



## CANADIAN COUNTERCULTURES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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# **Building Futures Together: Western and Aboriginal Countercultures and the Environment in the Yukon Territory<sup>1</sup>**

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*David Neufeld*

In the twentieth century, the Western world experienced extraordinary growth in its power and wealth. The intertwining of state organization and capitalist economy, while also provoking devastating wars, resulted in stable and prosperous societies promising freedom. By the 1960s, increasing numbers of young people were cashing in on this promise. Both as individuals and as leaders of communities, they challenged conventional notions of social order and sought alternative ways of life. The resulting diversity reflected the notion that freedom entailed not simply doing what one wants in the present, which was certainly popular, but also making a new and different future.

Human relations with the environment are an expression of cultural values and beliefs. In the Western democratic societies of the mid-twentieth century, the romantic counterculture seeking renewed relationships with the environment challenged dominant rational and materialist societal values. The Yukon Territory, with its sparse

population and its land widely available for squatting, proved alluring. Incoming back-to-the-landers conceived of the Yukon as untouched wild space, a place where they could build alternative ways of living. They encountered there a different group of people, who had never left the land: the Aboriginal people of the territory, who also sought a future that addressed their interests. The countercultural goals the newcomers brought with them in the 1960s came to fruition in the 1980s. The Yukon counterculture was plural, as both Western and Aboriginal countercultures shaped distinct discourses on environmental relationships. The Western counterculture was interested in getting back to the land, while the Aboriginal counterculture worked to get their land back. Nevertheless, at certain times and on some specific issues, these two countercultural groups cooperated in fashioning alternative futures.

## GOING BACK TO THE LAND

One counterculture seeker's Yukon experience illustrates the connection between the back-to-the-land impetus and deep concerns about the environment. Tim Gerberding was born at about the middle of the baby boom.<sup>2</sup> He grew up in Wisconsin, the son of a Lutheran minister. The family's life was disrupted when his father was accused of theological heresy for suggesting that the Bible was a metaphorical guide to living rather than a text of literal truth. Brought before an ecclesiastical court, his father lost his job. His experience of a rigid and righteous organization pursuing a single truth paralleled Tim's later counterculture experiences in the Yukon Territory.

By the time Gerberding was eight, the Lutheran authorities had relaxed their censure, and his father was invited back into the church. A new posting moved the family to Denver, Colorado. A family friend there—the director of the state historical society—took them to many historic sites. The ghost towns and isolated mountaintops of the West appealed to Tim. These trips lengthened, and in 1967 Tim and a friend took off on a summer-long ramble, ending up with hippie friends in San Francisco's "summer of love." Police soon apprehended them as



9.1 Alan Innis-Taylor in his Whitehorse office, 1972. Source: Richard Harrington Coll. PHO 105 389, Yukon Archives.

wayward youth and shepherded them back to Denver, to finish high school.

After two years at St. John's College, a so-called Great Books college, Gerberding and several friends headed off on a road trip. The "buzz" was about "cheap land in Canada," and it was said that the best place was Golden, British Columbia. Inspired by Timothy Leary and other counterculture writers, the friends headed north. Land was available around Golden, but they had nowhere near enough money to buy any of it. Continuing north, they visited the Nass Valley. Tim was overwhelmed by the beauty and isolation of the place; he remembers a strikingly beautiful chunk of land, full of ancient trees, but again the prospective landowners needed more money than they had. Eventually they made it to Whitehorse, in the Yukon Territory. Here they ran into Alan Innis-Taylor, who invited them into his cramped office full of books, maps, and artifacts in the downtown federal government building.<sup>3</sup> He regaled them with stories of the Yukon River and the historic places along it. The group was entranced. But with both the summer and their money waning, they headed south to regroup and make plans for a return to the Yukon.

The following spring, Gerberding and four young male and female companions bought an old school bus, loaded it with supplies, and headed back to the land. In Whitehorse they again met with Innis-Taylor, now noticeably cooler about encouraging young people to go off into the bush. He emphasized that the Dawson area was an especially poor choice. Gerberding and the others figured that Innis-Taylor's warnings must mean Dawson was an especially interesting place. With a full set of topographical maps of the middle Yukon River, they marked all the promising places: that is, those with southern exposure, likelihood of dry timber, a side stream for clean drinking water, and a good place to build a cabin. At Pelly Crossing, they built a log raft and launched their search. The five young people floated downstream. The seemingly endless rolling hills and empty forests of the Yukon valley flowed past them during the truly never-ending sunny days of a subarctic summer. Steering into likely spots, they wandered through their selections of "free" land, dreaming about what they could do. Their experience was an almost mythic idyll of the counterculture.

Toward the end of summer, they floated past the confluence of the Forty Mile River, some ninety kilometres downriver from Dawson. Coal Creek, across the river, was the last place marked on their maps. They landed. A recent forest fire had left a lot of standing dead trees suitable for a cabin and firewood. On the flat land beside the river a rough airstrip had been cut to support a fire camp. A large tank of diesel fuel still sat beside the strip, and on the high bank above the river there was a beat-up wooden trailer to live in. After a few days' stay, they decided it would be home. The group retrieved their bus and supplies, driving to the Clinton Creek mine townsite, just ten kilometres upriver from "their land." With the help of another young couple camped out on the river nearby, they ferried their gear over the river to their new place. Their romantic adventure in the backwoods of the Yukon was, for some of them, almost over; however, for Gerberding it was just beginning. Determined to stay and live in this apparently pristine environment, he felt in control of his future.

