When You Don't Know The Language, Listen To The Silence: An Historical Overview of Native Indian Women in B.C.

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In order to describe and understand the history of Native Indian women in British Columbia, the hiding places of the history must first be discovered. There was a time, before European conquest of North America, when the voices of Native women were strong and clear. As they raised their children, taught their daughters the traditional roles and skills for living, shared daily events with their sisters and husbands, and captivated their grandchildren with tales of mythical heroines--of Bear Mother, Mouse Woman, Sun's Daughter, The Woman Who Gave Birth to Puppies, and Tzonoqua, the Cannibal Ogress--Native women of this province spoke and were listened to.

With the arrival of Europeans in the late eighteenth century, louder voices, predominantly male and foreign, were heard and, ultimately, prevailed. Many Native voices, indeed, whole linguistic communities, were silenced by fur traders' cannon, by epidemics of smallpox and other devastating diseases, by the plague of alcohol, and by the despair of poverty and political powerlessness. Not surprisingly, by the twentieth century, the assumption of Euro-Canadians was that not only the voices, but also the very languages and cultures, of Native people were lost, if they had ever existed at all.

How, then can the reconstruction of the history of BC Native Indian women proceed in the face of this widespread perception of their silence? Are those voices from the past truly lost forever, or are they simply not being heard? The thesis of this essay is that, first, although Native women of the past left no written record of their culture, history and personal experiences, some Europeans and Euro-Canadians, mostly male, did listen, albeit sometimes with a jaundiced ear and often only to Indian men. Their observations and accounts, located in journals, administrative reports, police records, and

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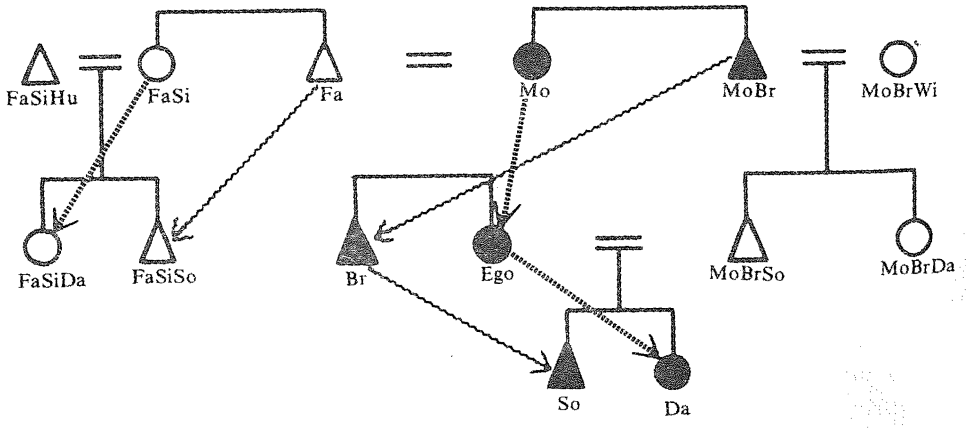
anthropological works, contain elusive and provocative glimpses of the lives of Indian women. Second, Native women have continued to speak, in order to transmit old traditions and new perceptions to their offspring and to give meaning and value to their everyday lives. Female descendants of those original women are living repositories of not only Indian cultural history but also of the common life experiences of women everywhere, and they must be encouraged and assisted to share with their Native and non-Native sisters their collective memories, their life histories, and the creative strategies they have used to adapt to and cope with the harshest of circumstances.

The intent here is, first, to provide an outline of the major features of traditional Indian culture that shaped the lives of Native women in traditional times and, second, to present a brief historical overview, with emphasis on changing economic patterns of women of Indian descent since the time of European contact. In addition, a critical assessment of written sources pertaining to traditional and historical views of Indian women will be discussed. As well, new directions for discovering the history, past and present, of those women will be considered.

Of necessity a discussion of women in traditional Native cultures of British Columbia is limited. Moreover, any history of Indian women in British Columbia suffers from generalizations, just as a history of European or African women would. Within the present political boundaries of this province, there existed perhaps thirty different Native languages spoken by people of ten major ethnic groups.[1] Consequently, here, concentration will be upon two traditional cultures, the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands, and the Coast Salish of southeastern Vancouver Island and the southwestern mainland, who embody the two major forms of social organization that must be considered in order to understand the roles and status of aboriginal women.[2] Among the Haida, as well as other northern groups such as the Tsimshian and northern Kwagiulth, social organization centred upon a principle of matrilineal descent and kinship (Figure 1). Among the Coast Salish and other southern groups, including the Nuu-chah-nulth-aht, or Nootka, Bella Bella, Bella Coola, and southern Kwagiulth, kinship and descent were organized around a bilateral principle.

