DIABETES IN GITXAAŁA: 
COLONIZATION, ASSIMILATION, AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

by

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ABSTRACT

Diabetes is used as a lens through which to examine colonial processes of dispossession, assimilation, and economic change in the coastal First Nations community of Gitxaala, in BC, Canada. Diabetes is a worldwide epidemic disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples. Social determinants of diabetes in Gitxaala are explored ethnographically, focusing on diet change and food security.

Diet is framed as a 'choice' by government agencies, but economic factors, food availability, and food preferences all delimit the foods consumed in Gitxaala. The importance of traditional foods for subsistence and cultural identity is explored. A history of integrating and then relying upon colonial foods is traced through a history of economic change. Current economic hardship limits both access to nutritious store-bought foods and the harvesting of traditional foods; although many community members prefer traditional foods, starchy processed foods are the most readily available and affordable. Colonial attempts to assimilate taste preferences, including relief rations and residential schools, have had lasting effects. Childhood exposure to traditional foods, or to sugary foods, impacts adult diet and health. Intergenerational attitudes to foods are changing, and Gitxaala youth are consuming an increasing amount of sugary foods.

Access to traditional food resources is impacted by colonial policy, community avenues of food distribution, and traditional ecological knowledge. Expropriation and commercialization of resources, particularly the fishery, have severely impacted access to important resources, contributing to community-level food insecurity. While the practice of selling harvested foods for cash within the community is growing, food distribution along family lines remains critical for household level food security and community health. The transmission of traditional ecological knowledge about food ensures healthy eating in the future. Although this process was interrupted by the residential school experience, the community is initiating new ways to maintain this aspect of Gitxaala identity.

In Gitxaala, health is understood as holistic. Biomedical understandings of and treatments of diabetes are insufficient for true healing, which must also occur on the community and ecological levels. While colonial practices have been detrimental to food security and risk for diabetes in Gitxaala, certain traditional practices maintain healthy eating and contribute to community health.
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This work is dedicated to the people of Gitxaala, past, present, and future.
INTRODUCTION

...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, and again, we're losing that too... I hope you're not offended if I say we're beginning to think like a white person.

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

The question of why people living in Gitxaala suffer a high risk of developing type II diabetes mellitus is easily answered: their diet is too high in sugar. Why they consume so many sugars, however, is a far more complex question. Some of the most nutritious foods in the world are to be found in the waters in Gitxaala territory; this food is an important component of a healthy Gitxaala identity. Eating chips and pop seems, on the surface, a willful disregard of nutrition and tradition alike.

Diet is framed as a ‘choice’ by government agencies, but multiple processes of colonization, both historical and contemporary, are creating barriers to Gitxaala residents’ ability to exercise agency in their diet. First the British and then the Canadian governments have employed policies that have ultimately engineered food insecurity in the community. Gitxaala’s entanglement with - and marginalization within – colonial economies has shaped access to both traditional and store-bought foods. Food preferences have likewise been affected by assimilationist practices. These entanglements have affected the types and proportions of foods consumed in Gitxaala.

Food security in Gitxaala depends upon access to, redistribution of, and transmission of knowledge about its own traditional food resources. Colonial practices have greatly impacted these domains. Policies surrounding the commercialization of resources, particularly the fishery, have drastically affected the community’s access to its traditional foods. Traditional avenues of food distribution, which ensure house-hold level food security for many, are under pressure from economic forces. The colonial state has implemented

1. “Gitxaala” is spelling adopted by the community for their nation; I use it to refer to both the people and the geographical location. The English spelling is “Kitkatla”.

2. I intend “entanglement” in the way used by Donald Moore, to refer to “an inextricable interweave that ensnares; a compromising relationship that challenges while making withdrawal difficult if not impossible” (2005, p.4).
practices expressly designed to interrupt the transmission of traditional food knowledge. The ways in which these traditions are maintained and how they enable access to traditional foods are explored.

A biomedical framework of health is insufficient for understanding diabetes in Gitxaala. A more holistic conception of health, in which the health of the individual body is connected to the health of the family and the territory, is essential for healing diabetes in this community. New and traditional practices that are being mobilized for healing at the family, community, and ecological levels will be examined throughout.

Diabetes is used as a lens through which to examine these broader issues of colonization, attempts at assimilation, and economic change, issues that resonate in indigenous communities across the world. By framing diabetes as a food security issue, we can evaluate the impact of practices – colonial and Gitxaala – as barriers to accessing nutritious foods, or as access enablers.

SITUATING THE RESEARCH

A Geography of Gitxaala

The Gitxaala Nation is one of the Ts’ymseen peoples; the Ts’ymseen share a history, tribal structure, ayaawk (laws), and the Smalgyax language. Gitxaala’s territory stretches from Tgii Xws’aanx (Porcher Island) in the north to Lax Git Giyaaks (Princess Royal Island) in the south. Approximately 450 people live year-round in the present-day village of Lach Klan (on Dolphin Island).

3. Research in Gitxaala was conducted through June and July of 2005, under the auspices of the Forests and Oceans for the Future (FO4tF) research project (directed by Charles Menzies at UBC), and with the guidance of Gitxaala’s Community Health Representative, Dora Moody, and the Health Director, Linda Innes. My research network developed out of the ongoing work of FO4tF and the efforts of community-based researchers Ernie Bolton and Sam Lewis. Sam Lewis acted as my cultural guide, interview coordinator, and translator; his efforts opened many doors to me.

We followed the research protocol developed by Gitxaala and FO4tF (Menzies, 2004). Once approved, the oral documents and transcripts created from interviews are public documents (in the same way that a published article might be); in Gitxaala, they likely have even greater validity. Interviews are cited in the same way as scholarly publications, noting the participant’s name, the date of interview and tape number, and the transcript page on which the quote is found. Thus the notation “Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005[1], p.6” is Matthew Hill’s interview of the 5th of July 2005, tape 1, at p.6 in the transcript. In dialogue, “RA” refers to Robin Anderson, and “SL” refers to Sam Lewis. In the text, words in italics represent words in Smalgyax. In the quotes, words in italics represent translations from Smalgyax. The interviews (both in digital and text format) are property of the individual participant and the Gitxaala Nation and are housed in the Gitxaala Council Office. Quotes and citations have been approved by the participant; if the participant was unavailable, a pseudonym was used.
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 people who live in Gitxaala, it remains the centre of the world. But policies and practices of colonial governments have isolated Gitxaala. It is a 20-minute float-plane ride to Prince Rupert, the nearest town with a supermarket and hospital. It is an hour and a half on the twice-weekly ferry, and two hours at least by boat. The village is located on a reserve, the boundaries of which were drawn by the Canadian government in the late 1880s. Combined with the concentration of Euro-Canadian industry in other locales, these factors have marginalized the community economically. Gitxaala culture continues to adapt to these changing contexts.

EATING, IDENTITY, AND DIABETES

Eating in Gitxaala: Reliance on Traditional Foods

Even now, we call the inlet our grocery store. (Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.1)

Gitxaala relies significantly on its traditional food sources including: salmon, halibut, cod, oolichan, 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, 2005; Adelson, 2005, p.S53) increases the importance of these traditional food sources.

4. See McDonald, 1994 for a parallel example concerning Kitsumkalum.
5. 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 itself free 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, politicized court battles that they seldom loose.
Until the 20th century, the diet was high in proteins provided by fish and meats. The limited set of plant resources increased the significance of each; seaweed and a diversity of berries\textsuperscript{6} 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.\textsuperscript{7} Oolichan and sea mammal greases, rich in non-starchy carbohydrates and other nutrients (Newell, 1993, p.154) were staples, eaten with dried fish, vegetables, or mixed with berries for desert; they are now a special treat.

The cultural and nutritional importance of salmon cannot be over-stated. One participant reported knowing only two families in the entire village who did not eat jarred salmon. Traditional food experts stated that they jarred between 2 and 12 dozen jars of salmon to last them through the winter, in addition to the salmon that was smoked, dried, or frozen. Salmon is so central to the diet that it is simply called ‘fish’.

**Gitxaala Food: Gitxaala Identity**

Every participant stressed the value they placed on their “own foods”. I came to understand “own foods” as wild foods harvested and preserved in the traditional manner, as opposed to store-bought foods or semi-traditional foods such as homemade bread, *eets’m anaay* (a deep fried dough served with syrup), or chow mein made with seal or deer meat (foods which are often referred to as “traditional” within the community).