## POSTWAR YUKON AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Yukon had long inspired such reveries of escape from mainstream society. From early in the twentieth century, the North inspired Canadian thought. The North's resources and its demands upon the human spirit were seen as the promise of a bright national future. However, only the Yukon, of Klondike gold rush lore, and the railway belt depicted in Group of Seven paintings had any purchase on Canadian popular culture. Through mid-century, it was war—hot and, later, cold—that sparked a more concrete Canadian attention to the defence capacity and natural resource wealth of the North. The Yukon Territory consequently experienced considerable change as the modern state and industry began directing and constructing the envisioned national future. These changes eventually both spawned and supported the diverse set of counterculture responses in the Yukon beginning in the mid-1960s.

The wartime Alaska Highway and CANOL (Canadian Oil) Road, both military projects completed in 1943, and the postwar expansion of the road network connected the Yukon to the outside world.<sup>4</sup> This enhanced transport access along with a variety of government incentives supported more intensive mineral prospecting. Mining activity in the Yukon accelerated through the 1950s. Production of copper restarted at the Whitehorse mines after World War II; the short-lived Johobo copper mine began operations within the recently established Kluane Game Sanctuary in 1959; and the large asbestos mine at Clinton Creek, not far from Gerberding's homestead, was under development by 1964. In 1969 the huge Cyprus Anvil lead/zinc open pit mine started operation, resulting in the new town of Faro.

Even grander visions of the future built on the almost unimaginably large hydroelectric power generation opportunities in the Yukon. As early as 1946, the Aluminum Company of America proposed a hydro project in the upper Yukon basin to support aluminum production.<sup>5</sup> Another proposal suggested that the entire upper watershed of the Yukon River be reversed, to flow south to the Pacific Ocean. In

1949 the US Bureau of Reclamation suggested that the scale of such a hydroelectric project might require the town of Whitehorse to be moved, arguing that while “local residents . . . would resist such a move . . . [this] should not influence the planning of the project for the national good of both Canada and the United States.”<sup>6</sup> As elsewhere in the resource periphery, outside desires trumped local perspectives.

Successive Canadian governments agreed, celebrating the national prosperity generated by the mining and hydroelectric industries. Under the direction of Progressive Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker’s “Northern Vision” of national development and progress, small-minded local opposition should not hinder progress. In 1960, Gordon Robertson, deputy minister of northern affairs and natural resources, summed up Canada’s position: “We own the north. . . . It belongs to us. Canadians for this reason, must look to the north to see what it is good for, to see how to use it.”<sup>7</sup> Annual northern development conferences, bringing together federal geologists and bureaucrats, industrial venture capitalists, and the northern business community, started in the mid-1960s.

The application of this attitude from the 1950s through the 1970s was especially virulent in the Canadian North because of the assumed absence of any local countervailing philosophies of social order. Traditional Aboriginal societies were pushed off balance by the colonial administration exercised by the federal government. The postwar newcomers created a transient, unstable community prepared to accept overarching and dehumanizing social ordering in the belief that the Yukon was too big to hurt and in return for generous personal material gain. An observer in the early 1970s noted, “The notion that the territory’s wilderness environment is infinite and that it somehow constitutes either a loss or a threat to society is evident both in individuals’ interactions with their surroundings and in the aggressive governmental programs designed to open up or conquer the frontier.”<sup>8</sup>

Although they may be considered back-to-the-landers in their own right, Rudy Burian and Yvonne Burian exemplify those non-Aboriginal old-timers unconcerned about big industrial plans. The Burian

Camp is: A place that does not really exist. It has no history and no future. It has no plans and no memories...
Camp is: A place where you keep your mouth shut because you learn that you have nothing to talk about except camp...
Camp is: A meat grinder for your soul: it swallows you, grinds you up and delivers you to someone's plate as their workhorse...
Camp is: A beginning of a lifestyle you hope to move into - i.e., school, money for another start on the land...
Camp is: Where you give up your freedom of choice for a solid helping of chance...

9.2 A view of the transient experience in the Yukon. Source: Rock & Roll Moose Meat Collective, *The Lost Whole Moose Catalogue: A Yukon Way of Knowing* (Whitehorse: Rock & Roll Moose Meat, 1979), 98. The *Lost Whole Moose Catalogue*, through its three distinct editions (1979, 1991, and 1997), provides a fascinating record of an arriving, ageing, and next-generation Yukon counterculture.

family lived on Stewart Island, an isolated outpost on the Yukon River, at about the midway point of Gerberding's raft trip. Until the early 1950s the island had a roadhouse and a small store, a police post and a telegraph station. River shipping ended with the construction of the gravel road to Dawson, and the Burian family soon had the island to themselves. The Burian land holdings on the island were not freehold, but a lease of ten of the fifty-by-one-hundred-foot lots of the Stewart River townsite plotted in the fall of 1899 that had never been developed. Despite the lack of land security, the Burians remained sanguine about the threat of large-scale mining development: "I never worry about that, 'cause that's about all it's good for up here is mining.



That's what keeps the country going. That's what the Yukon is." Commenting on the landscape devastation resulting from sixty years of gold dredging about Dawson, Rudy noted, "Yeah, but in a few years you'll never even see that. It will be just the way it was. . . . There's just too much land for it all to disappear like it does outside. It might happen sometime. But not in our lifetime."<sup>9</sup> Like many non-Aboriginal Yukoners, the Burians accepted resource development and could not imagine it significantly changing the Yukon environment.