Haida Matrilineality



Clarification of both matrilineal and bilateral social organization is essential, not only because kinship and descent gave structure to women's roles and to social and economic relationships, but because a common popular misconception, current among some feminists, attributes to all North American Indian cultures, or at least to those organized matrilineally, a matriarchal society. While matriarchal societies, based upon a principle of female political and economic dominance and upon female-centred religious beliefs, were postulated by nineteenth-century social theorists such as Bachofen[3], Morgan[4], and Engels[5] as the earliest form of human social organization, there is no reliable archaeological, historical, or anthropological evidence for the existence *anywhere* of primitive matriarchies and certainly not for the Native societies of British Columbia.[6,7] As Bamberger maintains, matriarchy is a male-created, sexist myth, portraying original woman either as a mystical and virtuous Mother Goddess--as mid-Victorian, male intellectuals envisioned her--or as a deceitful, treacherous, and sexually promiscuous child-woman, as she is frequently depicted in the mythology of contemporary primitive societies.[8] In either case, matriarchies were concocted by males to provide justification for the way the world *is* and *ought* to be--*truly* patriarchal and male-dominated. Bamberger comments that

> the elevation of woman to deity on the one hand, and the downgrading of her to child or chattel on the other, produce the same result. Such visions will not bring her any closer to attaining male socioeconomic and political status, for as long as she is content to remain either goddess or child, she cannot be expected to shoulder her share of community burdens as the coequal of men. The myth of matriarchy is but the tool used to keep woman bound to her place. To free her, we need to destroy the myth.[9]

Despite insisting that matriarchal societies have no empirical validity, consideration must be given to Webster's view that, although mythical,". . . matriarchy is the only *vision* we have of a society in which women have power. . . ."[10] and as such allows us ". . . to pose critical questions about the relationship between power, gender, and social structure."[11] Cameron's *Daughters of Copper Woman* provides a rich illustration of the metaphorical value of matriarchy as a literary vision to enhance the position of Native women in traditional society.[12]

An examination of Native cultures on both the north and south coasts of British Columbia shows that although women were not exploited and oppressed to the same degree that occurs in modern capitalist societies, and although women frequently enjoyed high status and some influence and authority in domestic, economic, political, and religious realms, real power was largely concentrated in the hands of men, whether fathers, brothers, sons, or nephews. Aboriginal Native society was male-dominated throughout British Columbia.

For example, among the matrilineal Haida, descent of clan and lineage identity, as well as inheritance of all property, was traced through lines of females, but although a married woman might own property received from

her parents ". . . as endowerment for her marriage,"[13] and at her death that property was passed to her daughter, the bulk of her matrilineage's estate was transferred from her brother to her own son (Figure 1).[14] Included in the important wealth of the estate which passed from a man to his own sister's son was tangible property such as houses, totem poles, and canoes, and ceremonial property. The male beneficiary, in turn, bequeathed his property, both real and symbolic, to his sister's son.

Haida marriage patterns also reflect the ambivalence between women's influence and men's power. A girl's mother was instrumental in selecting a husband for her daughter,[15] but the maternal uncle and the father of the girl may have had the final say in groom selection.[16] Upon marriage, a bride submitted to her husband's domestic authority, although this authority was exercised subtly. Moreover, while a widower was not required to remarry and could marry whom he pleased, a widow either had to accept the new husband, often many years her junior, selected by her male kin or, if she did not remarry, she was exiled, with few personal belongings, from her late husband's house and had to seek refuge as a poor relative with matrilineal kin.[17]

Although there was some male-female overlap in economic tasks traditionally assigned to females, women were not permitted to engage in male hunting and fishing activities because of menstrual and reproductive taboos which, if broken, could bring serious harm to male activities or to men themselves.[18] Women who were skilled in female occupational pursuits, such as food preservation and preparation, or basket-making, were held in high regard by men as well as by other women, but they were not permitted to transgress traditionally male occupations.[19] Only in one male-dominated economic sphere, that of trading, did women play a significant role. Early European maritime traders remarked on more than one occasion that Haida men were loathe to conclude fur-trading deals without their wives' consent; without that consent, a husband might be berated or even physically abused by an irate wife.[20] Whether Haida women exercised the same authority in trading activities before European contact is not clear, but, as Blackman observes,

> given the acknowledged role of men as traders, . . . it is likely that they represented their wives in exchange and that the dominant role of women [in trading] is reflective of . . . [women's] interest in their own property.[21]

In the political sphere, Haida women participated in and influenced lineage and council decision-making, but household, lineage, and village chieftainships were usually held by males. If no male heir were available, a woman might hold a chief's seat until her eldest son reached maturity, at which time chieftainship passed to him.[22] After European contact decimated the Haida in the nineteenth century, women were more commonly found in positions of chiefly nobility.[23] Nevertheless, while women seem to have played a fairly active role in Haida political matters, females, from the time of their first menstrual seclusion, were subjected to a number of restrictive and rigid taboos on their activities, movements, and social contacts with males and

were instructed in the ideal virtues of womanhood: " . . . submission, contentment, and industry . . . , endurance, modesty, [and] a retiring disposition . . .,"[24] hardly qualities and regulations conducive to gaining political power and prestige.