In Gitxaala, the consumption of own foods is understood to contribute not only to an individual’s physical health, but to the health of one’s identity as *Gitxaala*, and thereby to the community’s health (all three being inseparable in the traditional Gitxaala holistic view of health). The possessive “own” is used to indicate one’s “own” people, that is, family on the mother’s side or one’s tribe\textsuperscript{8} (Garfield, 1939; Dunn, 1984, p.43). These are the people to whom one belongs.\textsuperscript{9} The application of this possessive to a particular category of foods was a strong indicator of the sense of belonging associated with it, and the extent to which food, like family, built up one’s identity. In the past, the foods served at a feast would have each represented the territory in

\textsuperscript{6} See Martindale and Jurakic 2004 for an archeological analysis of the importance of berries in the Ts’ymseen diet and economy. See Turner 1995 for a comprehensive list of berries available in Ts’ymseen territory.

\textsuperscript{7} Wapato, a starchy tuber growing in southernmost BC, may have been traded for (Turner, 1995).

\textsuperscript{8} People in Gitxaala use the word ‘tribe’ to refer to what anthropologists usually call the ‘clan’; in Gitxaala, there are four ‘tribes’: Raven, Eagle, Blackfish (Killer Whale) and Wolf.

\textsuperscript{9} Thus, a father will refer to his children as “his wife’s own children.”
which they were collected, reminding the guests of the hosts’ lineage and the territories attached to it (Garfield, 1939, p.213; Darling, 1955, p.12). Thus, the phrase “own foods” can be interpreted as a statement about the inherent right of Gitxaala people to harvest and consume these foods, a right that constructs Gitxaala identity. Elder Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown reflects on the connection between territory, food, and what it means to be Gitxaala:

I feel so bad, we lost everything about the way Gitxaala people used to be. Gitxaala owned a lot of yupyuup [resource harvesting sites], we don’t do those things now. Right now, just head over to the grocery store to buy our food.

(Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 20.07.2005, p.20)

“Own” is also used more broadly in the colloquial to indicate ownership, such as “my son’s own toy” or “so-and-so’s own boat”. Using the term “own” when referring to foods can be understood as an ownership statement.

“Sugar” Diabetes: What It Means for Gitxaala

Diabetes is recognized as an epidemic in Canada (Young et al., 2000). Currently, over 2.25 million Canadians are estimated to have diabetes, although an estimated 30% of cases remained undiagnosed (Canadian Public Health Agency, 2007). It is the seventh leading cause of death in Canada (Canadian Public Health Agency, 1999), and the rate of type II diabetes is rising drastically among children (Young et al. 2000; Harris, Perkins & Whalen-Brough, 1997). Undocumented in Aboriginal populations in Canada before 1940, diabetes has increased dramatically in the last 15 years (Szathmary, 1994), and now affects Aboriginals at a rate 3 to 5 times higher than non-native Canadians (Young et al. 2000). The disease occurs in pandemic proportions in many indigenous populations world-wide, with the lowest prevalence in the least “developed” communities, and the highest among “modernized” indigenous populations and certain migrant populations (WHO Ad Hoc Diabetes Reporting Group, in Hefferman, 1995, p.264), that is, among populations who are economically marginalized and distanced from their traditional means of food production and consumption. The highest prevalence in the world is among the Pima Indians of Arizona (over 50%; Smith-Morris, 2006, p.189). While the lowest was once among the Inuit (Eaton, 1977, p.53), even they are now consuming more store-bought foods and their risk for diabetes is increasing (Bjerregaard & Young, 1998).
Diabetes mellitus involves a difficulty in absorbing and transforming ingested sugars into energy, resulting in hyperglycemia (Szathmary, 1994, p.458). This debilitating illness is the leading cause of "blindness, kidney problems, nerve damage\(^{10}\) and erectile dysfunction" in Canada, and four out of five people with diabetes will die of heart disease (Canadian Diabetes Association, 2007, web). Complicating risk factors include having high cholesterol, having high blood pressure, or being overweight or obese.

Type II diabetes\(^{11}\) (or non-insulin dependant diabetes mellitus) is the most common in Gitxaala. Five out of 22 project participants reported having type II diabetes or being border-line diabetic. 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 keep up with the sugars ingested, or its inability to absorb insulin into tissue cells (Szathmary, 1994, p.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.

Members of the scientific community debate the complex etiologies of diabetes,\(^{12}\) but they all agree that a diet high in sugar is one of the causes of type II diabetes. The at-risk or diabetic individual must regulate foods which the body quickly converts to glucose, in order to maintain a safe blood sugar level. These include refined sugar, carbohydrates high in starch (a type of sugar) such as rice and potatoes, and processed foods

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10. 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).

11. "Diabetes" actually refers to several different disease mechanisms (Szathmary, 1994) which are grouped into three "types". Type I (insulin-dependant diabetes mellitus, or IDDM) refers to the body’s inability to produce insulin; it usually sets in during 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).

12. 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, & 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 & 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).
derived from refined carbohydrates such as white bread, pasta, and potato chips. The Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA) recommends that individuals “choose” to eat more carbohydrates high in nutrients and fiber, such as vegetables and whole grains. Due to the correlation between obesity and diabetes, the CDA also recommends regular exercise and limiting fat intake, making no distinction between healthy fats (such as oolichan grease) and unhealthy fats (such as lard). Salt, due to its effect on blood pressure, should also be limited.

Those foods the CDA recommends restricting have a prominent place Gitxaala’s store-bought diet, and those it recommends ‘choosing’ are in remarkably short supply. Not surprisingly, community health professionals and residents alike are concerned about diabetes. However, many of the health and life-style ‘choices’ proposed by the CDA are difficult to make in Gitxaala, due to structural factors.

**FOOD “CHOICES”**

Colonial policies and practices have severely curtailed Gitxaala residents’ ability to access healthy foods, constituting an attack on community-level food security. 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 & Bellows, 2003). Making accessible store-bought foods that engender a deadly disease cannot be considered “safe”; making inaccessible nutritious store-bought foods does not constitute “adequate nutrition”; and restricting access to nutritious own foods is not “culturally acceptable” in Gitxaala. Gitxaala’s economic history, from the onset of colonization to the community’s current economic marginalization, is a factor in the proportions of own foods and store-bought foods currently consumed in Gitxaala.

**Colonial Economies, Colonial Foods**

A history of starch and sugar consumption in Gitxaala can be traced through a history of economic change in the region. Foreign and store-bought foods – like colonial economies – have been gradually introduced and integrated into the Gitxaala lifestyle, and have come to be relied upon. Because Gitxaala people
have always been fishermen, the fishery provides an especially salient example of the shift from traditional to colonial economies and foods.

In the early years of Ts'ymseen contact with European traders, the Tysmseen dominated trade and freight industries (McDonald, 1984, p.42-45), and the food supply. The Ts’ymseen expressed disgust at the foods European traders first brought with them (the exception being molasses, a processed sugar), and Europeans were more interested in buying Ts’ymseen foods after months of sea voyage than in selling them their own (Martindale, 2003). As the European presence stabilized in Ts’ymseen territory, so did the presence of their foods. When the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) arrived in 1826 and established permanent trading posts in the region beginning in the 1830s (Garfield, 1939, p.169; Martindale, 2003), Ts’ymseen domination of the fur and freighting industries 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, p.329; this pattern remained in the 1930s; p.199), and began trading them to the HBC once they started producing their own (Martindale, 2003, p.26). Flour, sugar, liquor, and tobacco gained prominence in potlatching ceremonies in the 1800s and early 1900s (Garfield, 1939, p.208, p.249).