Ultimately, a revival of First Nations political activity in the 1960s and the arrival of counterculture youth in the 1970s challenged the prevailing pro-development approach. Aboriginal people quickly saw how such changes would impinge on their lives. While many Yukon non-Indigenous people welcomed, or at least accepted, economic development, government and industry actions significantly compromised Yukon Aboriginal peoples' relationships with the natural world. In 1947, the territorial council—made up exclusively of non-Indigenous men—revised hunting regulations to address the interests of local sport hunters and to broaden access to wildlife for both tourism development and big game outfitters. This desire to maximize the economic value of wildlife resulted in much stricter controls on access to the land. Until this time, Aboriginal access to wildlife had been largely unregulated, the government accepting subsistence practices as a positive alternative to relief payments. The new regulations, however, applied to all, both Aboriginal and newcomer. With the expansion of the federal social safety net in the postwar period, even isolated groups were guaranteed their subsistence needs.<sup>10</sup> Waged jobs were available for the progressive, welfare for the reluctant. Them Kjar, the first director of the Yukon's Game and Publicity Department, wrote with satisfaction about these changes in 1954:

If we look back only five or six years we find the times in the Yukon have changed greatly due to the many new mining, prospecting, and building enterprises which suddenly have been established, as well as improved road and air transportation, thereby enabling trappers (Indian and White) to

occupy themselves elsewhere at a much higher profit than trapping or hunting could give, leaving obsolete the old way of living off the country as well as nullifying the use of dogs.<sup>11</sup>

Others were less enthusiastic about such decisions. Jack Hope, a New York writer investigating Yukon peoples' responses to these changes in the early 1970s, noted the challenges faced by Aboriginal people: "Another destabilizing aspect of Yukon society is the collision between the territory's white and Indian cultures. . . . These problems are further exacerbated by the white culture's typical intolerance for a people who could not make a smooth and instant transition from a relatively primitive society to a modern industrial one."<sup>12</sup> Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in elder Percy Henry responded to my interest in First Nations perspectives on the counterculture newcomers by reminding me that the hippies were not the only young people in the region worth noting.<sup>13</sup> He spoke of his own youth. When a young man needed money he just headed off into the bush. Henry recalled he would set up camp in a good spot and cut wood for a week or two; then, hauling it into town, he'd sell it and have money. But then things changed: "every piece of land has a number on it." He could no longer just go out in the bush. What were young people supposed to do? "Regulation, regulation, regulation, halfway to Heaven."<sup>14</sup> This pressure on Aboriginal land and resources occurred at the same time and in the same place that Gerberding and his friends were laying out their camp in the woods, escaping contemporary society—or so they thought.<sup>15</sup>

The Aboriginal challenge to contemporary society took a different form. Establishing a number of activist organizations in the mid-1960s, Yukon Aboriginal people organized themselves to confront the government's vision of the future. They wished to define their own relationships with their land, within the cultural landscape they called home. While there should be no confusing First Nations' intercultural resistance with the intracultural protests of the Western counterculture, there were places and times where their distinct strategies and different objectives intersected.<sup>16</sup> Both, however, related

to the character of peoples' cultural and social relations with the environment.

The Yukon in the 1970s was a difficult place from which to challenge the contemporary world. A small long-term non-Aboriginal population ran the commercial and administrative infrastructure of the territory. The bulk of newcomers were simply sampling life in the North, making some money for a project back down south or starting their career in government. New York writer Hope was struck by the casual alienation of most of the white people he met:

The highly transient nature of the Yukon's population is not conducive to social stability. The territory's frontier economy is based on construction and resource exploitative occupations, such as mining and mineral exploration, road and dam building. These occupations offer extremely high wages to attract men to the remote, outpost locations, but they do not encourage roots.<sup>17</sup>

Hope also noted "people who appear each spring . . . to see what the frontier is all about. . . . [M]ost go back south at about the time the weather turns cold and the days get short. Some are back the next June with a zealous Yukon patriotism and a fierce determination to stick out the next winter. A few do. Most don't."<sup>18</sup> All Yukoners—newcomers, old-timers, and Aboriginal people alike—faced steep odds in countering the power of a centralized government's push for economic growth.

## **WORKING ON THE ENVIRONMENT: THE YUKON CONSERVATION SOCIETY**

However, a small number of enthusiasts started a spirited, quixotic intracultural resistance to the excesses of the government's northern vision. The story of the Yukon Conservation Society (YCS) highlights the nature of both the countercultural desire to limit environmental devastation and the conflict with the local non-Aboriginal population,

who saw only the promise of modernity and doubted that there could be any serious threat to the territory's expansive wilderness.

John Lammers, a refugee of the World War II Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, arrived in the Yukon in the early 1950s. Originally settling in Whitehorse, Lammers undertook a variety of bush and town positions until 1963, when he acquired land at the isolated confluence of the Stewart and Pelly rivers and set up a year-round wilderness tourism business. He and his wife built their own camp and ran river trips for a small but well-to-do market of southern Canadians and Americans. Their income was modest, but Lammers was living out his dream of an alternative lifestyle. He lamented the fact that many newcomers simply settled in town and adopted a suburban lifestyle, when the alternatives were so attractive:

The physical Yukon is different from elsewhere. And with planning, our society up here could easily offer human beings a life that is different. But to do that we would have to . . . acknowledge that the thing that is special about the Yukon is her small population, our space, our great natural environment. And our society should steer people toward a lifestyle that takes advantage of her particular endowments. . . . There are many, uniquely Yukon opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

Years before the influx of counterculture youth, Lammers identified the Yukon as a place that could address the Western cultural interest in communing with the natural world.