In the realms of ceremonial activity and religion, Haida women were active in potlatching. Although nearly all large, important potlatches were hosted by males, a girl's puberty potlatch was hosted by the celebrant's mother, and women were entitled to receive wealth at all potlatches.[25] In dancing societies, " 'women were barred from the more important dances,' "[26] but sometimes wore important ceremonial regalia when they did dance. Apparently, both men and women could become shamans, or religious practitioners, although there is some evidence that a menstruating shaman was excluded from any house where a male shaman was working,lest her menstrual contamination impair his power.[27]

Finally, in artistic pursuits, the socially significant painting and carving of crest designs and figures was exclusively a male occupation, while women's art, largely weaving, was considered relatively unimportant.[28]

In summary, then, the positon of women in the matrilineal societies of Native British Columbia reflects relatively high status and not a small degree of influence and authority in many cultural domains, probably because female reproductive power provided daughters to perpetuate each matrilineage and sons to inherit the wealth and chieftainships of their mothers' brothers. Nonetheless, real power in all but the reproductive sphere was firmly in the hands of Haida men.

BC Provincial Museum #PN8737

Group of Salish(?) women. R.Maynard photograph.

The propitious, if largely male-derived, status of women in matrilineal societies of northern British Columbia is less evident among the women of Coast Salish and other southern cultural groups, where matrilineality did not exist to validate the importance of females. Although both father's and mother's sides of the family were important in determining social identity and economic and political standing in the bilaterally structured Coast Salish community, males held all of the most important economic property, including hunting, fishing, and gathering sites, and most ceremonial prerogatives. Futhermore,only men held positions of political power and authority. Although daughters inherited the property of their mothers, female property was economically and socially insignificant. [29] Customarily, when a woman married, she resided in her husband's village, under his domestic authority. "In the event of separation, the common property remained with the husband."[30] Moreover, since marriages were arranged, and Coast Salish girls were expected to acquiesce to parental choices of husbands, women who left their husbands, even physically abusive husbands, were not well-received at the homes of their fathers. In cases of divorce, "male children beyond infancy always remained with their fathers, and sometimes the girls did too. Infants in arms went with their mothers and sometimes remained with them, but a boy, at least . . . "[31] was likely to be returned to his father so that he could share in his father's property and social position.

An examination of the literature reveals, further, that Coast Salish boys had more freedom than girls did, especially during puberty when a girl was expected to prepare for marriage by remaining in a state of complete inactivity and virtually total seclusion from the time of her first menstrual period until her marriage. Girls were kept under strict female supervision, going outside only at night accompanied by their mothers, and were expected to remain chaste and modest and to regard marriage with a wealthy man as ". . . the consummation of their life interest."[32]

The division of labour was reasonably clear cut, with females engaged in domestic tasks, child-rearing, and weaving. Although there is no indication that the subsistence activities of women were regarded as inferior to those of men, and although men and women sometimes helped each other with economic tasks and pooled their labour for the family unit and for feasting activities, a distinct division operated where artisanry was concerned, with men involved exclusively in all aspects of woodworking and the construction of equipment, utensils, tools, and weapons, and women involved exclusively in weaving and other work with textiles.[33]

Even in the sphere of supernatural power, males were predominant. Coast Salish religion centred around a belief in a multitude of supernatural helpers, or guardian spirits, who ensured success in daily subsistence activities and in obtaining wealth, and who were manifested in public displays of spirit possession during winter ceremonial dances. In addition, special supernatural helpers enabled individuals to become shamans. While women might seek these supernatural powers, girls were unable to go on prolonged guardian spirit quests, as young males would do. In consequence, women had less intense and less frequent encounters with the spirit world. Moreover, spirit helpers were not as necessary for women as for men " . . . to achieve pre-

eminence in some occupation."[34]

In summary, many women of Coast Salish society might be of high-class status, but their position was dependent upon the status of their fathers and husbands, who had the social, economic political, and supernatural means to obtain wealth, prestige, and political power. Real wealth lay outside the direct control of women, and consequently, they seem to have had little or no external political power, and apparently were rigidly excluded from positions of leadership and from village decision-making.[35]

Although European contact had variable impact upon the lives of Native Indian women, the intrusion of an expansionist and exploitive cultural system was ultimately to bring profound and largely negative changes to women's lives, for now, in addition to the asymmetry of cultural relationships balanced in favour of men, there was to be a new and more devastating form of male domination of the Indian woman's world.

Initially, during the approximate eight and one-half decades of Euro-Indian fur-trading activity, change to Native Indian culture was minimal.[36] In fact, the fur trade stimulated cultural growth by bringing " . . . prosperity [and] an increase in wealth . . . [to] a society already organized around wealth"[37] and by strengthening the existing social and economic systems rather than weakening them.