The first cannery opened on the Skeena River in 1877, and many others followed. Ties to canneries restricted Ts’ymseen fishermen’s movements over their territories during the commercial season; for their wives, summer cannery work became a sensible alternative to going out in camp (McDonald, 1984, p.48), 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, p.199; Martindale & Jurakic, 2004), women’s engagement in the canneries disproportionately affected this component of the diet and knowledge base. In the early 1900s, when markets were found for species of salmon which run in the early summer through the late fall (Newell, 1993, p.65), fishery and cannery work began to infringe more seriously upon time spent out in camp. However,

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13. Some were built on traditional Ts’ymseen territories and fisheries (Darling, 1995, p.44).
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.\textsuperscript{14}

In the 1920s and 30s, when this project's oldest participants were young, Gitxaala's own foods comprised the bulk of the diet, and much of it was still preserved in the traditional manner. Community leader Txa-la-laatk Matthew Hill reports the late Chester Bolton estimating that 30,000 pieces of fish would have been dried each year for each house, that is, for thirty or forty people 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'l uunax (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 purchase 100 lb 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 (Doris Coombs\textsuperscript{15}, 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), and sugar for preserving fruits (Doris Coombs, 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, Doris Coombs, 04.07.2005, p.4). Baloney and wiener\textsuperscript{16} were the only store-bought meats available at this time (Saygyooks Martha Lewis, 18.06.2005, p.15); their introduction coincided with the onset of clam digging as a source of income (Doris Coombs, 04.07.2005, p.9). The connection between the commercialization of a traditional food source, the shift in labour power from harvesting it for consumption to harvesting it for cash, and its substitution in the diet by a processed, purchased alternative, was established; it continues to this day.

\textsuperscript{14} See Macdonald (1984) for an analysis of Ts'ymseen involvement in the early commercial fishery and its impact on food-gathering.
\textsuperscript{15} A pseudonym.
\textsuperscript{16} Baloney and wiener are both cheap processed meats made from the parts of animals that cannot be sold to a butcher, such as lips, ears and snouts.
Gardening was a good fit with seasonal participation in the wage economy, and was adopted as a method of producing potatoes, cabbages, carrots, radishes, onions, rhubarbs (Txa-la-laatk Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005[3], p.1; or Doris Coombs, 04.07.2005, p.13), and berries such as raspberries and black currants (Saygyooks Martha Lewis, 17.06.2005, p.18). Elder Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown elaborates:

It was quite normal a long time ago, every family got their own gardens. That's in, when I first remember in the 40s and the 50s, they have gardens all over the place. There’s no gardens anymore. It’d be easier to go buy them now.

(Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.17)

The ratio of own foods to store-bought foods began to change in the 1940s through the 1960s. Elder Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown 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)

Gitxaala people relocated to centres of Euro-Canadian industry as canneries consolidated in the late 1930s and early 1940s; cannery unions and the mechanization of the canning process were transforming fishing and canning into full-year pursuits by the 1950s (Newell, 1993, p.128). These factors distanced Gitxaala 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, p.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). This was the last generation for whom gardening integrated easily into their seasonal cycles (Saygyooks Martha Lewis, 17.06.2005, p.18). 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 58:50, p.13). Although store-bought foods were still purchased only twice a year by families based in the village and relying on seasonal fishing and trapping for income in the 1960s (Paul

17. See Coll Thrush, forthcoming, for a history of the potato on the Northwest coast.
Dickson\textsuperscript{18}, 14.07.2005, p.20), participants who were children during these decades recall sugar having a prominent place in their diets; this included its incorporation into traditional dishes,\textsuperscript{19} the invention of new dishes,\textsuperscript{20} and having candies as snacks.

By the 1950s, technological advances had enabled the fishery to be harvested at rates unmatched even by the prosperous pre-colonial fishery, and its collapse was undeniable. The DFO, which had from the beginning been deliberately dismantling the Aboriginal fishery in favour of the commercial fishery,\textsuperscript{21} responded to these pressures by closing many areas to drag seining\textsuperscript{22} in 1964. For community elder \textit{Lax Skiig Gilaskamax} Allan Brown, this meant 1964 was the last summer spent out at fish camp, were his family could harvest a variety of their own foods while he drag seined commercially; they moved back to the village full time. In 1968, the DFO implemented the Davis Plan,\textsuperscript{23} reducing the number of salmon licenses in British Columbia. The resulting steady rise 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 get no loan 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). Advances in refrigeration and freezing created a market for fresh fish, dealing a final blow to the region's canneries and resulting in massive unemployment. Gitxaala went from being a community in which there were 13 drag seining licenses (\textit{Lax Skiig Gilaskamax} Allan Brown, 20.07.2005, p.100), many people owned gill-netters (\textit{Lax Skiig Gilaskamax} Allan Brown, p.25),  

\begin{enumerate}
\item A pseudonym.
\item Such as: dipping salmon berry shoots (\textit{oil}) in sugar, including it in a recipe for the leafy green \textit{klax'otsmgyet} or cow parsnip (see Doris Coombs, 04.07.2005, p.13), and including it in the traditional desert of salmon berries and oolichan grease.
\item Such as: sugar dumpling soup (brown sugar wrapped in dough and boiled in water) which was sometimes served for dinner (Gary McNeil 05.06.2005 12:10, p.5); and cored apples filled with brown sugar and baked.
\item See Harris, 2004, pp.177-213; Sharma, 1998, pp.52-54; Newell, 1993; and Butler & Menzies, n.d.) for a more complete discussion.
\item A net is dragged out from the beach using a boat and winched back to the beach. This technique, usually carried out at traditional title-held harvesting sites, was complimentary to families' other harvesting activities. 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 participate in their traditional economies.
\item See Newell (1993, pp.148-180) for a comprehensive look at the Plan and its implications for First Nation fishing communities.
\end{enumerate}
and there was 100% (seasonal) employment (Butler & Menzies (n.d.) to one in which few people have a job or ready access to a boat with an outboard motor.

As Gitxaala residents involved themselves in colonial economies, they were able to integrate new colonial foods into their traditional diet. Purchasing sugar, flour, potatoes, and other goods presented a method of procuring, preserving, and preparing food that fit well with Gitxaala's economic activities. As involvement in wage labour turned into reliance and people became distanced from traditional means and places of production, store-bought products became essential to the efficient preparation of traditional foods. While Gitxaala residents still rely heavily on their own foods, store-bought foods now supply the bulk of the diet in many households.

**Barrier to Access: Economic Hardship**

Economic hardship contributes to food insecurity, and thereby to diabetes, in two primary ways: by restricting Gitxaala residents' access to the hunting and fishing equipment necessary to harvest their own foods, and by making a balanced store-bought diet inaccessible.

The colonial state has outlawed many of the traditional means of production and markets of exchange that made Gitxaala wealthy, forcing Gitxaala fishermen to participate in the commercial fishery if they wish to continue exchanging their fish for other goods (see the section on Fisheries Regulations for further discussion). From the inception of the commercial fishery – the main industry in Gitxaala territory – the state has purposefully marginalized First Nations within it, ensuring Aboriginal labour power for the settler enterprises it favoured. Policies have undermined the community's economic independence, making Gitxaala fishermen even more reliant on the fish processors than non-native fishermen, and making them feel most keenly the results of fishery's restructuring and collapse.
Social Assistance has been known in the community since the 1960s; reliance on it has increased dramatically since the DFO’s license buy-back programs of the 1980s and 1990s. Between 75% and 85% of Gitxaala residents are currently on some form of social assistance, not including those who qualify for Employment Insurance (EI) due to their work in the fisheries. A single adult receives $225 per month from Social Assistance (Sam Lewis, 15.06.2005, p.9), or a minimum of $500 on EI. The only steady employer in the village is the Council Office, so many of those seeking paid employment are forced to leave their homes and families. Few Gitxaala youth graduate from high-school to become eligible for work at the Council Office; others must look for work outside of the community. In addition, many Gitxaala residents start their families by the age of 20. All of these factors contribute to economic hardship in the community.

Economic hardship severely restricts access to own foods. People are unable to harvest sufficient resources for their households when they do not have gas money for the boat (Wahtibu Mary Hill, 23.07.2005, p.31). One participant reported that it can cost over $500 to fill up a gill-netter (Sam Lewis, 15.06.2005, p.10), and another reported that it cost him $297 (Gary McNeil, 05.06.2005, p.17) to fill up his motor-boat. This is next to impossible on Social Assistance (Tim Innes, 03.07.2005, p.20). Participants also judged the lack of boats to be a major barrier to traditional resource access. Many community members sold their boats under the government’s buy-back program, and the ensuing economic difficulties have made it difficult to maintain, let alone augment, the community’s fleet.

