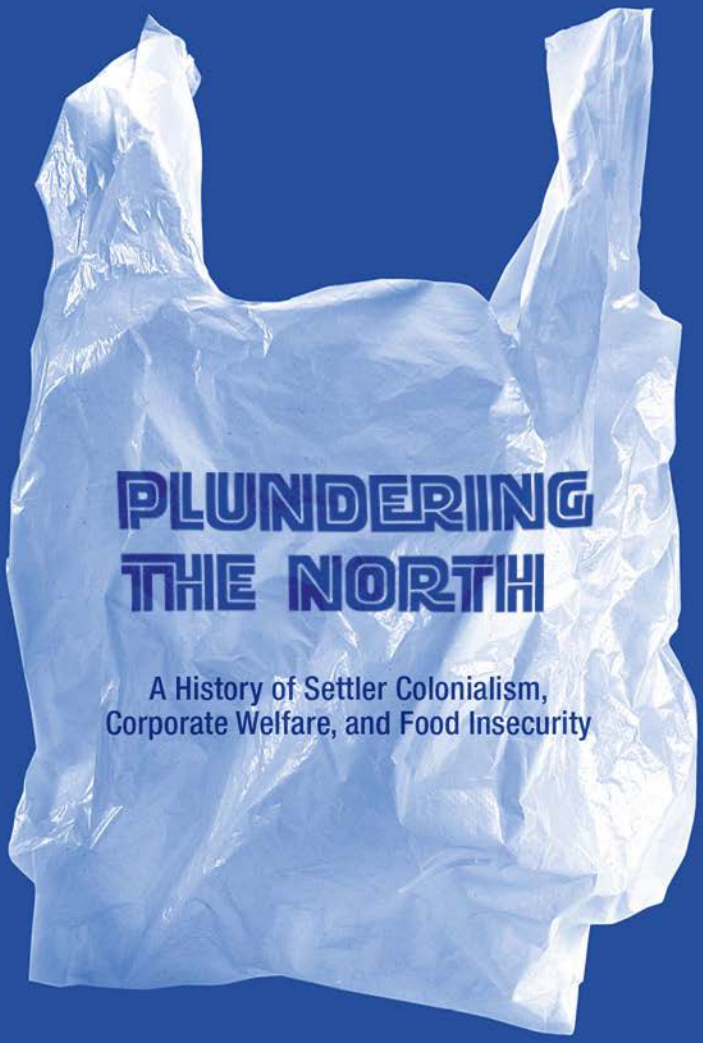

# PLUNDERING THE NORTH

## A History of Settler Colonialism, Corporate Welfare, and Food Insecurity

Kristin Burnett
and Travis Hay

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UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA PRESS

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Corporate Welfare, and Food Insecurity
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Current Northern Store/NorthMart Locations

# PLUNDERING THE NORTH

# INTRODUCTION

*I think it's just the cost, really. I mean, how can I say this? You know: I am relatively healthy and I try to feed my family in a reasonably healthy way, but I buy ice cream, you know? . . . but like: it's eleven dollars for a tub of ice cream. And so, it's just the overall amount of money that families have to spend on food. . . . It's over fifty percent of your household budget. And that was based on somebody else's nutritious food basket estimate. Most people don't want to eat, necessarily, that food.*[1]

—Community Member [Sarah]

Sarah (a pseudonym)[2] is a member of a fly-in First Nation in the geographic area now known as northern Ontario who works to address access to and the affordability of market-based foods in her community. She and her partner are also active harvesters and share the foods they harvest with extended family and friends. Sarah lives out a community reality of securing wider access to food for her family and those around her, but is an autonomous individual who makes her own decisions about what it means to live "well" or "healthy." She is also a person of some privilege in her community: Sarah is well educated, lives in a dual-income household, and helps operate a food market that brings fresh foods at cost into her community on a bi-weekly basis. Nevertheless, food access remains a significant concern for Sarah and her family.