Lammers's lifestyle aspirations quickly ran into the realities of the Yukon mining boom of the mid-1960s. Incensed, Lammers complained that local citizens had no

voice in the planning of what goes on. . . . The federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development . . . rules the Yukon . . . [controlling] oil exploration, road building, timber [and] mining. And they apparently view their function as one of a . . . broker, selling off our product

# A Castle on the Frontier



9.3 Lammers' autobiographical book showing the Yukon Wilderness Unlimited camp at mouth of the Pelly River. "It's a wonderful place here. It's friendly. I have always felt the wilderness hospitable and warm. It's more than just the physical facts of water and trees . . . it's sort of a medium, like amniotic fluid that surrounds the child in the womb and invokes a feeling of total well-being. We feel good here. And it means something to me to have built my home here, as carefully as I could, to fit into the wilderness." Source: Hope, *Yukon*, 157.

as fast as they can, without trying to ration any of it out to last for the future.<sup>20</sup>

Lammers started a citizens' campaign for comprehensive land-use regulation. As president of the new YCS, established in 1968, he wrote, "We are in danger of losing all of the Yukon's natural assets swiftly, if greedy, single-minded, unplanned, extraction type of 'development' is allowed to spread its cancer here also."<sup>21</sup> In late summer 1970, speculators staked Lammers's own property for potential development.<sup>22</sup> Lammers moved into high gear.

The society, closely modelled on the Alaska Conservation Society,<sup>23</sup> was led by local outdoorsmen and -women. These included Charlie Taylor, the president of the Yukon Fish and Game Association; Monty Alfred, a federal hydrologist; Bob Charlie, a young First Nations broadcaster; and Cora Grant, an avid birdwatcher and the one stalwart supporter of Lammers's causes. Lammers began to build the society's membership, gaining the support of the local canoe club and the consumers' association; the chamber of commerce and all government departments studiously ignored them.

An initial survey of the membership identified subjects of concern: wildlife preservation, scenic and aesthetic aspects of Yukon roads, cleanup of abandoned mines, public consultation by the federal government, public education on issues, and parks and land-use regulation.<sup>24</sup> These relatively conservative objectives reflected Lammers's desire to support the federal government's proposed introduction of comprehensive land-use regulations that the local mining industry vociferously resisted. Lammers had difficulty getting the YCS board to support even these limited goals. Membership was never large; he complained that only ninety people signed up, and over sixty of these were from southern Canada and the United States.<sup>25</sup> Among local members, only two or three stood with him on more controversial issues. One by one, directors resigned or simply stopped showing up. Rudy Burian, Lammers's downstream neighbour, observed that "[John] wants to save everything. He even believes in suing the government if they do something he doesn't like. He's a nice guy, but he's

just too radical in his conservation ideas. . . . His ideas to me are more or less communistic.”<sup>26</sup>

The failure of the first conservation society to advance an environmental agenda among Yukon people can be attributed to the prevailing non-Aboriginal belief in the scale and resilience of Yukon wilderness. In 1971 roughly three-quarters of the Yukon population—largely young, non-Aboriginal, and transient—lived in Whitehorse or the relatively large communities of Dawson City, Faro, and Watson Lake. Caught up in the glamour of a new Klondike rush, they did not see how they were connected to contemporary environmental issues.<sup>27</sup>

However, Kluane National Park, an integral element of the government’s northern development strategy, garnered all kinds of interest. Southern environmental organizations, the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada being especially prominent, rallied broad public support for the establishment of the Yukon national park.<sup>28</sup> Although originally supportive, Lammers found that his agenda for land-use regulation was lost between the economics of industry, the symbolic value of the national park, and the economic diversification offered by tourism.<sup>29</sup> Isolated and almost alone, he concluded the federal government had traded away the regulations to industry in return for the national park. A bitter man, Lammers attempted to disband the YCS in the spring of 1972.

Despite Lammers’s fiat, the conservation society carried on. The floundering group was briefly led by a non-Aboriginal believer in ecological salvation through Native spirituality. However, the outdoorsmen and more conservative long-time Yukoners quickly took over leadership and pursued a more moderate public role. They made contacts in forward-thinking elements of the mining industry, and together they sought to fashion compromises in mining practices. They were no dreamers of an alternative future. As its new president declared, “Conservation . . . must make the leap from dreamy Indian *idyll* to present day *push*. . . . Members of the society can create a working relationship between the simple life and today’s life.”<sup>30</sup>

At this point, the counterculture reacted in their own way to environmental threats. Under the leadership of Innis-Taylor—“the grand

old man of Yukon environmentalism”<sup>31</sup>—they established an alternative body, the Yukon Resource Council, in 1973 to maintain a strong public voice against unrestricted resource development. The council soon recaptured the leadership of the YCS. They mounted potent professional and technical cases against proposed mega-hydroelectric projects, the Alaska Highway pipeline, extension of the Dempster Highway, and the related release of lands for oil exploration. A teacher in Old Crow (a YCS member) supported the Vuntut Gwitchin community presentation to the Berger Commission (1974–1977), an early crossover between counterculture and Aboriginal advocacy. Further, during the anti-trapping and anti-fur campaigns of the mid-1980s, YCS was almost alone among Canadian environmental groups in offering support for Aboriginal trapping.

By the late 1970s federal government departments, now more sensitive to demands for local participation, began to support the YCS with annual grants and specific consultation contracts, much to the chagrin of the local Progressive Conservative MP, Erik Nielsen.<sup>32</sup> The society’s environmental education role greatly expanded in the early 1980s. Programs were developed for schools, and a much broader offering to the public included workshops on energy conservation, lectures, and a series of travel books highlighting Yukon’s environmental wonders. These efforts, especially the initiation of a still-operating summer program of free nature and history hikes in Whitehorse, dovetailed with the development of the ecotourism market. The organization was well organized, employed paid staff, and enjoyed a degree of community support. Led by a board of well-educated and articulate wilderness guides, teachers, and professionals—most of them young recent arrivals in the territory—their strategic objective was the transformation of Yukon society.

In 1979, YCS President Nancy MacPherson noted that the society wished “to explore and promote alternative ways of thinking and living in this world.” Lynda Ehrlich, an active member in 1980, recalled local resentment toward the society: “YCS was perceived as kind of radical left wingers and [the YCS] wouldn’t have disputed that to a great extent. . . . There were all sorts of crazy comments about us,



the hippies.”<sup>33</sup> The society was radical. Most of its activities promoted rethinking humans’ relationship with nature and argued for a reduction in resource consumption and a greater emphasis on the stewardship of natural places.