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24. In order to scale down the fleet, the DFO offered to ‘buy back’ small scale fishermen’s licenses and boats. Many Gitxaala fishermen accepted due to the increasing expenses associated with fishing and the decreasing number of fish. See Butler & Menzies, n.d.
25. More than one participant suggested to me that ‘getting your hours’ 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). Now, a fisherman must make a specific amount of money to get their EI.
26. This number depends on their income during fishing season.
27. The Lach Klan School goes up to Grade 10. Only a handful of Gitxaala students move to Prince Rupert to complete Grades 11 and 12; those that do are faced with the difficulties of being away from their families at a young age.
28. For how this contributes to their poverty, see Rich McNeil (a pseudonym; 03.07.2005, p.19).
30. A speedboat is necessary for many harvesting activities including line-fishing, shellfish harvesting, and deer and seal hunting. It is also useful for transportation to Prince Rupert for access to store-bought foods and health services.
Dora Moody, the Community Health Representative, stated that families who were economically marginalized within the village had a hard time accessing the equipment that would facilitate harvesting and traditional knowledge transmission (20.06.2005, pp.6-7). Dora Moody makes the link between the collapse of the commercial fishery, the shift in diet, and a lack of boats as a barrier to accessing traditional foods:

I think part of it is the economy. Lack of people going out on the boat, there's a lack of boats, I think before almost every family had a speed boat that they could go and gather their food with, but now there's not many people that have a speed boat, there's maybe ten, if that... we don't have many people that can have access to their traditional foods. So with that too we lost the people that know how to teach them, how to even gather it or prepare it once they have it.

(Dora Moody, 20.06.2005, p.3)

This is a major change from the days recalled by elder Lax Skiiq Gilaskamax Allan Brown, in which his ancestors built their own seine boats (20.07.2005, p.26).

Economic hardship, combined with the geographic distance of grocery stores from Gitxaala, makes it difficult to supplement the traditional diet with nutritious store-bought foods. Prices for groceries in Prince Rupert are high compared to urban centers such as Vancouver due to transportation costs; purchases must then be shipped to Gitxaala at 33 cents per pound by plane, and 25 cents per pound on the ferry that runs twice a week.

The high cost of purchasing and freighting vegetables and fruit – recommended as a healthy "choice" by the CDA – is prohibitive. Bobby Morrison31, who grew up in Port Simpson, compares that village's access to fresh goods with Gitxaala's:

RA: Do you find it hard to get vegetables around here?
BM: Too hard! At the moment we gotta pay for freight to get it out here.
RA: Is it the same in Port Simpson?
BM: No, it's not hard there cuz they got more stores there. It's a bigger village than here, and they probably got about 5 or 6 stores. They got a ferry, they got a road there that goes into the village, so... everyday you can get it fresh.

(Bobby Morrison, 11.07.2006, pp.34-35)

31. A pseudonym.
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 in their dishes. These vegetables have also been selected for their hardiness; lettuce rots within three days in the sea air climate. Some family-owned stores in Gitxaala reported experimenting with importing fresh produce but quickly abandoned these schemes due to lack of demand (perhaps related to the high price they had to charge) and the inability of produce to withstand the humidity.

Candy bars, chips, and pop are the only goods sold in Gitxaala at the same price as in town. Packaged, processed foods high in starches and sugars, such as Kraft Diner, pastas, and rice, are light to transport, easy to store in the sea air climate, and can feed a large family inexpensively. Paul Dickson, a community leader, describes how his diet changed when he moved back to the community several years ago:

I was thinking why am I gaining weight... I started watching what I was eating and there was a lot of sugar in the diet. But by just cutting out the sugars I was able to regulate my weight back to where it was. But I found that when I came out here I was eating a lot more sugar content, basically packaged stuff, it did have an effect.

(Paul Dickson, 14.07.2005, p.30)

Gitxaala residents’ ability to “choose” a healthy snack or meal is heavily curtailed by economic factors. The foods from which Gitxaala residents are able to ‘choose’ a snack or meal are already determined to a large degree by the community’s economic position, which is compounded by its geographical marginalization within the Canadian system.

Portions and Proportions

Because “own foods” are nutritious compared to the high-starch, high-sugar store-bought foods available in Gitxaala, the proportion of store-bought to traditional foods consumed is significant for an individual’s diabetic risk. Portion sizes are important because obesity is a risk-factor for diabetes. The factors which dictate the proportion of own foods to store-bought foods consumed in a household, and the portions of different foods consumed in a meal, are complex.

Participants raised on a traditional diet were the most likely to place their own foods at the center of their current diets; these same participants firmly asserted that their children were being raised on their own
foods. Most elders interviewed maintained a high ratio of their own foods in their diet despite their inability to harvest it themselves. Elder Doris Coombs, now 92, relates her dietary habits as follows:

SL: *Throughout the week, how many times do you have T'kumsiwah (Euro-Canadian) food, like chicken, or anything like that?*

DC: Just once, once a week.

SL: *Is it all traditional food other than that, eh?*

DC: I don’t like T’kumsiwah food. When I go to town, Sam, *I just eat a little bit.* I just like our own food.

(Doris Coombs, 04.07.2005, p.16)

There were, however, participants who stated that while their own foods were their “favorite”, store-bought foods constituted the major part of their diet. Reasons cited include: a partner or other family members who were more accustomed to preparing and eating store-bought foods; the ability to purchase store-bought foods due to income; and the inability to harvest own foods due to engagement in wage labour, a lack of boating and hunting equipment, or a lack of knowledge about food harvesting.

Just as reliance on store-bought foods has increased with the community’s integration into the cash economy, so it is for individuals and their families. Ernie Bolton, a fisherman in his 50s, reported that all he consumed as a child were his own foods, only eating store-bought meats once or twice a month as a treat. However, this changed when he started working for cash at the age of 16:

Back then we can’t afford to buy store food. So we had to rely on our own… 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)

Even though groceries had to be obtained in Prince Rupert and shipped home, he claimed that store bought foods were “easier”; procuring them seemed to fit better with his work schedule. In part because he learned to cook during the years in which store-bought foods were increasing in importance for him, they still constitute the majority of his and his family’s diet today.

Every participant related that they had bread as their main food for breakfast, usually with coffee (in which most participants reported putting several spoonfuls of sugar); other breakfast foods mentioned were
cereal, porridge and occasionally eggs. There was no mention of fruits or vegetables. While most Canadians will recognize their own breakfast habits in this list (perhaps with the addition of fruits), Doris Coombs describes how significant a change this is from her youth:

SL: When you were a young girl a long time ago, what did you have for breakfast when you’d get up?

DC: It was not like what we eat today, how those people ate a long time ago. Old people. Boiled fish, that’s what they’d have in the morning. And it was seal fat they’d have with it. And I remember, Sam, how they used to go, them people. They’d dry the fish, full dry, and when they’re ready to eat it they’d soak it overnight. They’d salt it overnight in the water. In the morning, they’d boil it, and then they’d put the boiled seal fat with it, along with potatoes. And that was their breakfast, them people, in the mornings, I still remember, and not today for us. Now we have mush (porridge).

(Doris Coombs, 04.07.2005, pp.16-17)

Portion sizes and ratios of different types of foods served at the same meal are also important for an individual’s diabetic risk. Dora Moody, the Community Health Representative, reflects on this aspect of the diet:

I think a lot of the problem here too, is portion sizes. We don’t know the proper portion sizes. Like we try to teach it through the diabetes program, but even though we have that information we still don’t ... eat the way we’re supposed to, like, if we don’t have vegetables for instance we’ll have more rice. I know with fried seaweed people tend to have a lot of rice. I think that rice is a lot more prominent than it was a long time ago.

(Dora Moody, 20.06.2005, p.4)

Vegetables and fruit – traditional or store-bought – consumed in Gitxaala are fractional compared to the fish, meats, and starches. The average Gitxaala dinner plate consists of one half rice and one half fish; onions are sometimes the only vegetable. This reflects the high value placed on meats and fish, but also exposes a high reliance on starchy carbohydrates (such as rice) and a lack of carbohydrates high in fiber (such as vegetables). Combined with large portion sizes, these proportions contribute to a risk for both obesity and diabetes.
Given the inaccessibility of store-bought vegetables, access to traditional vegetables becomes even more important in achieving a nutritious diet. Seaweed and berries of all kinds are heavily relied upon. Salmon berry shoots (oil), a wild celery (pe’ens), and the kelp on which herring roe is dried, are all eaten as snacks. However, the current way of eating oil, pe’ens, and most berries, are all heavily supplemented with sugar. Seaweed is very healthy when consumed boiled (usually served with rice and salmon roe), but it is often served deep-fried which, although delicious, may contribute to high cholesterol.