Not until the publication of Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties* was the effect of the fur trade on Indian women examined. [38] Ironically, it is by virtue of their relationships with men, particularly with White men, that Native women's role in the fur trade came to light. Van Kirk suggests that "both the attitudes of the Indians and the needs of the traders dictated an important social and economic role for the Native woman that militated against her being simply an object of sexual exploitation."[39] As traders' wives, Native women cemented trade alliances and often acted as peacemakers in disputes between White and Indian traders; on the other hand, the women sacrificed, according to Van Kirk, considerable personal autonomy in adjusting to European values of home and family.[40] What Van Kirk's research[41] does not consider is that Indian women of the south coast who married White traders may not have fared well at all if they left their husbands and returned to their own kin. When the grandmother of one of our Coast Salish informants returned to her natal home after marriage to a European trader, her family felt compelled to hold a potlatch to erase her shame and to make her name good again. According to our female informants in Coast Salish society, children of these unions were regarded, in the early days at least, as illegitimate and brought shame to the mother and her family. Since social identity was determined by both sides, but particularly the father's side of the family in Coast Salish society, unions with European men were considered by Native people to deprive children of the more important paternal half of their birthright. In matrilineal societies such as the Haida, on the other hand, a woman's marriage to a non-Haida, even a White man, was not particularly disadvantageous, because the children inherited property from their mother and their mother's brother, not from their father.

In another way, the fur trade affected Native women. Among the Nuu-chah-nulth-aht, or Nootka, shortages of female labour in production of

resources were critical to the underpinnings of social, economic, and political organization, and slavery was a solution to any shortage of labour power. "The importance of female labour power also fits in with a preference for female slaves."[42] During the fur trade era, women's work in processing finished furs was crucial to trade-generated wealth.[43] Unfortunately, the responses and views of women, whether high class, commoner, or slave, to the shift in occupation, can only be guessed at. What did a high-status woman have to say when she was compelled to take time from familiar traditional domestic and subsistence activities to process countless numbers of furs and to supervise extra slave women? How did a woman who was taken as a slave for this purpose feel about her plight? Male writers, whether missionaries, government agents, or anthropologists, rarely, if ever, concern themselves with the real feelings and experiences of women.

With the advent of settlement and colonial rule in British Columbia from 1849 on, stimulation of the Native economy gave way rapidly to overwhelming negative change. As Fisher suggests, European settlement introduced major cultural changes so rapidly that Native people lost control over the disruption of their traditional lifestyles.[44] He argues that, as settlement increased in the 1840s and 1850s, Christian missionaries appeared and began to demand "total cultural capitulation"[45] from the already reeling Native population. Focusing first upon preaching and conversion, missionaries of differing and competing faiths began to establish mission schools by 1861.[46]

According to the records of 1891 for Kuper Island Residential School, twelve subjects, including English, scripture and verses, morals, and deportment, were taught, along with "trades or other industries."[47] Native girls were instructed in knitting, sewing, housework, and kitchen work. The school day at this southeastern Vancouver Island institution consisted of four to five hours in the classroom and four and one-half hours learning domestic trades.[48] A March 1896 report noted that twenty-one girls, between the ages of seven and sixteen, made ninety-four articles of clothing, besides doing the general mending for staff and students.[49] By June 1896, those twenty-one girls had produced another forty dresses, six nightshirts, twelve chemises, twelve sheets, and twenty-six pairs of knitted hose.[50] Twentieth-century enlightenment had little effect on Native Indian education. In 1938, records indicated that the number of hours students spent at domestic work had increased substantially, while time spent on more academic classroom activities diminished. In the March 1938 records, forty-nine girls between the ages of eight and sixteen each spent an average of 225 hours at a trade and from thirty to sixty hours in the classroom.[51]

An Indian girl washed, cooked, cleaned, and mended her way through residential school. Even during the 1950s, females spent more time mending the resident priest's underwear than they did reading, according to some of our younger Native informants. Inevitably, the training she received prepared the Native girl for later domestic duties both at home and in the work place. A former nun reminisces that

> the girls . . . liked to work. And this was what they needed . . . how to make clothes and how to mend . . . .

> the white people around were always glad to hire an Indian girl during the holidays because they said they're clean, they know how to work and how to give satisfaction. They would never be looking for jobs if they wanted to work.[52]

In spite of dreary, menial tasks that bordered on slave labour, and in spite of other educational shortcomings, school records and correspondence between Native parents and school officials,[53] and interviews with ex-pupils suggest that students often asked to be re-admitted, because school life frequently offered more security and stability to Native children than home life did. Some children were orphaned by epidemics; others had parents or close relatives who, with the advent of wage labour, were obliged to work far from their home reserves for long periods of time. Family illness, family poverty, and domestic upheaval brought about by the encroachment of the White economy and attendant social problems are other situations that Native children faced if they returned home. In virtually every case, leaving the residential school meant low-paying jobs in the burgeoning White economy. Yet, while some women claim that they enjoyed school life, others reflect on their feelings of homesickness, of loneliness, and of frustration and bitterness when they were forbidden to speak their Native languages[54] or to converse openly with their own brothers in the rigidly sex-segregated school yards and dining halls. As well, many women remember recurring epidemics of measles and whooping cough, pleurisy and pneumonia that swept through the schools, claiming the lives of many of their classmates. All of the women interviewed expressed regret that they were not permitted to learn more than domestic trades at residential school.One woman shared with us her disappointment that she was not taught well enough to read the books that the teachers read to her; another wanted to take piano lessons, but the school piano was forbidden to Indian students.

