tight colonial control.²⁰ In 1894, Aboriginal fishermen were required to obtain permits for the food fishery, and by 1910, the colonial government began to impose regular closures on the food fishery (Sharma 1998:35). The DFO has since continued to restrict Gitxaala people’s access to their own foods. Fishing

18 The significance of this economy is often underestimated, but the oral, ethnographic, historical and archeological records leave no doubt about the wealth that Gitxaala accumulated through trade (Garfield 1939; *Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005) and the distance their surplus traveled inland and along the Pacific Rim (*Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005[1], p.3, p.26). These traditional economies of exchange are based on familial ties and long-term relationships rather than short-term gain.

19 See Langdon 2006.

20 Sharma (1998) argues that the food fishery was created “to accord the commercial fishery priority and ensure that Aboriginal communities were able to feed themselves lest they become a burden on the public purse” (1998:29). Harris (2004) equates the food fishery to the reserve system in that the colonial government set aside a fraction of the original resource in order to commercialize the rest (155); he further argues that the DFO has since done all it can to block aboriginal fishermen from accessing the food fishery (158-176).

at creek mouths and the catch of certain species of fish (such as steelhead salmon) are both illegal, certain areas are closed to cod fishing (Keith Lewis, 15.06.2005; *Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005, p.12), and there is a complete ban on picking abalone (for example, see Cliff White, 14.07.2005, p.2; see also Menzies 2010). Some scholars argue that the DFO had been deliberately dismantling the Aboriginal fishery in favour of the commercial fishery.²¹

By outlawing many of the traditional means of production and markets of exchange that made Gitxaala wealthy, the colonial state forced Gitxaala fishermen to participate in the commercial fishery if they wished to continue exchanging their fish for other goods. At the same time, the state-controlled commercial fishery – the main industry in Gitxaala territory – has continually marginalized First Nations enterprise, ensuring Aboriginal labour power for the settler enterprises instead. Gitxaala fishermen became even more reliant on loans provided by commercial fish processors than did non-native fishermen, making them feel most keenly the collapse of local canneries and processors and, ultimately, the collapse of the fishery.

The artificial distinction between the food and commercial fisheries is a cause of economic tension at the community level.²² Reliance on mechanized boats for fishing concentrates the ability, and responsibility, to harvest food fish among those few villagers who have managed to retain their boats despite the collapse of the fishery. Because the same boats are used for both the commercial and food fisheries, the food fishery sometimes suffers on those occasions that the commercial fishery is open, forcing the community's need for food fish into competition with individual fishermen's need for capital gain (Julia McKay, 16.07.2005, p.19).

Food security in Gitxaala has also been undermined by a dramatic restructuring of the commercial fishery. In the 1980s and '90s, the DFO attempted to reduce the pressures on the fishery and reduce the number of fishing licenses by implementing a buy-back program. Many Gitxaala fishermen accepted the DFO's offer to "buy back" their small-scale licenses and their boats due to the increasing expenses associated with fishing²³ and the decreasing number of fish.²⁴ Reliance on Social Assistance skyrocketed and Gitxaala people's ability to access their own foods by boat

21 See Harris 2004:177-213; Sharma 1998:52-54; Newell 1993; and Menzies and Butler 2008 for a more complete discussion.

22 It also provides fertile ground for tension between Aboriginal and non-native fishing communities; see for example Coates 2000, or Menzies 1994.

23 It can cost over \$500 to fill up a gill-netter (Sam Lewis, 15.06.2005, p.10), or nearly \$300 to fill up a motor-boat (Ken Innes 05.06.2005, p.17). This is next to impossible on Social Assistance, which barely covers the basic cost of living (Tim Innes, 03.07.2005, p.20).

24 Menzies and Butler 2007.

was greatly diminished.²⁵ Project participants judge the current lack of boats in the community to be one of their biggest barriers to traditional resource access. In the end, the DFO conglomerated the small-scale licenses and sold them to international companies running massive operations farther offshore.

The DFO cast its buy-back programs and its policy restrictions on space, time, species, and technologies as measures to ensure stable fish stocks, but these policies are often at odds with the *ayawwk* and Gitxaala people do not see them as beneficial to the resources. Rather, Gitxaala people have experienced an alarming decline not just in their access to resources but in the resources themselves since these policies have been implemented. Gitxaala residents make direct links between the conglomeration of fishing licenses after the buy-back programs and the collapse of salmon stock,²⁶ which came to a record low in 2009.