While the work of the society was non-partisan, its membership was not. Politics in the Yukon was then, and largely remains today, polarized between the business and industry promoters of unrestrained economic development and a counterculture recognizing a plurality of interests in how the environment is understood and related to. In 1985 the two Yukon countercultures felt they had achieved a major objective with the election of a left-leaning New Democratic Party government with four First Nations and four non-Indigenous legislators under the leadership of Tony Penikett. This victory was understood as a sign of the transformation wrought by both First Nations young people and their newcomer peers over the previous fifteen years.<sup>34</sup> Many more of them subsequently moved into government to enact their dreams.

## AN ABORIGINAL COUNTERCULTURE

The period between World War II and the mid-1980s witnessed a dramatic assault upon Yukon society. Prior to the war, First Nations were generally left to their own devices and ways of life. While economic development occurred, its scope was generally limited in areal and environmental effects. Local government generally tolerated the different ways of life practiced by First Nations. The intrusion of big government into the Yukon during and following the war radically transformed this situation, and for at least a half century, the values of a callous modernity seeking material wealth and a homogeneous national society were forced upon an unwilling Aboriginal population. The Yukon is still recovering from this onslaught and its lingering agents.

The Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in of the Dawson City area have identified the effects of successive government actions as causing three separations: from their land, between generations, and from their history.<sup>35</sup>

The separation from the land began in the early 1940s with more aggressive federal land management. The creation of the Kluane Game Sanctuary in 1943 as a national park reserve challenged the viability of a number of surrounding First Nations communities.<sup>36</sup> The concurrent revision of land-use and hunting regulations resulted in a loss of Aboriginal young people's personal agency.<sup>37</sup> For a people whose way of life, both material and spiritual, relied upon an intimate relationship with land, this separation was a major crisis.

Linked with the creation of the national social safety net in the late 1940s was an expansion of the Yukon Indian residential school system. Community church schools, perennially underfunded, were closed, and more children were removed from their families and subjected to an education that undermined their certainties, replacing them with foreign values. The resulting separation between generations shattered the community's ability to flourish, excising a sense of purpose and isolating parents and elders from their future. The residential schools absorbed the young people of the counterculture generation and spawned in many of them the same restless energy that activated their non-Aboriginal peers.

Beginning in the mid-1950s the tourist and public promotion of a Canadian history of the Yukon erased Aboriginal people from time. A focus on the incorporation of the Yukon into Canada and the exploitation of natural resources for the nation altered the earlier non-Aboriginal narrative of gold discovery as the catalyst for a self-governing progressive community.<sup>38</sup> While the original community story was a narrative that ran parallel to an Aboriginal presence, the national revision in place by the late 1960s was a totalizing narrative that denied any other stories of presence. This corruption effectively removed First Nations from the Yukon landscape and compromised their ability to make their interests known. These three traumatic separations seriously tested the resilience of their communities. Unlike their Western counterculture contemporaries, Aboriginal young people sought to overcome the restrictions on their use of their own lands and then to make their own future in a culturally plural Canada.

Yukon First Nations, still very much present, responded to these pressures by initiating both a fight *for* freedom (i.e., direct negotiation with government, court action, and public protest) and a fight *of* freedom (i.e., working within their communities without reference to the limitations of colonial laws).<sup>39</sup> They centred their fight *for* freedom upon obtaining a treaty with Canada, an alteration of the national thinking by an appeal to Western traditions of law and social justice. Through the use of state tools, First Nations hoped to achieve their objective of national recognition and respect for their cultural presence in Canada. Yukon First Nations leadership, raised through the social turmoil and distress of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, began the fight for freedom by preparing a proposal for government consideration. In early 1973, they presented to Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau a document titled “Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow: A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to Settlement by the Yukon Indian People.”<sup>40</sup> This document challenged the denial of the place of Yukon First Nations in Canada and proposed a settlement. The First Nations’ objectives were to regain their connections to their land, restore their cultural relationship to the environment, and establish self-government. Together these would provide the capacity to build an alternative future for their people. The subsequent negotiation and implementation of the treaty, elements of which are still in progress, have taken almost fifty years. The process, often bitter and confrontational, has absorbed the lives of three generations of First Nations people. The ultimate outcome of this fight for freedom is still in the balance.<sup>41</sup>

Alongside the fight *for* freedom was the fight *of* freedom waged within communities. Communities struggled to renew traditional values and land practices as part of the rejuvenation of their cultural identity. Effective self-government requires a people who know how they are related to their environment. Typical among Yukon Indian bands in the 1960s, the Dawson band council (now the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in government) strove to protect their community, shielding it from the colonial excesses of Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) programs. A thankless and crippling responsibility, leadership in this



9.4 Cover of *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*. “We had our own God and our own Religion which taught us how to live together in peace. This Religion also taught us how to live as part of the land. We learned how to practice what is now called multiple land use, conservation, and resource management. We have much to teach the Whiteman about these things when he is ready to listen. Many Indians look at what the Whiteman has done to destroy and pollute lakes and rivers and wonder what will happen to the birds, fish and game. We wonder how anyone will be able to know what effect the Pipeline and other industrial projects will have on birds, fish and game before they are built. We feel that you are going ahead to build the Pipeline anyway, regardless of the harm it will do. . . . We wonder how the Whiteman can be so concerned about the future by putting money in the bank, and still he pays no attention to the future of the land if he can make a quick dollar from selling it to foreigners. Traditionally the Indian did not have to store up goods for the future, because he protected the resources so that they would always be there.” Source: Council for Yukon Indians, *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow*, 9, 14–15.