Sarah's community has a Northern Store—a retail chain operated by the North West Company (NWC), the successor of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). The Northern Store is frequently the only full-service grocery store in many First Nation and Inuit communities located in northern Canada. The food sold at the Northern Store in Sarah's First Nation is exorbitantly expensive—at least double the cost of the same food sold in southern Canada.[3]

The NWC has consolidated a near monopoly on food sales in the Canadian North and expanded its operations in the early twenty-first century to include financial and banking services, medical and pharmaceutical services, bottled and purified water sales, as well as postal operations. Even though Sarah's First Nation runs initiatives intended to bolster Indigenous food sovereignty and security distinct from the NWC (such as harvester support programs), they are regularly forced to rely on NWC business operations for many state-sponsored programs intended to support the health and well-being of the most vulnerable community members. Sarah explains:

> As far as prenatal programs are concerned . . . we're given these vouchers that can be handed out to pregnant women and women who are . . . breastfeeding their infant for up to one year. And those food vouchers, it's for milk and some food. Those are only redeemable at the Northern Store. . . . Also, one of the programs at the Health Centre would buy emergency supplies like diapers or that kind of thing, and that would come from the Northern Store. So, within [a local health organization], we would just request a purchase order, and that purchase order would be redeemed over there. Technically, I think we could redeem our purchase orders in the other local stores, but we don't do that so much—well, because the Northern Store is the only full service grocery store.[4]

In this context, it is very difficult for people to purchase food and household goods locally or run community programming without using the Northern Store.

We began with Sarah's story because her experience with the Northern Store and, by extension, the NWC reveals the contemporary contexts in which people living in northern First Nations and Inuit communities are forced to make choices about food. First and foremost, the cost of food and other essential goods in northern communities is prohibitive, difficult to access, and available from a very limited number of retailers. Second, what is available at northern retailers is largely predetermined by non-Indigenous people who do not live in the Canadian North. Since the Second World War, the federal government has increasingly sought to govern which foods Indigenous peoples should or should not eat, either directly through forced purchasing lists and food subsidies or indirectly through shame-based nutrition education programs and initiatives that consistently position Indigenous

bodies as unhealthy and, increasingly in the latter part of the twentieth century, as obese and in desperate need of intervention.[5] The introduction of market-based foods of poor quality, divorced from socio-cultural meanings, worked alongside provincial and federal governments in the twentieth century to undermine Indigenous food sovereignties through the criminalization of harvesting practices, severing the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and alienating people and communities from their territories. Third, northern grocery stores occupy a position of considerably more power in the socio-economic life of the communities in which they operate compared to their southern counterparts. State-funded programs and services have long been routed first through the HBC and now through the NWC, enabling corporations to benefit enormously from providing relief, social services, and food programming. Finally, the NWC, like the federal government, dedicates a considerable amount of its resources to sanitizing its operations by employing a discursive chicanery to make it appear as if they are providing a service or "doing a favour" for northern communities that helps rather than hinders Indigenous food sovereignties.[6] We interrogate how relational discourses of service provision, benevolence, and "aid" continue to permeate much of how the state, the HBC, and its successor the NWC position themselves in Indigenous communities and in northern Canada more broadly. The Canadian government has certainly not, as it claims, "made a healthy, modern lifestyle a reality . . . in the magnificent yet stark wilderness" of the Canadian North, nor does it have "preserving quality and freshness down to a science."[7] Instead, the state has done quite the opposite by ensuring First Nations and Inuit communities who have thrived in their territories since time immemorial do so with increasing difficulty. The federal government and its exercise of colonial governance has facilitated the presence and growth of corporate interests in northern First Nations and Inuit communities.

The objective of this book, then, is to unpack the history of federal Indigenous food policies and corporate practices in the provincial and far North in Canada in the post–Second World War period. We seek to elaborate upon how the state in the last century has manufactured food insecurity and retail monopolies in northern First Nations and Inuit communities. A historical examination reveals that the present-day northern retail landscape is not the result of the business acumen of the NWC's executives or the perceived failure of Indigenous peoples to become more like European-Canadians. Instead, settler colonialism and corporate welfare have created the current

food landscape. In order to illuminate the history of this problem, we trace the partnership established between the federal government and the HBC in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing in particular on the ways in which food and foodways became a technology of assimilation used by the state in their efforts to destroy the national patterns of Indigenous peoples and ultimately acquire their land. Built on the foundations of the former Northern Department of the HBC and purchased by HBC executives and private investors in 1987, the NWC currently holds a position of market dominance in most northern First Nations and Inuit communities. The NWC inherited many of the relationships and business practices developed and employed by the HBC over centuries of operations on Turtle Island.[8] Building on the foundations laid by the HBC, the NWC leveraged their market share of food sales to include other essential services unavailable elsewhere in many northern communities, like banking and pharmacies. This business model has proven so profitable that the NWC has exported it further south to rural and low-income communities in the south Pacific and Caribbean.