In a pattern all too familiar to Gitxaala fishermen, the commercialization of one species after another has resulted in a disheartening series of collapses. While most DFO and non-native scientists pinpoint the beginning of the fishery collapse to a time between the 1950s and the 1980s, Gitxaala fishermen have had a much longer timeframe in which to establish a base line, and they track the collapse to the beginning of commercialization. Elder *Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown elaborates:

Ayawwk, which is law... in Gitxaala we're not allowed to take lots. We just take enough for our food, to survive. We're told to take just what we need. And then some of the things are so commercialized now, that's the beginning of the troubles we have, it was commercialization. Abalone is a really good example of that because it's been commercialized, now it's gone. [Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 20.07.2005, p.8]

More than one participant suggested to me that nowadays, putting in enough hours or making enough money to qualify for EI was the only secure financial benefit to be gained by working in the failing fishery (for example, see Sam Lewis 15.06.2005, pp.7-8). While all fishermen have felt the effects of collapse, First Nations communities are disproportionately affected due to a series of policies that stretch far beyond the fishery and that have undermined First Nations' cultural as well as economic independence.

The division of the fishery into food and commercial fisheries, the ever-increasing restrictions on the food fishery, the marginalization of First Nations within the commercial fishery, its restructuring, and the dramatic decline of critical resources

²⁵ A motorized boat is necessary for many harvesting activities including line-fishing, shellfish harvesting, and deer and seal hunting, and has become increasingly critical as local resources thin out and harvesters must travel farther afield to access their own foods. A boat is also useful for transportation to Prince Rupert for access to store-bought foods and health services.

²⁶ Salmon spend between 1.5 and 4.5 years in the deep ocean, where they are prey to large offshore fishing operations, before returning to the creek in which they hatched in order to spawn.

have all seriously impacted the community of Gitxaala's access to its own foods. The colonial government has appropriated Gitxaala resources for its own enrichment – to Gitxaala's great disadvantage. Many settlers who live and work within this system have been sadly miseducated about how it has profited them at the expense of others.

In calling these foods “our own,” Gitxaala people remind us that they have never lost a war, signed a treaty, or transferred the rights to these resources to anyone else. They remind us that these food resources do not rightfully belong to the Crown but belong inherently to Gitxaala people. To say “our own foods” is to make a powerful, political ownership about food resources, and reclaim them from disenfranchisement.

Belonging: Own Foods as Gitxaala Identity

In Gitxaala, the consumption of own foods is understood to contribute not only to an individual's physical health, but also to the health of one's identity as Gitxaala. Own foods are a building block of identity, as are family, tribe, nation, and attachment to the land and seascapes that make up Gitxaala territory. In the past, each of the foods served at a feast represented the territory in which it was collected,²⁷ reminding the guests of the hosts' lineage and the territories attached to it (Garfield 1939:213; Darling 1955:12). These are resources with which Gitxaala people have shared a history stretching back to time immemorial, resources which sustained them and contributed to their wealth and political importance in the region. These are resources that define Gitxaala people.

In Gitxaala, own foods and food practices embody not just lineage but the values at the core of what it means to be Gitxaala. Elder *Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown provides an example:

On my first [deer] kill for food, my mother's relation would thank my dad's tribal house for providing me [by distributing dry goods and our own foods to them]. That was the law; I don't think they do it anymore. They call it dzidzups'k which, translating, is to go build up a person's status. [Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.9]

Part of the colonial enterprise is the assimilation of colonized peoples; food knowledge, practices, and preferences in Gitxaala – and the values they embody – were not exempt from this undertaking. While Gitxaala people entered the 20th century rich in food-related values and knowledge, and with a strong preference for their own foods, assimilationist programs such as food assistance, residential school and foster care undercut these and many other aspects of their culture.

²⁷ The community continues to use feasting to mark important public events, although some of the formalities around the foods eaten have changed.

Flour and sugar²⁸ feature significantly in the diet supplied by the colonial state, in sharp contrast to the prominence of fish and meat in the traditional diet. In the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, many First Nations on the North Coast (and indeed, across Canada) were requesting assistance from the Department of Indian Affairs; in Gitxaala, residents struggled in these decades as access to their trap lines and fisheries – the main industries that provided economic independence – were drastically restricted. Rather than change policies to enable the harvesting of traditional foods, the Canadian state supplied processed colonial foods. Kelm (1998) reports that in 1928, relief rations for an adult for one month were “twenty-four pounds of unenriched flour, two pounds of sugar, one pound each of baking powder, salt, and tea, in addition to however much beef, pork, fish, bacon, or beans \$2.00 could buy, and \$1.20 worth each of lard, rice, molasses and macaroni” (34).