period took its toll on the participants. Nevertheless, this resistance allowed community activities and structures to continue operating despite the many outside forces seeking to modernize the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in.<sup>42</sup> The gradual move of families from Moosehide, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in village just downriver from Dawson, to Dawson through the 1950s undermined community coherence and strength. In the later 1960s, the band council encouraged people to visit their former home. Moosehide quickly became a sanctuary from the pressures of assimilation. People regained their spirit through maintenance of the graveyard, an opportunity for youth and elders to work together, and the repair of their homes and the village church, pillaged by non-Indigenous river travellers. Moosehide was an anchor to place and signalled community agency. The fight of freedom also acknowledged the need to live together with non-Aboriginal peoples in the present. Early efforts to work with some counterculture young people showed the way. Tim Gerberding's experiences illustrate the character of contact between Aboriginal and newcomer.

Having branched off from the friends with whom he had come to the Yukon, Gerberding's first years were busy as he and his partner developed a satisfying subsistence lifestyle. They built a permanent cabin, established a large vegetable garden, harvested berries, and began fishing the annual runs of salmon. They were not alone; a small number of other young newcomers were scattered along this remote stretch of the Yukon River. They shared the work during salmon runs and supported one another in times of need. They also had contact with local First Nations people. Initially, there was tension. (What are these young strangers doing in my trapline and hunting area? And what are they doing fishing for salmon?) For the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, the presence of another growing group of earnest and aggressive newcomers was unwelcome news.<sup>43</sup> Competition for salmon, whether for subsistence or commercial sale, fuelled conflict. However, the situation mellowed as prolific salmon runs through the 1970s and 1980s supported the needs of all.<sup>44</sup> First Nations families also relaxed as only a small number of young people stayed for long in the area—and the newcomers were generally polite. They also appeared to prefer camps

far upriver, a comfortable distance from the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in family camps closer to Dawson.<sup>45</sup> With patience shown by First Nations and respectful approaches made by the newcomers, accommodation became possible.

By 1980, both newcomers and Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in fishers came to acknowledge some shared interests. The establishment of a viable commercial salmon fishery that year demonstrated the possibilities of a sustainable life on the land, something both the First Nations and the back-to-the-landers wanted. When Dawson and Old Crow First Nations, with DIA support, built the Hän Fisheries plant in Dawson in 1982, the back-to-the-landers upriver were active, and welcome, contributors to the success of the operation.<sup>46</sup> Gerberding and his family moved into Dawson in the late 1980s as their two boys approached school age, satisfied they had lived the bush life. Gerberding started work with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in government as a member of its treaty negotiating team—a professional relationship that continues to the present.

A growing sense of a brighter future encouraged Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in young people to further action. In the mid-1980s, a number of mothers took action to rebuild the community's traditional connections to the land. Concerned about their children losing their identity and with families effectively being confined to town, the women badgered their brothers—since children's uncles are traditionally responsible for teaching land skills—to get their children out on the land. The result was First Hunt. The initial event quickly became a community affair, and First Hunt continues today. Focused on teens, and open to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, the hunt is tied to the arrival of the caribou herd in Tombstone Territorial Park, north of Dawson City. The school closes, and youth, First Nations elders, and the “uncles,” now including a cross-section of Dawson Aboriginal and non-Indigenous hunters, set up a large camp. Activities include hunter safety, environmental science games, elder storytelling sessions, hunting, and, usually late in the evening with Coleman lanterns hissing yellow light inside a large canvas-wall tent, the butchering of caribou carcasses. A couple of weeks later the young hunters host

a community feast where they share their first kills with the whole community. The success of this adaptive reproduction of the traditional Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in annual round was subsequently expanded to include First Fish at Moosehide in July, beaver camp in the spring, moosehide tanning in later fall, and a variety of gathering activities that vary with the seasons. Each provides close contact among youth, elders, and extended families, exercising and reinforcing the important connections between generations, the environment, and their lands.

From the mid-1960s to the present, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in young people, with concerns typical of Yukon First Nations, pursued an intercultural countercultural agenda emphasizing their distinctive cultural attachment to the environment—a connection expressed in stories and song, in land-use practices, and in their history. In a profound sense, the countercultural agenda of the First Nations peoples of the Yukon rejected the tenets of economic growth proposed by governments, corporations, and many Yukon individuals. The First Nations preferred to open a space for the unimpeded development of their own cultural, social, and economic interests and values. They did so, in part, in collaboration with the people who had left the mainstream of North America in search of a new way to build a future.

## CONCLUSION

In the 1960s and 1970s, young and generally well-educated newcomers came to the Yukon seeking an alternative way of life. Self-sufficient and eager, many squatted in the bush, built their own cabins, planted gardens, and attempted a subsistence lifeway, often with mixed results. Others lived in town and took jobs but held similar values in terms of the environment—specifically, that the environment deserved acknowledgement and care. Together, and with some old-time Yukoners, they began to question the frantic pace of resource extraction and their apparent inability to be heard. The YCS provided a platform for the articulation of protest, to challenge national ideas of the North as Canada's future, with the dramatic environmental

changes that industrial activity implied. Once firmly established, the YCS worked most effectively within a familiar Western discourse of nature as a source of both human wealth and solace. Advocating for protected areas and more effective land-use regulation, the Yukon newcomer counterculture remained within a familiar political and cultural realm, seeking an appreciation of nature and a respect for the ecological mechanisms that ensure a healthy environment. Their enthusiasm contributed to the election of the NDP territorial government in 1985.