The potential for resentment and anger among Indian school girls is reflected in this reminiscence of a Roman Catholic teaching sister:

> The girls did all kinds of fancy work and sewing. They were very industrious. They liked to work . . . . The boys were easier to handle than the girls. They [teaching missionaries] always had difficulty with the girls . . . . the girls were more capricious and very, very hard to please.[55]

Not surprisingly, given their school training, domestic service in European homes appears to have been a major form of employment for many Native women from the late nineteenth century to the present.[56] Wages were fifty cents a day in 1900 and $1.50 a day during the Depression, according to Native informants. Other early female occupations include prostitution, cannery work, and seasonal agricultural labour, the latter two remaining sources of supplementary incomes today.

Prostitution among Native women of British Columbia, in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries, is an oft-cited example of either their degradation and promiscuity or of their victimization. Time does not permit a detailed examination of the social,

economic, and personal consequences of prostitution, but three important aspects of this occupation emerge from archival research. Although some early writers single out Haida women as the largest group of prostitutes, [57] first, on board fur-trading ships, and later, in Victoria, only a few suggest that the women were apparently of low or slave status in traditional society. [58] [59] Male customers and/or observers of the time invariably refer to prostitutes, or to any Native women who took their fancy as "chief's daughters" or as "Indian princesses,"[61] although the lack of distinguishing symbols of high status, such as lip ornaments, belies the first designation,[62] while the second is a political impossibility on the northwest coast. The implications of the use of low-ranking or slave women in prostitution would indicate that not only were some women forced into this occupation, but that Haida men did not prostitute women of high status.

Second, a perusal of early police records suggests that Indian prostitutes in Victoria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries displayed a spirited inclination to turn the tables on their customers. After making an assignation to meet a male client, an Indian woman would contact two or three of her female colleagues who followed her to the meeting place. The women would jump the unsuspecting male, beat him senseless, roll him and run with his purse for dividing and their sense of honour and justice intact.[63]

Finally, a search of the Victoria City Police charge books for the period 1880-1910 yields a total of only six arrests of Indian women for street-walking as compared to much larger numbers of arrests of White, Chinese, and Black prostitutes. Most arrests of Native women are alcohol-related charges in all years investigated.[64] Furthermore, although a suggestion was made by Duff that the first brothel in Victoria was operated by a Haida woman, police archival documents list only non-Indian women as both keepers and inmates of bawdy houses, and all arrests of Native women prostitutes in Victoria are listed as street-walking offences. [65] [66] One explanation for the rarity of prostitution charges against Native women in Victoria may be that as soon as large numbers of non-Indian women arrived in the colonial city, Indian women were squeezed out of the trade.

When labour was scarce in the province, in the late nineteenth century, many Native women found employment in the rapidly growing fish-canning industry. In the early 1870s, nearly all Fraser River fishermen were Native. Cannery managers contracted with individual fishermen and paid them for their catch. The Native fisherman was usually accompanied by his wife and children, and by other family members.[67] The wife might work in the cannery, but she also frequently acted as boat-puller for her husband, rowing and maneuvering the boat, fully laden with fish and heavy nets. [68] Furthermore, a Native man who was fishing for a cannery was more likely to get a boat and fishing gear on loan from the cannery manager if the wife of the fisherman was adept at can-filling or net-mending.[69] In 1880, an estimated 400 Native women worked in the Fraser River canneries; by 1895, fully one-third of the province's canneries were located in the north, particularly on the Skeena River, and these northern canneries relied totally on Native labour, predominantly female.[70] Women were hired as can-fillers, fish-cleaners, and net-menders, and their children were often hired to clean off the filled can.[71]

In 1892, fishermen on the Fraser could make $600 to $1000 per season.[72] Yet, in 1893, women who cleaned and packed fish made only one dollar to $1.50 a day, without board, working an average of ten hours per day--for a maximum of fifteen cents per hour.[73]

> The Minimum Wage Board did not prescribe a minimum rate of wages for women in canneries until 1943, although virtually all other industries were covered. [In that year, the Board] set a minimum rate of 33 cents per hour.[74]

That Indian women did not accept passively the miserable working conditions, the drudgery, and the meagre wages that befell them as cannery workers is evidenced by the observations of a cannery supervisor writing in 1891 who described the Klootchmen, as they were called, as "awfully self-willed," squashing salmon, filling cans with "nothing but back and skin" and angrily throwing filled cans on the floor and shouting "you work" when he criticized them.[75] The supervisor also related an incident when a group of twenty Indian men and twenty-five Indian women cannery workers flourished their long knives at him in a pretend thrust, watching his face to see if he were frightened.[76]

Agricultural labour was another early source of income for the female Indian labour force of British Columbia, one deserving of full-scale treatment on its own.[77] Like cannery work, agricultural work, whether picking fruit, berries, and flowers or working in the potato and hop fields, meant back-breaking twelve or thirteen-hour days and wages ranging from about one dollar a day in the late 1800 s to $1.25 an hour in 1971.[78] An interesting characteristic of agricultural work for Native women has been, until recently, travel across the border to pick in the United States. A few women were hired as contractors who arranged for groups of Native pickers to pick fruit or hops in the States. Cash advances were paid to the workers, and women who were involved remember bitterly that "once you accepted the advance, you were hooked. That small advance was the only cash you ever saw, all summer long." Food had to be purchased at the grower's store, at vastly inflated prices, using the grower's scrip or food tokens. A single person might earn, at the turn of the century, a total of ten dollars for the three-week hop-picking season; women who brought their children along as workers fared better, earning close to one hundred dollars for the season.[79] Even in 1952, just before mechanization replaced Native hop-pickers, experienced workers in the Fraser Valley hop fields could seldom earn more than" . . . $7.50 for an average thirteen hour day"[80] or a total of perhaps $157.50 for twenty-one days of work, *before* deductions for living expenses.