Active food experts and harvesters who have considerable traditional food knowledge claimed to know little about traditional vegetables, even if they knew something about plants for traditional medicine (Eddie Smith, 02.07.2005, p14). Elders, however, were able to list an astounding variety of their own foods (including some traditional food plants) that were no longer harvested, or no longer prepared in the traditional manner. As these foods, and the knowledge about their harvesting and preparation, are eclipsed by a limited set of store-bought foods, the breadth of tastes and nutrients in Gitxaala’s diet is diminished.

FOOD PREFERENCES

Food preferences are often portrayed as individual preferences and choices. But the tastes to which an individual is repeatedly exposed in the first few months of a whole foods diet (and even in breast-milk) are particularly important in developing food preferences as children (Birch & Fisher, 1998), and food preferences in childhood are strong predictors of food preferences in adulthood (Nicolaus et al., 2004). Canada’s attempt at making colonial foods available — even the focus of the diet — in the past has created acceptance and appreciation of these tastes today. Children’s early exposure to the full diversity of their own foods has been increasingly restricted, limiting their opportunities to develop a preference for these foods. Nevertheless, the taste for certain foods is cultivated throughout a person’s life and can be changed.

32. A community garden project has recently been initiated to address these issues of access to vegetables and fruit.
33. Despite the fact that access to both has been significantly reduced; berry access by logging and the expansion of the village site, and seaweed access by warming weather patterns, limited boat access, and heavy harvesting of sites near the village.
34. A pseudonym.
35. This was in the interview context (seated inside, in front of the recorder). Participants would likely have been able to point out many more edible plants on a walk through the bush.
Barrier to Access: Canadian Attempts at Assimilating Gitxaala Taste Preferences

The colonial state has taken advantage of interactions with aboriginal people's diets in order to assimilate their taste preferences. Ensuring the consumption of colonial foodstuffs was as important to the assimilation agenda as the restructuring of homes and households36 or the imposition of Euro-Canadian ideas of hygiene (see Kelm, 1998).

Flour and sugar37 had prominent places in the diet supplied by the colonial state, compared to the importance that fish and meat have 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 as the fur trade, then the national economy, and then the local canneries, underwent serious decline. Rather than change policies to enable the harvesting of traditional foods, the Canadian state chose to supply 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" (p.34). The exclusion of canned salmon from this list indicates its high commercial value, the capitalist agenda of distancing the worker from their product, and the assimilationist agenda of distancing aboriginal people from their traditional foods. This list also provides a clue as to the origins of some of Gitxaala residents' tastes for certain foods, such as sugar dumpling soup (see footnote 20 above), and baloney.

Residential schools were another forum for the imposition of Euro-Canadian ideas of "proper" food. Potatoes, gruels, breads, and biscuits38 provided the bulk of the impoverished diet; meats and fruits in good condition were rare (Gilbert Hill, 14.07.2005, p.28; Kelm, 1998, p.71-73; Campbell, 2003, p.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

36. This was primarily to dismantle the political structure embodied in the longhouse living arrangement (Darling, 1955).
37. Both white, 'refined' products resonant with Christian ideas of purity; both now linked to diabetes.
38. All starchy carbohydrates; all linked to diabetes.
only some of the abuses suffered by aboriginal children in residential schools. The dissociation from the body and from food that was so much a part of many people's residential school experience is still making itself felt in Aboriginal communities today.

The local school also played a part in introducing Euro-Canadian foods to Gitxaala. Paul Dickson, a community leader, remembers powdered milk and biscuits being served at the local government-run school in the 1960s. Although the biscuits were brought out in barrels and deteriorated in the humidity over the course of the year (Paul Dickson, 14.07.2005, p.17), and although most First Nations people are lactose intolerant, these were considered the proper foods to feed children who were, ostensibly, learning to be “Canadian” at school.

The colonial government took these opportunities to provide Gitxaala people with precisely those foods that it is now trying so hard to convince them are unhealthy.

The Taste for Our Own Foods

Participants’ early food experiences have had very real effects on their eating habits and health status as adults. Many participants, when asked to name their favorite foods, responded with “our own food”. Wahtibuu Mary Hill, in her 50s, is recognized in the community both for her expertise in preserving traditional foods and for her work in teaching these skills to Gitxaala youth. She describes how she was exposed at a very young age to the taste of her own foods:

My Mom told me that she used to make a hammock in between the swings out of a blanket ... and stick us in there when we were babies, and then if we're fussing too much, she'd open up a cockle, and she'd stick a stick in the middle of the cockle, stick it in our mouth [shows that the stick would lie across the mouth], and that was our soother. That way we don't swallow the cockle, just the juices, and we're quiet sucking away and we can't swallow it cuz the stick is across our mouth.


Wahtibuu Mary Hill discusses the effect that early food experiences had on her current eating habits:

39. 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.
Today it’s everything’s sugar. Those days we never had the money to buy stuff so we never ever got into candies or pop, and to this day I’m still like that because of that. Because I never had it. Our treat was an apple and there was like thirteen children so my dad cut them in wedges for all of us to have, that was our treat, apples and oranges!

(Wahtibuu Mary Hill, 23.07.2005; 3:12 – 3:55)

Mary’s early experiences shaped food preferences that outlasted the years she was separated from her community and her own foods.

Those who consumed a lot of sugar as children are also aware of the long-term effects this has had on their taste preferences. Bobby Morrison is a full-time harvester who has married into the village from the neighbouring community of Port Simpson. He was diagnosed with type II diabetes a few years ago, when he collapsed after consuming 24 soft drinks a day at work (11.07.2005, p.24). He discusses his childhood eating habits:

RA: When you were growing up as a kid did you have a lot of sugar in your diet?

BM: Oh yeah I used to. But I never used to take more than 2 teaspoons of sugar in my tea or coffee or whatever… There was a lot of pop though, we used to drink pop like crazy.

(Bobby Morrison, 11.06.2005, p.29)

Bobby Morrison traced his life-long habit of heavy sugar consumption – resulting in an acute diabetic crisis – to a childhood diet high in sugar.

Today’s youth express a good deal of variation in their tastes and attitudes towards their own foods. Some youngsters are enthusiastic. Wahtibuu Mary Hill describes her own grandchildren’s taste preferences and their origins:

They just love it, love our food. That was their baby food, their Mom, she used to make fish hash, potatoes and fish and bake it in the oven, mash it up, that was their baby food.

(Wahtibuu Mary Hill, 23.07.2005 1:12:34 – 1:12:53)

Other youth may not identify with Gitxaala’s own foods. While salmon is a regular part of their diet, they may feel that trying ‘new’ traditional foods requires stepping outside of their comfort zone. Dora Moody discusses these changing preferences and attitudes within the community:

40. One can of regular pop or soft drink contains between 140 and 160 calories.
I'd say the main staples for our traditional foods, which is you know fish [i.e. salmon], halibut, seaweed, or even deer. But when you talk about things like seal, or the devilfish [i.e. octopus], or even clams or cockles, the kids aren't really into that, neither are teenagers, and I think we're kinda loosing that part, cuz, I think in a way, some kids view it as substandard to modern store-bought foods. It's not as "tasty" as having a hamburger, for example. Different, different tastes. Same thing with chowmein, they'd want that, chowmein, instead of having seal for example.

(Dora Moody, 20.06.2005; 13.13 – 16:06)

Dora underscores that the high pop-cultural value placed on store-bought foods devalues traditional foods and makes them seem old-fashioned. Gitxaala youth never see their own foods on TV. More than one participant expressed concern that the taste preferences of Gitxaala's youngest generations are being assimilated.

High-sugar colonial foods have undeniably increased in importance in the last few generations. Even children who see their parents struggling with diabetes and its consequences find themselves with few store-bought options. Chips, candy bars, and soft drinks are readily available in the small family-run stores in Gitxaala and are affordable by community standards. Gitxaala children consume a considerable amount of these products. Paul Dickson observes:

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.

(Paul Dickson, 14.07.2005, p.30)

All participants, especially those who are diabetic themselves, expressed alarm about children consuming 5 or 6 soft drinks (equivalent to 800-960 calories) a day. Bobby Morrison reflects on this:

When I talk about diabetes I talk to the younger generation about it, I talk about 'em drinking Coke, and then, that's the worst thing going is Coke, Orange Crush, Grape, all that, cuz all the sugar that's in them. I tell 'em, like I say, you're gonna get diabetes, it's gonna hit you maybe about 10, 15 years down the road from now.