Yukon Aboriginal peoples, increasingly separated from their lands by government through the mid-twentieth century, faced a very different fight to maintain their connection to the environment. First Nations addressed the intercultural conflict of interests with a dual strategy of diplomatic negotiations with Canada (a fight *for* freedom) and a community-based strategy of adaptation (a fight *of* freedom). With a culturally distinct relationship to the environment, Yukon First Nations struggled to frame their connection to traditional territories in ways that could be understood by Canada's negotiators who wished to understand the land as property. As there is, as yet, no common understanding of the parameters of the Yukon First Nations' relationships with the environment, the long-term validity of the present treaty—the set of agreements and implementation schedules signed between 1992 and the present—remains uncertain. As with the intracultural arrangement wrested by the Western counterculture, the Yukon First Nations intercultural agreements are similarly volatile and remain open for continuing negotiation.

The Yukon countercultures, both newcomer and Aboriginal, reacted to the excesses of the modern colonial administration and the aggressive capitalist economy through the second half of the twentieth century. They pursued different objectives and developed their own tactics. However, both held to the idea that whatever their relationship to the environment might be, the two groups would have to live together and share that environment between them. The diversity inherent in cultural pluralism, and its possibilities of multiple futures, demands a respect and appreciation of fellow travellers.



## NOTES

- 1 I am indebted to many Yukoners for sharing both their research and their personal experiences. The work of historical researchers Will Jones and Gail Lotenberg established a solid foundation for my interpretation of the countercultures in the Yukon. Both Gerry Couture and Tim Gerberding generously shared their memories of settling on the Yukon River in the early 1970s, while elders Ione Christenson and Phyllis Simpson, who grew up on the Yukon River in the 1930s and 1940s, and Linda Johnson, retired Yukon archivist, kept me from making up stuff about the old days.

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in elders Percy Henry, Mabel Henry, Peggy Kormendy, J. J. Van Bibber, Angie Joseph Rear, Ronald Johnson, Julia Morberg, and John Semple, among many others, have patiently guided my work with their community, while Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in citizens Debbie Nagano, Gerald Isaac, Freda Roberts, Edith Fraser, Georgette McLeod, and Kylie Van Every regularly questioned my ideas and suggested alternative ways of thinking things through. Sue Parsons, Jody Beaumont, and Glenda Bolt, cultural heritage employees of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in government, always welcomed me into their offices.

I am also grateful to Colin Coates, the participants of the

Counterculture and Environment workshop on Hornby Island, and two anonymous peer reviewers for their suggestions for improving my original paper.

- 2 Tim Gerberding, interview with the author, 22 February 2011.
- 3 Innis-Taylor (1900–1983) was born in England, was raised in Canada, trained with the Royal Flying Corps in World War I, served as a Mountie in western Canada, and ended up in Whitehorse in 1926. He subsequently took to mining and later worked as a purser on the Yukon River boats. His Yukon experience made him a suitable chief of operations for Byrd's Antarctic expeditions in the 1930s. During World War II he was an officer in the United States Air Force, supervising weather observations and air-rescue services. In the postwar period he provided Arctic survival training for Western air forces and airlines and developed Arctic survival equipment. In his later years he returned to the Yukon, undertaking conservation education, recording historic sites, working toward the establishment of the territorial archives, and providing advice to all comers from his office in the federal building. He was particularly interested in the welfare of young people coming into the Yukon. <http://arctic.synergiesprairies.ca/arctic/index.php/arctic/article/view/2173/2150>.
- 4 The highway to Mayo and Dawson, and its Top of the World

- extension to the Alaska boundary, was completed in 1955. In January 1959, intermittent construction of the Dempster Highway began to support oil field development; construction was eventually finished in 1979. The Robert Campbell Highway, originally completed as a mining road to Tungsten, NWT, in the early 1960s, completed a connection to the Dawson Highway for the Faro mine in the late 1960s. In the mid-1980s a road extension south to the Alaskan port of Skagway replaced rail haulage for the Faro mine. Since then, no significant additions have been made to the Yukon road system.
- 5 Claus M. Naske, "The Taiya Project," *BC Studies*, nos. 91–92 (Autumn/Winter 1991): 5–50.
  - 6 Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.
  - 7 G. Robertson, "Administration for Development in Northern Canada: The Growth and Evolution of Government," *Journal of the Institute of Public Administration in Canada* 3, no. 4 (1960): 362.
  - 8 Jack Hope, *Yukon* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), 8.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, 50–51. Conflation of Rudy and Yvonne Burian's statements.
  - 10 Catherine McClellan with Lucie Birckel, Robert Bringham, James A. Fall, Carol McCarthy, and Janice R. Sheppard, *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of Yukon Indians* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1987), 94.
  - 11 Quoted in Gail Lotenberg, "Recognizing Diversity: An Historical Context for Co-managing Wildlife in the Kluane Region, 1890–Present" (manuscript report, Parks Canada, 1998).
  - 12 Hope, *Yukon*, 9.
  - 13 Percy Henry, interview with the author, 25 February 2011.
  - 14 Percy Henry, personal communication, Spring 1996.
  - 15 Gerberding spoke about the ease of getting Yukon land around Dawson in the early 1970s. All one needed to do was identify the place, register their interest in the Lands Office, and, eventually, obtain a survey of the plot—at a significant cost. He paid \$1,200 to get the survey done a number of years after settling.
  - 16 Sherry Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.
  - 17 Hope, *Yukon*, 8.
  - 18 *Ibid.*, 9.
  - 19 John Lammers, *A Castle on the Frontier* (Salt Spring Island, BC: Gray Jay, 2004); Hope, *Yukon*, 155.
  - 20 Lammers, quoted in Hope, *Yukon*, 156.
  - 21 "The issues . . . and a course of action," *YCS Newsletter* (Whitehorse), no. 1 (Fall 1968), 3.
  - 22 Lammers, *A Castle on the Frontier*, 429.