Women, of course, were involved in a number of other wage labour activities, including the Cowichan knitting industry and tourist art production, but for the purposes of this essay, only two other factors will be mentioned. First, during the Depression of the 1930s, it is our impression that Indian women were often the economic mainstay of their families, not because of the wages they earned, which were almost non-existent, but because they were able to return to traditional subsistence pursuits such as the gathering of plant foods and the collection of shellfish to sustain their children

and themselves. A second important point is that a full-scale study of the history of Indian women in the labour force remains to be done. In his 1978 publication, *Indians At Work,* Knight bemoans the fact that " . . . the scope and nature of Indian wage labour . . ."[81] has been little more than a footnote in the economic history of British Columbia, and yet his discussion of Indian women's economic participation is reduced to the same footnote status.

Before concluding this essay with a discussion of sources of Indian women's history, brief mention should be made of the Indian Act and its effect on Native women. Although this impact has been discussed at length elsewhere,[82] [83] [84] the consequences, for women of Indian descent, of Sections 11 and 12 cannot be underestimated. Not only does Section 12 (1, b) systematically deprive an Indian woman of her rightful heritage if she marries a non-Indian man, but also, upon losing her Indian status, she forfeits her legal rights to live on Indian land, to inherit land or a house on an Indian reserve, and even to be buried in a reserve cemetery. Moreover, even if she retains her Indian status by marrying a registered Indian male, she loses membership and all rights in her natal band if her husband is a member of another band.[85] In either case, should her marriage dissolve and should she return, to live illegally on her natal reserve, as a high proportion of separated and divorced women do, among family and friends, her housing accommodation will be precarious, and she will exist either as a floating guest in the already overcrowded homes of relatives or as the inhabitant of a condemned house for which no repair monies may be allocated.[86]

Finally, if she chooses to remain unmarried, the Indian status of her children born out of wedlock may be contested under Section 12 (2).[87] Although rarely used today, up to the 1960s this sub-section enabled Indian agents to make illicit contracts with one or more White men to claim paternity of the infant of an unmarried Indian woman whom the agent considered a trouble-maker or unduly promiscuous, thus denying the Indian status otherwise entitled to her child under Section 11(e).[88]

Revisions to the Indian Act do not bode well for Native women, given the reluctance of Indian men to accord status to women who marry non-Indian men. Even if Sections 11 and 12 are replaced with fair legislation, there is little likelihood that redress will be made to the thousands of women of Indian descent who have already lost their status through marriage.

In assessing sources for research on the history of Native Indian women, we concur with Niethammer that the best source of information on Native women, especially prior to European contact ". . . would be that obtained from Native . . . women themselves,"[89] but they have left us no written histories. We must rely, instead, on the accounts of European explorers, traders, missionaries, and later, anthropologists. Nearly all of these observers were male, and as such, were concerned primarily with " . . . the heady stuff of male politics and public life."[90] Not only are most of these accounts heavily biased in favour of men's culture, but also what little information does appear about Native women is almost entirely gleaned from male Indian informants, whether the topic be women's participation in aboriginal fishing activities, women's artistic endeavours--almost always reduced to the status of crafts--or childbirth and motherhood. Conscious or unconscious, early European

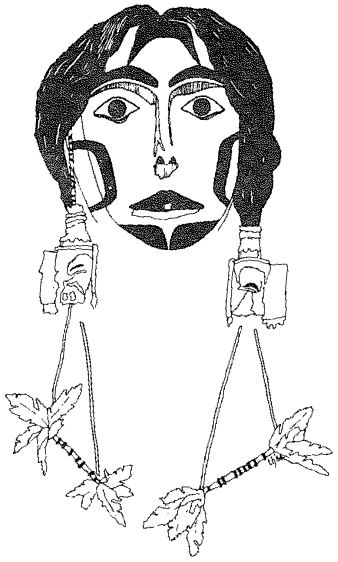
and later Euro-Canadian biases, coupled with male biases on the part of both reporter and informant, leave little but questionable and often contradictory reflections about the lives of Indian women. Undoubtedly, some White, male observers may have spoken with Native women, ". . . . but we must assume that the situation of . . . [an] Indian woman talking to a white male tended to colour her story somewhat, perhaps in ways she did not even realize."[91]