More than any other policies or programs, project participants referred to the residential school²⁹ and foster care³⁰ systems to explain the difficulties in their relationships with their own foods, with traditional food knowledge, with their community, with their bodies, and with diabetes. A significant number of people who are adults today were removed from Gitxaala as children, and every single participant interviewed about diabetes spoke about residential school, whether or not they had attended it. At times moving, often painful, participants’ narratives made clear and powerful links between these sufferings and the community’s current health status.

Residential schools were a direct attempt by the colonial state to assimilate Aboriginal children into “Canadian” society (*Txa-la-laatk* Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005(1), p.31). They imposed Euro-Canadian ideas about “proper” food; most forbade traditional foods.³¹ Potatoes, gruels, breads, and biscuits³² provided the bulk of the impoverished diet; meats and fruits in good condition were rare (Gilbert Hill,

28 Both white, ‘refined’ products resonate with Christian ideas of purity; both are now linked to diabetes.

29 Beginning in the 1870’s, it became Canadian Federal policy to send Aboriginal children to residential schools – run by the churches – so they could become literate, numerate, ‘hygienic,’ and ‘civilized.’ Some were sent by their families who wanted them to be educated, and some were forcibly removed from their communities by Indian Agents. Children were often contractually obliged to remain for a certain period of time despite the physical, emotional and sexual abuses suffered by many. Attempts to run away were punished severely. The Canadian government ceased this partnership with religious organizations in 1969, and most residential schools were finally closed in the mid-1970s (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2004). The Canadian state only officially acknowledged the harm this policy has inflicted on Aboriginal individuals and communities in a 2008 apology, and the more recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

30 As traumatized young people emerged from residential school with few positive parenting experiences of their own and began to have families, the state frequently deemed them unfit for parenthood. Rather than recognize the culturally accepted practice of adoption within the extended family, or try to place them within their communities and cultures, the state removed many children from Gitxaala and from other Aboriginal communities in Canada and placed them in Euro-Canadian communities. This practice is sometimes referred to as “the 60s scoop.”

31 Children were also forbidden to speak their own languages or practice any of their own cultural or religious traditions (Grant 1996; Canada’s Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996).

32 All starchy carbohydrates; all linked to diabetes.

14.07.2005, p.28; Kelm, 1998:71-73; Campbell 2003:119). In addition, nutrition was insufficient in some residential schools and absolutely unfit in others (Gilbert Hill, 14.07.2005, p.28), resulting in both immediate and long-term illnesses. Hunger and being forced to eat rotten foods were only some of the abuses suffered by aboriginal children in residential schools.³³ The body was experienced as a source of pain and shame. Dissociation from the body and from food – so much a part of many people's residential school experience – is still making itself felt in Aboriginal communities today.

The residential school experience was expressly designed to interrupt the transmission of traditional knowledge and values by physically removing children from their families, communities, and territories. Rather than learning to harvest their own foods, students did agricultural work, which sometimes went to supplying the school's coffers rather than its larder (Kelm 1998:71).

Traditional food knowledge, like all forms of ecological knowledge, is best acquired by 'doing' (Menzies 2006); its transmission therefore requires an appropriate forum for experiential learning and continued practice with skilled experts. Separated from these forums and their teachers, many project participants carried their traditional knowledge like a slow match³⁴ through their residential school, foster, and urban experiences. Participants now in their 50s or older who were sent to residential school described long periods after leaving school during which their traditional knowledge and values were submerged under self-damaging behaviours in an attempt to numb the pain of their experiences. They were proud to rekindle their harvesting knowledge once they had chosen to begin their healing or had returned to Gitxaala.

Tim Innes argues that the effects of being removed from the community continue to undermine the transmission of traditional knowledge and values, not only in his own life, but in the community as a whole:

I guess the reason why all this information [i.e. traditional food knowledge] is not shared, cuz ah, the older, older people, became not to trust, trust us. Like I said there's, I'm not too sure how many in the community went to residential school, and that's where we lost our culture. [Tim Innes, 03.07.2005, p.7]

Our values are different, today, the young generation, they have no values. None. We didn't teach 'em. I didn't, cuz I didn't know. I wasn't taught that... And it created a big cavity. I had to confront the truth in order for me to step out. I went to two residential schools. And that's an important part in what you're doing [i.e.