We think it is extremely important to understand the historical conditions of possibility that produced and maintained the current circumstances in northern Indigenous communities wherein high rates of food insecurity persist and the solutions generated by the state to address food insecurity are divorced from the systems in which they were produced. Moreover, what we are witnessing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the crafting of federal Indian policy are neoliberal ideologies where "the notion of free market rationalities" have come to inform state food policy, its proposed solutions, and the bodies upon which those policies/solutions are imposed. In other words, notions of "individualism, privatization, and decentralization reign supreme."[9] Such cold rationalities lie in direct opposition to the operation of Indigenous food sovereignties. By placing the discourses of the programs and government officials alongside the histories of state and corporate practices in the North, we can see how the settler state comes to understand itself as a benevolent, scientifically minded, and modern government through its project of assimilating Indigenous food systems to settler strategies of grocery shopping and market-based food consumption.

## Indigenous Food Sovereignties and Canadian Settler Colonialism

Our work focuses on those geographic regions in Canada that are currently known as the provincial norths and the Arctic or far North. We did not choose this geographic focus because these arbitrary divisions created by the colonial state accurately reflect the diversity of Indigenous nations and cultures. Rather, we explore settler colonial histories of assimilation and introduced foods in the northern First Nations and Inuit communities that are characterized by the federal and provincial governments as northern, rural, and "remote." Remote is used to refer to those communities that are accessible only by plane for the majority of the year. We examine a northern imaginary wherein the Canadian state casts the North as uninhabitable while simultaneously pilfering lucrative natural resources in the region. Discourses of the North as remote and vast have been (and are currently) used to legitimize the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their territories, making disproportionate rates of poverty and food insecurity appear normal and neutral.

The provincial norths are the sub-arctic region that runs from the coast of British Columbia (through the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador) across the Canadian Shield to the coast of Labrador.[10] Directly north of the sub-arctic lies the Arctic, popularly referred to as the far North, and includes the following socio-political divisions: Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Yukon, Nunatsiavut, and Nunavik. First Nations located in the provincial norths briefly have access to more southern markets via seasonal winter roads. This intermittent access is being rapidly reduced due to climate change. Food, goods, gas, and building materials are transported into "remote" northern communities through long and complicated shipping routes, including trains, planes, barges (for communities located along the coast), and winter roads. Heavy materials and foods with long shelf lives are usually shipped during the winter months on seasonal roads.

The Indigenous peoples and nations that have lived in the geographic areas that make up Canada's provincial and far norths occupy diverse cultural, social, ecological, geographical, and climatic realities. Given that "the North" makes up more than half of the land mass now known as Canada, enormous variation exists in physical landscapes, plant and animal life, and Indigenous food sovereignties.[11] However, what remains consistent across these territories and diverse cultures are the significant, and in some cases

rapid, changes that have taken place during the twentieth century. For instance, the provincial and far norths have experienced economic and environmental degradation through resource extraction, climate change, and the imposition of federal Indian policies that saw the creation of reserves and forced sedentary living, the internment of children in residential schools, and other violent interventions associated with the Canadian settler colonial project. Provincial hunting laws, deputized game wardens, and criminalized Indigenous food economies all played foundational roles in limiting food choices for Indigenous families in the North. Today, many northern First Nations and Inuit communities' food systems are comprised of a mixture of land- and water-based foods acquired through hunting, trapping, and fishing; locally grown and harvested foods; and introduced market-based foods that are shipped into communities along extended transportation routes. These market foods are sold in what is often the only store in the community at more than twice the price of the same food sold in southern parts of Canada.[12] Discourses around the high price of foods generally focus on long transportation routes and extreme environmental conditions,[13] obscuring the processes of settler colonialism that have been taking place for more than a century.

The assault on Indigenous food sovereignties by the Canadian state has eroded the ability of Indigenous communities to govern and determine all aspects of their food systems, and as a result, food insecurity rates in northern Indigenous communities have skyrocketed. Food insecurity is measured at the household level and refers to "inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints."[14] To illustrate the severity of food insecurity for Indigenous communities in northern Canada, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, issued a report on his visit to Canada in 2012. De Schutter notes in the report that 60 percent of on-reserve Indigenous households in northern Manitoba were food insecure, as were 70 percent of adults in Nunavut. These rates of food insecurity, he observed, were six times higher than the national average and "represent[ed] the highest document[ed] food insecurity rate for any Aboriginal population in a developed country."[15] The federal government has described food insecurity in northern Indigenous communities in Canada as a "serious public health issue."[16] More significantly, the long-term impact of food insecurity has grave cumulative physical, social, and mental health consequences on both children and adults.[17]