Women are accustomed to sharing their experiences not only with other women, but also, and sometimes more frequently, with men, particularly with male lovers or husbands. Women are accustomed, also, to hearing those men revising, editing, and reducing the reality of women's experience into insignificance. For Native women, the issue of their reality is compounded, particularly by male anthropologists who have inquired of Indian *men* about the lives and roles of Indian *women*. A recent personal experience comes to mind. In a discussion with a male band council member from a Vancouver Island reserve about revisions to the Indian Act, the Native male's distortion of women's reality became very apparent. When Mitchell suggested that the present Indian Act discriminated very harshly against Native women, the Indian man dismissed her statement by claiming, rather emphatically, that in the old days, Indian women did have equality with men, ". . . because we let them be initiated into the winter dances." Thus, anthropological accounts screen the real world of Native women, first, through the perception of Indian men, and then through the perception of the male anthropologist. Moreover, what Joy Kogawa calls the "blue sky reality"[92] of women--the inner essence of female experience--simply has not been a major concern of anthropology, precisely because males are more comfortable with the public arena where they seem to conduct much of their own lives.

Ironically, some of the few real insights into that "blue sky" world of Native women have come from the often bland and blatantly ethnocentric archival accounts of pre-anthropological writers. Reading between the lines of early historical documents, we are able, at least, to pose compelling questions about the unreliability and capriciousness of Indian school girls, the status and defensiveness of Indian prostitutes, and the behaviour of "self-willed" female cannery workers--questions that betray the conventional image of the Indian woman as a passive, submissive victim. Regrettably, however, there was little to find between the lines of traditional anthropological accounts. Indeed, not until publication of Margaret Blackman's life history of Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida woman, has the breadth and depth of the life of any British Columbia Native woman been regarded as " . . . inherently worthy of consideration."[93] [94]

If we are ever to understand and share in all the realities of Indian women, the direction seems clear. The life history method will enable Native women, at last, to tell their own stories, in their own words and with their own perceptions and definitions of what it means to be a woman and an Indian. Our own life history research with five elderly women of the Nanaimo Indian Band on southeastern Vancouver Island has been a revelation. [95] Not only are the women able to relate many childhood memories about the more traditional lives of their grandmothers and mothers, which verify or call into question material in standard ethnographic accounts for the Coast Salish, but

they have shared with us their intensely private joys and sorrows, their humour, anger, and tenacity, and their unlimited capacities for living, working, and coping in a world that has shown them little but contempt.



Footnotes

1. Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia: Vol. I. The Impact of the White Man,* Anthropology in British Columbia Memoir No. 5 (Victoria, BC: Provincial Museum, 1964): 12, 15.

2. The choice of Haida and Coast Salish as representative cultures is not entirely arbitrary. Mitchell has done fieldwork among both groups and Franklin among the Coast Salish; see n. 95 .

3. Jacob J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right,* trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

4. Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society,* ed. Eleanor Leacock (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963).

5. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State,* ed. Eleanor Leacock (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

6. Joan Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society," *Woman, Culture, and Society,* eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974): 263-280.

7. Paula Webster, "Matriarchy: A Vision of Power," *Toward an Anthropology of Women,* ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975): 141-156.

8. Bamberger, *op. cit.:* 280.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Webster, *op. cit.:* 145

11. *Ibid.*

12. Anne Cameron, *Daughters of Copper Woman* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1981).

13. Margaret B. Blackman, *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982): 32.

14. *Ibid.*

15. John R. Swanton, *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida,* American Museum of Natural History, Memoir No. 8 (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1909): 50.

16. Blackman, *op. cit.*: 29.

17. *Ibid.*: 33.

18. *Ibid.*: 35.

19. *Ibid.*: 34.

20. *E.g.,* Joseph Ingraham, *Joseph Ingraham's Journal of the Brigantine Hope on a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of North America, 1790-92,* as cited in Blackman, *During My Time,* p. 35; see also Erna Gunther, *Indian Life on the Northwest Coast of North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972): 133.

21. Blackman, *op. cit.*: 35-36.

22. *Ibid.*: 38-39.

23. George Dawson, *Report on the Queen Charlotte Islands,* Geological Survey of Canada, Report of the Progress for 1878-79, as cited in Blackman, *During My Time,* p. 38.

24. Blackman, *op. cit.*: 28.

25. *Ibid.*: 36-37.

26. Edward S. Curtis, *The Haida,* The North American Indian, XI, p. 142 (1916), as cited by Blackman, *During My Time,* p. 37.

27. Blackman, *op.cit.:* 39.

28. *Ibid.:* 39-40.

29. Homer G. Barnett, *The Coast Salish of British Columbia* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1955): 250.