33 Refer to Grant (1996), or Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996, vol 1, part 2, section 10) for a review of the conditions in residential schools and the abuses many aboriginal children experienced there.

34 A slow match is a piece of cork or bark that smoulders during a long voyage and is used to ignite a fire at a new location (Gottesfeld 1992).

the research project] for us people that went to residential school, to acknowledge that. [Tim Innes, 03.07.2005, p.7]

Many project participants deplored the erosion of traditional values, such as the *aya'wkw* of *dzidzups'k* ("building up status") as described by *Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax* Allan Brown at the beginning of this section, and the way in which cash has also encroached on the traditional value of food sharing. Ernie Bolton explains:

EB: Yeah, you pretty much have to buy it these days you know, anything you get now, the young people as soon as they get something they sell it to you. I think that's our problem now, everything with money.

RA: Whereas before maybe...?

EB: Whereas before we always shared... anything that can be picked we always had to give to someone that don't have a boat or couldn't get out on their own... I've heard so much about those young people now that they, they sell it to [their elders]. And I feel really bad, like, when I hear. Not only elders but to some young people that can't go out, their own brother, sister, they have to buy it. And it's really sad to hear. [Ernie Bolton, 08.06.2005, p.19]

There are also young people in the community who ignore tradition and marry inside their tribe, or who partake in marijuana or alcohol. They are perceived by others as marginalizing themselves within the community, and they have the most difficulty of anyone in Gitxaala in accessing their own foods. These young people, many of whom have young families, are less likely to be gifted food, are less likely to be invited out on others' boats, and have fewer opportunities to learn by doing. Their lack of traditional knowledge and lack of engagement in the reciprocal cashless economy surrounding the sharing of own foods compounds their marginalization. These disaffected youth struggle with their Gitxaala identity, and their relationship with it is discussed and debated in the community.

Many participants stressed the urgency of conveying traditional food knowledge and values to the community's youth. Rather than being framed in terms of a fear of losing the knowledge "before it was too late," it was expressed as a fear of losing the youth (Tim Innes, 03.07.2005, p.7). Participants expressed concerns that the youth would not know who they were without their identity being placed in the context of food harvesting and preservation knowledge (for example, see Butch McKay, 11.07.2005, p.42).

The strong connection between foods, values, and Gitxaala identity has been continually undermined by the introduction of colonial foods. The residential school and foster experiences wrenched many Gitxaala children away from their families,

their foods, and the knowledge, practices and values embodied in their own foods, leaving deep scars on the Gitxaala identity.

For Gitxaala people to reassert that own foods are their own, just as their families or tribes are their own, is to reclaim these foods and the resources that produce them as building blocks of Gitxaala identity. It is to reassert that the knowledge and values embodied in their own foods continue to be important to “being Gitxaala.”

Own Foods, Decolonization, and Healing

Many participants talked about how their own foods were contributing to healing for themselves and their community. The most obvious examples are the participants who were successfully managing their diabetes by incorporating more of their own foods into their diet, in tandem with reducing sugar intake.³⁵

Own foods are also healing Gitxaala socially and spiritually. Some participants spoke of the steps they were taking to redefine their relationships with both food and community. They are going out to family camp sites to harvest their own foods, sharing foods they have harvested with other community members, teaching others to harvest and preserve their own foods, talking to their children about Gitxaala values and traditions by talking about food, eating together as a family, having guests over for meals, and getting the whole community together for celebratory feasts and occasions such as weddings.

Gilbert Hill, a project participant who had been marginalized in the community in his youth due to his alcohol and drug use, talked about how sharing his own food contributed to his social healing:

When I first used my smoke house last year I had over 40 sockeye in there and they were all ready. We were [taking the fish] home with a wheelbarrow... My wife said to me this is the first fish we smoked in our smokehouse she says, what do you think we should do? I said what do you mean? She says I think that since it's your first one, you should give it out, to the people. I thought okay lets go, I'll push the wheelbarrow and you walk around and tell me where we're going to go, who you're going to give the fish to. We walked around the whole community giving fish away to mostly the elders and people who can't get out in boats. We got home, we were talking, we were happy, we didn't even get to keep one fish for our meal I said. I looked at her and she looked at me and we smiled. Now we'll wait until next time. And you know it really works what we do because... it all came back to us. People are always offering me fish now. [Gilbert Hill, 14.07.2005.]