- 23 The Alaska Conservation Society was established in 1960 at the University of Alaska Fairbanks to lead a citizens' charge against both Project Chariot, a nuclear bomb engineering project promoted by Edward Teller, and the Ramparts Dam on the Yukon River. Dan O'Neill, *The Firecracker Boys: H-bombs, Inupiat Eskimos, and the Roots of the Environmental Movement* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994).
- 24 Will Jones, *A History of the Yukon Conservation Society: Focus on Kluane National Park 1968–1992* (Whitehorse: Yukon Conservation Society, 1997), 11–12.
- 25 Many of the non-Yukon members had been clients of Lammers's wilderness tours. Hope, *Yukon*, 154.
- 26 Quoted in *ibid.*, 51.
- 27 The national historical commemoration of the Klondike gold rush beginning in the late 1950s was prompted by a government desire to highlight a northern vision of economic development. David Neufeld, "Parks Canada and the Commemoration of the North: History and Heritage," in *Northern Visions: New Perspectives on the North in Canadian History*, ed. Kerry Abel and Ken Coates (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2001), 45–75.
- 28 The National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada, a citizen group dedicated to raising the profile of protected areas, was established in 1963 with significant financial support and overall direction from Parks Canada. It was renamed the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society in 1986.
- 29 Jones, *History of the Yukon Conservation Society*, 13.
- 30 "Editorial," *YCS Newsletter* (Whitehorse), no. 4 (May 1973), 2; emphasis in original.
- 31 Jones, *History of the Yukon Conservation Society*, 31.
- 32 Resources—Lands, National Parks, Natural Resources Council, file 3, vol. 180, series 1, Erik Nielsen Fonds, Yukon Archives, Whitehorse.
- 33 Lynda Ehrlich, interview by Will Jones, Research Collection for Yukon Conservation Society, Parks Canada, Whitehorse. Even as recently as the early twenty-first century the remains of this old guard of hippie-hating anti-environmentalists lingered in the Whitehorse office of the Federal Mining Recorder. I had arranged with the Mining Recorder to exchange a Yukon mining history book I'd published for their digitized inventory of air photos. When I arrived in the office and introduced myself to the counter staff person, she not so amiably replied, "Oh, you're that asshole from Parks."
- 34 "The NDP Rise to Power in the Yukon," *The National*, CBC Television, broadcast 14 May 1985, <http://www.cbc.ca/player/Digital+Archives/Politics/Provincial+and+Territori->

- al+Politics/Yukon+Elections/  
ID/1803621162/.
- 35 The three separations and their effects were identified by a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in community committee in a proposal to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in the early 1990s. The author worked with the group as secretary.
- 36 For details of the effects of the sanctuary's creation on the Southern Tutchone community of Burwash Landing, and the community's response to separation from their lands, see David Neufeld, "Kluane National Park Reserve, 1923–1974: Modernity and Pluralism," in *A Century of Parks Canada, 1911–2011*, ed. Elizabeth Claire Campbell (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011), 235–72.
- 37 More details on these regulation changes are available in Lotenberg, "Recognizing Diversity."
- 38 David Neufeld, "Public Memory and Public Holidays: Discovery Day and the Establishment of a Klondike Society," *Going Public: Public History Review*, no. 8 (2000): 74–86; David Neufeld and Linda Johnson, "Local History of the Yukon," in *Encyclopedia of Local History*, 2nd ed., ed. Carol Kammen and Amy H. Wilson (Lanham, MD: American Association of State and Local History, 2012), 587–89.
- 39 James Tully, "The Struggles of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom," in *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton, and Will Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36–59. For more details on the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in fight of freedom, see David Neufeld and Georgette McLeod, "Call and Response: The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Dänojà Zho Culture Centre: A Canadian First Nation Statement of Cultural Presence" (paper presented at the Northern Governance Policy Research Conference, Yellowknife, November 2009), abstract at NGPRC website, accessed 5 January 2013, <http://ngprc.circumpolarhealth.org/abstracts>.
- 40 Council for Yukon Indians, *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* (Brampton, ON: Charters, 1977), accessed 5 January 2013, [http://www.eco.gov.yk.ca/pdf/together\\_today\\_for\\_our\\_children\\_tomorrow.pdf](http://www.eco.gov.yk.ca/pdf/together_today_for_our_children_tomorrow.pdf).
- 41 Numerous negotiations on treaty implementation continue, and several court cases launched by Yukon First Nations seek to clarify the opportunities and possibilities under the Umbrella Final Agreement between Canada, the Council for Yukon Indians, and the Yukon Territory. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in alone has pursued at least two cases: one during their negotiations in the mid-1990s and a current case testing the terms of the land-use planning chapter of the agreement.
- 42 This section is based upon numerous personal communications from Percy Henry and Peggy Kormendy, both of whom

- were young chiefs of the Dawson Indian Band Council in the 1960s and 70s.
- 43 On a joint First Nations and Fishers' Association project, see Dan O'Neill, *A Land Gone Lonesome: An Inland Voyage along the Yukon River* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 18–29. On the earlier days of contact between back-to-the-landers (a group he calls “back-to-the-bushers”) and Native Americans in the Eagle area of Alaska, see John McPhee, *Coming into the Country* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), part 3.
- 44 Jody Cox, “The Upper Yukon River, The Salmon and the People: A History of the Salmon Fisheries” (draft manuscript report, Parks Canada, Whitehorse, April 2000), 94.
- 45 Ibid., 94n273. Cox points out that the allocation of campsites and fish eddies on the middle Yukon River is an informal affair (pp. 97–98). A map from the late 1970s in the land negotiation files of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in archives shows the camps and fishing areas identified by the First Nation for their citizens, mostly close to Dawson, thus allowing others to use areas not identified as such, further downstream from town.
- 46 Ibid., 94.