30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*: 195.
32. *Ibid.*: 180.
33. Marion W. Smith, *The Puyallup-Nisqually* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940): 139.
34. Barnett,*op. cit.*: 78.
35. Smith, *op. cit.*: 75.
36. Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict, Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977),: xiv.
37. Duff, *op. cit.*: 57.
38. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980).
39. *Ibid.*: 4.
40. *Ibid.*: 6.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Leland Donald, "Was Nuu-chah-nulth-aht (Nootka) Society Based on Slave Labour?" *The Development of Political Organization in Native North America,* ed. Elisabeth Tooker, 1979 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society (Washington: The American Ethnological Society, 1983): 112.
43. *Ibid.*; see also, for the Tlingit of southern Alaska, Frederica de Laguna, "Aboriginal Tlingit Sociopolitical Organization," *The Development of Political Organization in Native North America,* ed. Elisabeth Tooker, 1979 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society (Washington: The American Ethnological Society, 1983): 81.
44. Fisher, *op. cit.*: xiv.
45. *Ibid.*: 124.
46. Duff, *op. cit.*: 90.
47. Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, "Kuper Island Indian Industrial School Records 1889-1928, 1935-1938," XL, 1891, p. 1. PABC
48. *Ibid.*, 1896, p. 35.
49. *Ibid.*: 37.
50. *Ibid.*: 39.
51. *Ibid.*, XLIV, March, 1938.
52. Margaret Whitehead, *Now You Are My Brother: Missionaries in British Columbia,* Sound Heritage Series No. 34 (Victoria: Provincial Archives, 1981): 44, 47. PABC.
53. Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, *op. cit.*,I-VI, XXXVI-XLIX, *passim.*
54. Whitehead, *op. cit.*: 51.
55. *Ibid.: 44, 46.*
56. Ibid., passim.
57. E.g., Francis Poole, *Queen Charlotte Islands: A Narrative of Discovery and Adventure in the North Pacific,* ed. John W. Lyndon (Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, 1972): 313.
58. John R. Jewitt, *The Adventures and Sufferings of John R. Jewitt, Captive Among the Nootka, 1803-1805*, ed. Derik G. Smith (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974): 65.
59. Gilbert M. Sproat, *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life* (London, 1868): 92.
60. Henry R. Wagner and W.A. Newcombe, ed., "The Journal of Jacinto Camano," trans. Capt. Harold Grenfell, R.N., *B.C. Historical Quarterly,* II (1938): 207.
61. Jewitt, *op. cit.*: 56.

62. Blackman, *op. cit.*: 43.
63. Victoria City Police Department, Charge Books, 1880-1910, MSS (Victoria: Victoria City Police Archives), *passim.*
64. *Ibid., passim.*
65. Wilson Duff, personal communication with Marjorie Mitchell (Victoria, 1975).
66. Victoria City Police Dept., *op. cit. passim.*
67. J.C. Lawrence, "An Historical Account of the Early Salmon Canning Industry in B.C. 1870-1900," M.A. Thesis (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, September 1951): 28. PABC.
68. *Ibid.*: 29.
69. *Ibid.*: 28.
70. *Ibid.*: 31, 45.
71. Alfred Carmichael, "Account of a Season's Work at a Salmon Cannery" unpublished correspondence, 1891. PABC.
72. Lawrence, *op. cit.*: 65.
73. *Ibid.*: 65,66.
74. *Ibid.*: 66, n. 2.
75. Carmichael, *op. cit.*
76. *Ibid.*
77. See, for example, Marjorie Mitchell, "Women, Poverty, and Housing: Some Consequences of Hinterland Status for a Coast Salish Indian Reserve in Metropolitan Canada, " MS. Ph.D. dss. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1976).
78. *Ibid.*: 120-121, 235 ff.
79. *Ibid.*: 120.
80. Cy Young, "B.C. Hops," Weekend Picture Magazine, *Vancouver Daily Province* (October 4, 1952): 25.
81. Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978): 9.
82. Kathleen Jamieson, *Indian Women and the Law in Canada: Citizens Minus* (Ottawa: Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1978).
83. Mitchell, "Women, Poverty, and Housing."
84. Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970): 237-238.
85. Canada, *Office Consolidation: Indian Act,* R.S., c. 1-6 amended by c. 10 (2nd Supp.),1974-75-76, c. 48 (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1978): 6-8.
86. Marjorie Mitchell, "The Indian Act: Social and Cultural Consequences for Native Women on a British Columbia Reserve," *Atlantis,* IV, 2 (1979): 186.
87. Canada, *Indian Act,* p. 7.
88. Mitchell, "Women, Poverty, and Housing," p. 173.
89. Carolyn Niethammer, *Daughters of the Earth: The Lives and Legends of American Indian Women* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1977),: xiii.
90. *Ibid.*
91. *Ibid.*
92. Joy Kogawa, talk presented to Women in B.C. History Conference, April 27, 1984 (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984); see Joy Kogawa, *Obasan,* p. 196.
93. Blackman, *op. cit.*: 6-7.
94. *The Days of Augusta,* ed. Jean E. Speare (Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, 1973) is an earlier poetic oral history narrative from the life of Mary Augusta Tappage Evans, a Shuswap woman of Soda Creek, British Columbia.
95. The Nanaimo Indian Band Cultural Research Project, funded in 1980 by

National Museums of Man, Canadian Ethnology Service, Urgent Ethnology Programme, is coordinated by Marjorie Mitchell and includes an Elders' Life History Project. The life histories of five Nanaimo Indian women and one man will eventually be published by the Nanaimo Indian Band.

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