35 See Arora and McFarlane (2005) for the benefits of a low carbohydrate diet in managing diabetes; see Accurso et al. (2008) for the importance of increasing fat when decreasing carbohydrates. See also the documentary film “My Big, Fat Diet” about Dr. Jay Wortman’s work with the Namgis First Nation in Alert Bay, B.C., which chronicles the success of a community-wide return to a high fat, low carbohydrate diet in managing diabetes (Bissel 2008).

Gilbert Hill's story encapsulates how the production and consumption of own foods contributes not only to an individual's physical health, but also to the health of one's identity as Gitxaała, and thereby to the community's health. Gilbert's act of sharing his harvest is an act of decolonization. He is asserting his ownership of and right to harvest these foods, using and sharing the traditional food knowledge available to him, participating in a traditional cashless means of production and exchange, and combating community-level food insecurity – as well as strengthening his Gitxaała identity by honouring the principle behind *dzidzups'k*. All of these were nearly beaten out of him in residential school. Gilbert is both healing and decolonizing, all with his own foods.

Own foods are used to maintain family ties and Gitxaała identity across considerable geographical distance. They are shipped at great expense to Gitxaała relatives in Prince Rupert, Terrace, Vancouver, and beyond; by mapping the distribution of own foods, we are able to map the Gitxaała diaspora. Shipments to those who will be “missing their own foods” are a reminder of belonging and identity and constitute a living tie to the community that many still consider “home” no matter where they are staying.

Gitxaała people are finding new ways to ensure that their youth know their own foods. In the past, youth would have learned these vital skills from their aunts and uncles in fishing and berry-gathering camps and on hunting trips. Today, in the context of year-long residence in the village, outboard motors, and a full school day, youth are sometimes able to access this knowledge through programs in the community center or the Lach Klan School. The community has participated in the creation of localized curricula with Forests and Oceans for the Future (Ignas 2004). Also, children are being taught more and more by their parents who take them out rather than their aunts and uncles as is traditional (Butch McKay 15.06.2005, p.16), reflecting the very gradual shift away from the extended matriline and toward the nuclear family as the primary family unit. While some project participants expressed concern regarding the generally declining role of the family in teaching these skills, other participants were proud to mention community initiatives that took on this role.

As the political, technological and ecological environments continue to change, Gitxaała people will continue to find new ways to formulate and transmit their knowledge about the resources they have relied upon for countless generations. Such knowledge becomes a means to maintaining healthy territories, a healthy community, healthy families, and healthy bodies free of diabetes.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I came to understand own foods as real foods produced by the practice of traditional foodways, foods capable of nourishing and healing. I believe that

much of what Gitxaala people consume today is not really included in their cultural or mental category of “food”; it is produced far away, by a capitalist economy, it is disconnected from any sense of what it means to be Gitxaala, and it is killing them. On a symbolic level, diabetes in Gitxaala is a symptom of the extreme disconnection between Gitxaala people, their bodies, and their foodways – results of colonial, assimilationist, and capitalist enterprises.

Health authorities rooted in Euro-Canadian frameworks of health are urging people in Gitxaala to make healthier “choices.” But the choices they suggest are difficult to come by in Gitxaala and do not necessarily make sense there. They do not line up with Gitxaala’s category of own foods, nor do they account for the historical, economic, and political factors that structure Gitxaala’s access to food. A clearer focus on diabetes reveals not poor choices, but community-level food insecurity engineered by a history of entanglement with colonialism.

True healing must also involve decolonization, and “own foods” is a linguistic clue to the foods that heal. Do the parameters that define own foods – right to access the resource, ownership of the means of production, and embodiment of the values that constitute identity – hold true for the healing foods of other Aboriginal peoples? Do other cultures suffering from diseases of colonization such as diabetes carry other linguistic clues to healing?

Gitxaala people are conducting their own decolonizing experiment, in which the power of own foods is yet to be determined. That the people of Gitxaala continue to harvest, preserve, and distribute their own foods under adverse conditions is testament to the strength of their identity, the richness of their heritage, and their ability to maintain a dynamic and flexible culture.

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