(Bobby Morrison, 11.06.2005, p.25)

There is a concern that young people are cultivating this sweet tooth and that these taste preferences will last a lifetime. Adults in the community know that this is a real possibility because they have struggled with these same issues.
FOOD ACCESS

Entanglement with colonial economies and policies has not only increased Gitxaala’s reliance on store-bought foods, but has also severely restricted the community’s access to its own food resources. While Gitxaala people have exercised a great deal of agency in their involvement with colonial economies, colonial government policies have been created in distant locales by people who have never been to Gitxaala, and have left little room for agency. Such policies, by affecting the entire community’s access to nutritious foods, have directly undermined community-level food security.

Barrier to Access: Restrictions on Own Foods

The Ts’ymseen have their own set of rules and regulations regarding the fishery and other resources. A Walp (house) or a Name⁴¹ owns the rights to a particular resource⁴² (Darling, 1955; Garfield, 1939, p.174). For a salmon creek, this used to include stewardship duties in maintaining the creek, the right to fish at its mouth when the salmon were running, and the right to allow others to do so; it also includes a right to trade or barter the goods produced. Traditional title-holdings for fishing, hunting, trapping, berry-gathering etc. (see Darling, 1955, pp.10-12 for more), are frequently referenced by name when discussing resource harvesting. Beyond ownership rights, the ayaawk (laws) also provide a set of guidelines for proper behaviour towards resources (these guidelines were referenced by almost every participant when interviewed about climate change; for example, see Txa-la-laatk Matthew Hill 05.07.2005).

After Confederation, Federal and Provincial laws and the DFO began to redraw the map of access rights and recast the legalities surrounding fishing, oblivious to the pre-existing Ts’ymseen laws. In 1888, an Order of Council 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

⁴¹. In the Ts’ymseen 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 Butler & Menzies (n.d.) for a discussion of the harvesting practices associated with the Walp.

⁴². Gitxaala’s traditional resource-use rights remain unextinguished under the Canadian law, since no Ts’ymseen have ever signed a treaty.
spearng” (as in Sharma, 1998, p.35). In one move, the state outlawed Gitxaala’s main methods of harvesting salmon and a major facet of their economy⁴³.

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 that has been used to control subsistence activities and knowledge⁴⁴. Gitxaala people’s main fishing technologies were outlawed: nets were restricted to tidal waters, and weir⁴⁵ and trap fishing in rivers and at creek mouths were banned (Newell, 1993, p.49-51). 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, destroying an important forum for the transmission of knowledge about resource stewardship and harvesting. 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, p.35).

The DFO has continuously implemented new restrictions on Gitxaala people’s access to their own foods. Fishing at creek mouths and the retainment of certain species of fish (such as steelhead salmon) are illegal, certain areas are closed to cod fishing (Keith Lewis, 15.06.2005; Txa-la-laatx Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005, p.12), and there is a complete ban on picking abalone (for example, see Paul Dickson, 14.07.2005, p.2).

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⁴³ Gitxaala traditional economies of exchange are based on familial ties and long-term relationships rather than short-term gain; the oral, ethnographic, historical and archeological records leave no doubt as to the significant wealth that Gitxaala accumulated through trade (Garfield, 1939; Txa-la-laatx Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005), or the distance their surplus was traded inland and along the Pacific Rim (Txa-la-laatx Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005[1], p.3, p.26).

⁴⁴ 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, p.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 (p.155); he further argues that the DFO has since done all it can to block aboriginal fishermen from accessing the food fishery (pp.158-176). See Butler & Menzies, n.d.

⁴⁵ See Langdon, 2006.
The artificial distinction between the food and commercial fisheries causes economic tension at the community level. The food fishery, on which all Gitxaala residents rely, sometimes suffers on those precious occasions that the commercial fishery is open, as discussed by Sam Lewis and Julia McKay:

SL: Yeah, everybody’s going full blast fishing, making money, no time to get us fish, like.

JM: Yeah, fish, first time I ever seen it like that this year, the guys aren’t really out that much getting food fish cuz they had to go out for an opening already hey.

RA: Yeah, it was early?

JM: Yeah so the guys from here have to go out in between their commercial fishing to go get fish for the village.

(Julia McKay, 16.07.2005, 36:00 – 36:48, p.19)

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. The village’s need for food fish is forced into competition with individual fishermen’s need for capital gain since the same boats are needed for both.

DFO policy restrictions on space, time, species, and technologies are all products of colonization and commercialization. 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. Elder Lax Skiig 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 Skiig Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 20.07.2005, p.8)

The decline of certain culturally and nutritionally important resources due to commercialization, and the inaccessibility of others due to policy, have significantly contributed to community-level food insecurity.

46. As well as providing fertile ground for tension between aboriginal and non-native communities; see for example Coates 2000, or Menzies 1994.
FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Food distribution patterns in Gitxaala are changing. Because the knowledge, ability, and responsibility for gathering own foods are increasingly concentrated amongst a few, distribution patterns are the biggest factor in many residents’ household-level food security.

Barrier to Access: The Need for Cash

Gitxaala’s entanglement with colonial economies means that even those who are not directly involved in such economies (perhaps especially those who are not involved) have a need for cash. While nutritious food is present in the immediate environment, cash is necessary to access it, and for all other accoutrements of a modern life.

Many participants deplored the infiltration of cash and what they perceived to be its natural companion, greed, into the Gitxaala way of life. Participants perceived this to be especially troubling because it erodes the traditional values that reinforce food sharing, as 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)

Some participants postulated that the need to sell harvested resources is due to rising gas prices; others suggest it is due to drug or alcohol dependencies that must be financed. In either case, cash is becoming a necessity in Gitxaala. Jobs are few, and selling traditional resources within the community is the only means some community members have to earn cash at all.

The effects of this community-level shift are felt differentially by various segments of Gitxaala’s population. For elders, for those who are unable, or for those who do not know how to harvest for themselves,
it presents a serious economic strain. For those families who are socially marginalized to some degree and are not as intimately connected to family distribution networks (discussed below), buying is the main means of accessing their own foods. These families are forced to further rely on store-bought foods because buying their own foods is an insecure process; it is unpredictable and the cash must be on-hand. For the youth of Gitxaala, being enculturated into a culture of buying and selling threatens the values of sharing that maintain healthy avenues of food distribution, and through them, a healthy sense of family and community.

**Access Enabler: Traditional Food Distribution**

While the shift towards selling harvested resources is undeniable, it has by no means completely replaced the practice of gifting to elders, family members, those in need, and those who live beyond the community. While the occasional purchase of own foods is possible for most families, it is only through family ties that a household without an active harvester or a boat is able to secure enough fish to supply it through the winter. Most elders have decent access to traditional foods, due to the generosity of specific people in the community (Dora Moody 20.06.2005, p.3). Elder Johnny Aster even reported that seaweed had turned up in his freezer, and he had no idea who had been so kind as to put it there!

Elder *Lax Skiig Gilaskamax* Allan Brown explains the origins of these values and their relation to Gitxaala identity:

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 *deideap's’ke* which, translating, is to go build up a person's status.

*(Lax Skiig Gilaskamax Allan Brown, 22.07.2005, p.9)*

*Nii Wee Gwa'anas* Melvin Tolmie describes the importance of these values and how they are regenerated:

MT: So that was one thing that [my father] ever taught me was those kind of things, before we ever do anything for ourself or give it to other people we give it back to those that teach you

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47. Young families who have not followed traditional rules regarding marriage, whose lifestyles are radically at odds with traditional values, or who are dealing with substance abuse problems, can be marginalized within the community.
and supplied for you. And those are one of the things that he's ever taught me to remember and not forget.

RA: And do the young people know to do that?

MT: Oh, yeah, we pass the message on whenever we see people that go out, to go and try to do those kind of things. And [my wife]'s own boys are a good example with that cuz they love to go out and continue to supply. And it's those kind of teachings like that, we have to pass it down to them to continue utilizing it.

(Nii Wee Gwa'anas Mel Tolmie, 03.07.2005; 52:23 – 53:23)

Gifting food resources is not only a good way to build up the strength of a big name, to gain respect in the community, or to ensure that the gifting will be reciprocated in one's own time of need; it was also described by participants as part of their healing process (Gilbert Hill, 14.07.2005, p.6, Peter Morrison48, 22.06.2005, p.17). The value attached to these resources means that harvesting, fixing, and gifting them can nourish a strong and healthy sense of Gitxaala identity as well as a healthy diet.

TRADITIONAL FOOD KNOWLEDGE TRANSMITION

Traditional knowledge about the local ecology and about harvesting, preserving, and preparing own foods is critical for countering future generations' risk for diabetes by ensuring their access to their own foods. The more Gitxaala people know about their own foods, the more they are able to harvest it for themselves; they are then less reliant on store-bought foods and foods for sale within the village. They are then more able to participate in traditional food distribution networks, contributing to a healthy community. Knowledge also increases the perceived value of these foods, combating the assimilation of taste preferences.

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. The colonial government has tried very hard to assimilate First Nations peoples by destroying forums of knowledge transmission and separating First Nations children from those who would impart this knowledge to them. Assimilation experiences have often resulted in self-destructive behaviours, such as alcohol abuse, which continue to impact knowledge transmission. Gitxaala people have nonetheless maintained a great deal of

48. A pseudonym.
traditional food knowledge under these corrosive pressures, and have adapted it to deal with technological, cultural, and political changes.

**Barrier to Access: Residential School and Foster Care Experiences**

A significant number of people who are adults today were removed from Gitxaala as children by Indian Agents and either sent to residential school or put into foster care outside the community. Every single participant interviewed about diabetes referred to residential schooling in our discussions, whether or not they had attended it. Sometimes it came about when discussing what participants ate as children, sometimes it arose when discussing the acquisition and transmission of ecological knowledge, and sometimes it was referenced when reflecting on shifting community values. At times moving, at times 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). The experience was expressly designed to interrupt the transmission of traditional knowledge and values by physically removing children from their families, communities, and territories. Most schools forbade traditional foods; 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, p.71). Tim Innes explains how this robbed him of a chance to learn from the harvesting experts in his family:

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49. Gitxaala people have adopted motorized travel, firearms for hunting, mechanized fishing boats, and modern preservation techniques such as canning and jarring, enabling them to gather and preserve their own foods more efficiently. This means less time is spent in camps and more can be done within a day's travel from the village, dramatically changing both the knowledge itself and the forums in which it is transmitted. These technological changes have also contributed to a less active lifestyle, contributing to obesity and impacting diabetes risk.

50. Beginning in the 1870's, it became Canadian Federal policy to send Aboriginal children to residential schools, usually run the church, ostensibly 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 abuses suffered by many. The Canadian government ceased its partnership with religious organizations in 1969, and most residential schools were finally closed in the mid-1970s (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2004, <http://www.aicn-inac.gc.ca/gs/schl_e.html>).

51. I have chosen to draw quotes regarding residential schooling from Tim Innes, because he has boldly taken on the public role of exposing the damage residential schooling did to him, to his community, and to other First Nations people.

52. 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).
RA: Did you grow up in the canneries at all?

TI: No, I wasn't part of the, I was, I was really out of the picture. See we got taken out of here, there's five of us in my family...

RA: So did you, you never had a chance to learn from your father about fishing?

TI: No.

RA: Or your grandparents.

TI: I didn't know my grandparents. I'm learning today, who they were!

(Tim Innes, 03.07.2005, p.13)

Traditional knowledge was carried like a slow match through the residential school, foster family, and urban experiences of many participants. 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). Participants in their 50s or older who were sent to residential school described long periods after leaving school during which their traditional knowledge was submerged under self-damaging behaviours in an attempt to numb the pain of these experiences. They were proud to rekindle their harvesting knowledge once they had chosen to begin their healing, and/or had returned to Gitxaala. For a few, this meant exercising or even acquiring this knowledge only in more recent years:

... Otter Pass. I think that's my grandparent's own trap-line. I didn't know, I didn't know my ties with, who my grandparents were ... I'm learning most of this stuff for my family tree through my nephews Keith. They're teaching me. Even my nephews are teaching me how to harvest seafood here. I never knew that.

(Tim Innes, 03.07.2005, p.14)

Here, Tim makes clear that family, land, and traditional harvesting knowledge are closely connected for Gitxaala people. Learning about his family's history and traditional territories are integral to his acquiring harvesting knowledge as an adult.

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)
Residential school also destroyed many of the channels through which parenting skills and traditional values are transmitted and in which community cohesion is generated:

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. But, it's not anybody's fault, I took advantage of it, to get me my survival tactics. Not too often you'll hear it from the community about residential school. Cuz it's in deep denial. 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. the research project] for us people that went to residential school, to acknowledge that.

(Tim Innes, 03.07.2005, p.7)

In Gitxaala, harvesting, preserving, and preparing own foods are intrinsic to individual, family, and community health. Residential schooling’s attack on Gitxaala values and knowledge regarding own foods has constituted an attack on Gitxaala well-being. The community of Gitxaala is presently holding healing circles to pinpoint critical problems in the community that stem from the residential school experience, such as alcohol and drug abuse, and to begin healing.

**Barrier to Health: Alcohol**

One theme that surfaced in almost every interview was the detrimental role that alcohol has played in the health of individuals, families, and the community, despite alcohol being illegal on the reserve. It is dealt with in this section because participants presented alcohol abuse as being a direct result of the residential school and foster care experiences. Today, many of these children are adults who, along with their own children, are struggling with or recovering from alcoholism. In this sense, alcoholism is a direct result of colonial attempts at devaluing Gitxaala identities and ways of life. Alcohol has contributed to the risk of diabetes at the individual level in terms of its nutritional components, and at the community level by affecting the cohesion that is so essential to traditional knowledge transmission.

Because alcohol is high in sugars and carbohydrates, its consumption can contribute to an individual’s risk of developing type II diabetes. Many project participants who were diabetic were very explicit about the role alcohol played in their condition. Bobby Morrison says:
BM: Everything happened all at the same time, diabetes, arthritis, heart attack, all hit at the same
time... I guess that was from my early years of drinking all the time, used to drink a lot.

RA: So you think alcohol had something to do with it?

BM: Yep. Oh yeah, I used to drink a kind of beer that had lots of sugar in it.

(Bobby Morrison, 11.07.2005, p.26)

Sam Lewis shares his thoughts on the effect alcohol has had on his health:

RA: Do you think the alcohol had something to do with your diabetes?

SL: Ah. I just don’t know - I just wonder about it, if I was still drinking today, would I still be
alive, I wonder? Maybe not, I don’t know.

(Sam Lewis, 10.07.2005, p.6)

Many community members perceive the consumption of alcohol as a source of poverty, and family and
community disintegration. Participants assert that poverty is the main parameter affecting the ability of people
in the community to access their own and store-bought foods. Family and community disintegration directly
impacts the means by which people in Gitxaala acquire their own foods and the traditional knowledge
necessary to harvest for themselves.

Access Enabler: Knowledge Transmission Initiatives

Although Gitxaala’s traditional food knowledge, and the social institutions in which it is transmitted,
have been subjected to destructive pressures, Gitxaala is finding new ways to ensure that its youth know their
own foods. In the past, youth would have learned these crucial 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
programmes 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 (Veronica 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 of the primary family unit from the extended matriline to the nuclear family.53

Many participants stressed the urgency of conveying this important knowledge 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).

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. Gilbert Hill describes an initiative he and his wife Wahtibuu Mary Hill offered, which was organized through the school:

GH: One year we brought about 15 to 20 students down, to show them what we did with our seafood. How to get it ready, fix seaweed and take it home... That was maybe four or five years ago.

RA: And it was students from the school here?

GH: Yeah, they enjoyed it. They picked seaweed, they brought it home, gave it to their moms. We just teach them things, we talk to them in camp.

RA: And out there they listen.

GH: Mhmm, where there’s no TV, no games. But if you try to talk to them here it’s hard. (Gilbert Hill, 14.07.2005, p. 20:02 – 20:58)

As the political, technological and ecological environments continue to change, Gitxaala people will continue to find new ways 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.54

53. This is true in terms of residence and involvement in the cash economy. However, the extended family unit is still primary with regards to the traditional economies of resource harvesting, preservation, and distribution.

54. Knowledge about the harvesting of traditional foods can be instrumental in legal battles with the colonial government about ‘ownership’ of certain territories.
HEALING

"Healing", within the bio-medical system, involves an attempt to isolate a medical problem within the individual body, and then to treat it within that sphere, separate from mental, emotional, family, community, and ecological health. For diabetes type II, this means diet change, exercise, and a monitoring of blood sugar levels to ensure that they are within a safe range; for type I, it might mean all of the above as well as taking insulin regularly. But given the nature of diabetes, and the challenges in making appropriate health services available in Gitxaala, it is easier to prevent diabetes than it is to cure it. Healing, therefore, cannot refer only to curing an illness or treating its symptoms, but must include the resolution of those issues that place an individual at risk for diabetes in the first place.

As far as access to bio-medical treatment is concerned, there has been a Nursing Station in Gitxaala, in one form or another, for over 30 years. There are nursing staff present all week, although the nurses change frequently; the doctor comes for only a few days a month. The Nursing Station offers educational sessions regarding diabetes and the ability to have one’s blood sugar level tested, but for a complete review of their health, many community members must travel to Prince Rupert to see their family doctors. In a medical emergency, community members must be evacuated by helicopter to the hospital in Prince Rupert.

There are many people in the community who have a basic understanding of some medicinal plants, and there are a few who are recognized as being very knowledgeable about traditional medicines. However, participants claim that these experts keep their knowledge mostly to themselves, perhaps because few community members are interested in traditional medicine and none are willing to depend on it exclusively. Some participants expressed concern that community members wanted a ‘magic pill’ that would ‘fix’ their health problems, in contrast to more traditional ideas of healing which are social or spiritual in nature, or in which change might be gradual and lasting (see Kelm, 1998). This preference towards bio-medicine reflects a history of disease and healing in the region. Waves of new diseases such as small pox and influenza followed contact (even preceding it in some communities); traditional medicines were unable to cope and the majority of local populations were wiped out. For over a century now, Gitxaala has relied on Western bio-medicine to
control and cure non-traditional diseases such as TB (for a comprehensive exploration of these events see Kelm, 1998). Meanwhile, traditional healers were persecuted and imprisoned by the colonial Government into the 1950s, eroding traditional healing knowledge.

Despite the community's waning interest in traditional plant medicine, participants' discussions of healing strongly reflected traditional Gitxaala values and a holistic understanding of what it means to be healthy. Diabetic participants who have been successful in stabilizing their health situations asserted that moving away from store-bought foods and returning to their traditional diet was largely responsible (for example, Mike Joseph55, 07.06.2005, p.2). They also pointed to increased vegetables and greens in their diet as a major factor (for example, see Tx-la-laatl Matthew Hill, 05.07.2005(2), p.25). Regulating sugar was critical, and participants claimed that it became easier as they grew accustomed to eating less of it (for example, see Mike Joseph, 07.06.2005, p.8). Exercise such as walking, jogging, and rowing were also cited (Mike Joseph, 07.06.2005, p.2; Peter Morrison, 22.06.2005, p.14).

In their discussions regarding sources of ill-health and opportunities for healing, participants made it clear that changes in diet and life-style which target the individual diabetic body are not sufficient to treat or prevent diabetes. They made clear links between their experiences in foster care and residential school and their adult eating habits, between alcohol abuse, community dysfunction, and disinterest in bodily well-being, and between the erosion of traditional food knowledge and the amount of sugar consumed by Gitxaala youth. These discussions emphasized that attempting to cure the individual diabetic body is meaningless without also healing historical injuries and making healthy changes at the family and community levels.

The activities that participants presented as healing at these broader levels included going out in camp to harvest their own foods (Paul Dickson, 13.07.2005, p.6); sharing these foods with other community members, especially elders (Gilbert Hill, 14.07.2005, p.6); teaching others to harvest and preserve their own foods (for example, see Gilbert Hill, 14.07.2005; Wahtibuu Mary Hill, 23.07.2005; or Bobby Morrison, 11.07.2005); talking to their children about Gitxaala values and traditions; taking on leadership and political

55. A pseudonym.
roles within the community and beyond it (Tim Innes, 03.07.2005; eating together and having guests in one’s home; discovering and reaffirming family ties (Tim Innes, 03.07.2005; Wahtibu Mary Hill, 23.07.2005; Kevin Wallace56, 23.06.2005, p.19); and getting the whole community together for celebratory occasions such as weddings. A few participants even stated that being involved in this research project and having a chance to reflect upon, discuss, and promote awareness of these issues was also a part of their healing. The Nursing Station has also implemented drug and alcohol talking circles, and has begun to deal with the residential school experience in community workshops.

Healing may seem a daunting task in light of the issues discussed in this paper. Those realms over which Gitxaala residents have the least control, such as the policies and practices of the colonial government, are those which have the most pervasive impact on Gitxaala wellness and illness. However, in a holistic understanding of wellness, an action in any domain will effect a change in other domains. Thus, healing an individual diabetic body may lead to increased time out in camp for an entire family, or to discussion about diabetes within the community. Creating new pathways to transmit traditional knowledge will enable individuals to harvest healthy food, and will also build a healthy community more intimately tied to the local ecology and more able to engage in its stewardship. Creating opportunities for children to acquire the taste for their own foods helps to combat their assimilation into Euro-Canadian culture. Ensuring that traditional food knowledge is central to being Gitxaala helps maintain political awareness regarding traditional title-holdings and rights. These are just a few examples; Gitxaala people are able to suggest countless others that demonstrate their will to good health.

CONCLUSION

Food is important. It can be medicine or poison, and diabetes brings this duplicity of food to the forefront. In Gitxaala, the dual potency of food is embedded in the way people talk. Some foods are Gitxaala’s own foods; being Gitxaala, as an individual, as a community, as a culture, is constituted in part by harvesting, preserving, and eating these foods. Other foods, as some community members know bodily, make people sick. Individual and collective awareness is growing around this second category of foods.

56. A pseudonym.
Diabetes in Gitxaala may seem, on the surface, to be a matter of simply choosing the wrong foods. Health authorities rooted in Euro-Canadian frameworks of health are urging people in Gitxaala to make healthier ‘choices’. But the choices offered do not necessarily make sense in Gitxaala. They do not line up with Gitxaala’s categories of foods (“own” and other) nor do they account for the historical, economic, and political factors that structure Gitxaala’s access to food. If we focus diabetes as a lens and peer through it, we witness not poor choices, but community-level food insecurity engineered by the economics of colonialism and a history of attempted assimilation.

Over the course of their interaction with Europeans and Euro-Canadians, consumption in Gitxaala has mirrored production; the more the community became entangled in colonial economies, the more it came to rely on colonial foods. As the state attempted to dismantle Gitxaala’s economy by expropriating many of their resources and outlawing certain harvesting and trade activities, entanglement with colonial economies became more necessary, and Gitxaala people were distanced from their own foods economically, geographically, and temporally. First Nations have been marginalized within colonial economies by discriminatory practices, and Gitxaala has been greatly affected by the restructuring of its most important industry, the fishery. The resulting economic hardship denies Gitxaala residents the most nutritious store-bought foods, and simultaneously creates barriers to accessing Gitxaala’s own foods. These twin children of poverty mean that starchy, sugary, processed foods – precisely those foods the CDA recommends not eating – are the most readily available and affordable by community standards.

Not only do the CDA’s recommendations seem unreasonably challenging to achieve in Gitxaala, they recall former attempts at assimilating food preferences and consumption habits. Gitxaala people have been told what to eat before, on occasions when they were disempowered, and they are still reeling from these experiences and the illnesses produced by them. Today’s youth are still being subjected to assimilation in their food preferences by the media and Euro-Canadian ideas of food. When elder Lax Skiiq Gilaskaxmax Allan Brown says that his people are “losing” their “strong connection with the food” and are “beginning to think like a white person” (p.4 of this paper), he is talking about the cumulative power of Canadian policies and
practices that send the message that food is something you get from the store, and is something dissociated from territory, community, family, and identity.

Despite these challenges, the community has maintained many of the traditions that nourish it. Traditional food distribution networks and the values associated with them have persisted despite an increasing need to sell harvested foods for cash. The state attempted to destroy many of the forums in which traditional food knowledge was transmitted, but people carried this knowledge with them like a slow match through the experience of being separated from their community and their foods. Food experts are inventing new forums for knowledge transmission, and community leaders continue to debate and voice their political positions regarding their resources. The community is talking about diabetes and how to address its underlying issues. Because the health of territory, community, and family are inextricably linked to the health of the individual body in Gitxaala, healing on any level becomes an act of decolonization.

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. Although this research examined the socio-cultural determinants of diabetes in a specific community, the processes of colonization it uncovered are familiar to indigenous peoples the world over. In the course of this project, participants made clear links between resource expropriation, assimilation, and economic change, and their diminished access to a “safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet” (Hamm & Bellows, 2003). Diabetes is understood not as an illness in and of itself, but rather as a symptom of historical injustices and structural inequalities.
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