Indigenous health scholars and those engaged in food studies have been some of the leading academic voices in underscoring the ongoing nature of northern food insecurity as well as its alarming impact on the well-being of First Nations and Inuit communities.[18] Of particular relevance here are scholars who centre Indigenous food sovereignties alongside conversations about food insecurity. Indigenous food sovereignty refers to the capacity of Indigenous peoples to control all aspects of their food systems, including production, distribution, cultural knowledges and practices, and environmental safety.[19] According to Michelle Daigle, Indigenous food sovereignties are both "a resistance against the inter-workings of settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism, and a resurgence of Indigenous forms of authority and autonomy."[20] Foreclosures of Indigenous food sovereignty have thus been identified as worthy objects of critique as well as examples of settler colonialism.

Settler colonialism operates distinctly from other forms of colonialism, such as classical colonialism or post-colonialism, in that it "considers those political and geographic contexts in which the colonisers never left."[21] The assertion of settler authority and sovereignty is predicated upon the erasure of Indigenous peoples through what Patrick Wolfe describes as a "logic of elimination."[22] Here, Indigenous peoples are targeted by policies that seek to extinguish them as distinct peoples, cultures, and nations through a variety of eliminatory strategies, including those directed at Indigenous food and foodways such as hunting and fishing regulations.[23] Settler colonialism, in Wolfe's formulation, "strives for the dissolution of Indigenous nations and sovereignties in order to erect a new colonial society on the expropriated land base" and introduces alien social, economic, and political orders that are typically, though not exclusively, dominated by settlers.[24] Thus, settler colonialism functions not merely through the attempted elimination or destruction of Indigenous sovereignties or foodways, but through the efforts of settler states and polities to make Indigenous peoples stop being Indigenous. In Wolfe's words, "settler colonialism destroys to replace,"[25] and the construction of a national identity rooted in whiteness, Britishness, heteropatriarchy, and middle-class values remains central to the dispossession of Indigenous nations and communities.[26]

Lorenzo Veracini theorized that settler colonial conditions included targeting Indigenous peoples through assimilatory policies intended to absorb them into the settler body politic through federal legislation like Canada's

Gradual Civilization Act (1857) and the Gradual Enfranchisement Act (1869). Veracini also includes "enforced sedentarisation" and "coerced lifestyle change" as part of the settler colonial toolkit to eliminate Indigenous national patterns and secure settler sovereignties.[27] The destruction and dispossession of Indigenous foodways figure prominently here and are visible within the genocidal policies and actions of the state through the incarceration of Indigenous children in residential schools, the criminalization of Indigenous healing practices and ceremony, the imposition of the pass system, and the non-recognition of treaty rights to hunting and fishing, to name but a few.[28] All of these policies sought to accomplish the ultimate goal of severing Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land. Recent federal supports for Indigenous harvesting and sovereignty must also be viewed cautiously. Glen Coulthard and Audra Simpson unpack these political economies and elaborate on how settler colonialism works to destabilize Indigenous sovereignties by enfolding and prescribing Indigeneity within limited and performative settler articulations.[29] Thus, the state seeks to reduce the operation of Indigenous food sovereignties to a limited and overregulated number of harvesting and land-based practices that do not threaten settler sovereignty or the vast amount of money to be made from selling poor quality market-based foods to Indigenous peoples. Such expressions directly contradict Indigenous articulations of food sovereignties where, as Dawn Morrison eloquently writes: "Food is a gift from the creator. In this respect, the right to food is sacred and cannot be constrained or recalled by colonial laws, policies, or institutions."[30]

Veracini further elaborates on the role played by foodways in what he describes as "settler gastrocolonialism" and the ways in which food became and remains central to the consolidation and reproduction of settler colonial polities. "Settler food is a prerequisite of settler colonialism," writes Veracini, "but also its outcome, because to make settler food, the foodways of the Indigenous populations must be disrupted . . . one social body must starve so that the reproduction of another can be ensured."[31] In this framing, the foodways of Indigenous peoples in the Canadian North and settler colonial locales elsewhere can be read historically as a conceptual battleground on which settler or Indigenous futurities have been secured or foreclosed. Billy-Ray Belcourt explicitly locates the imposition of settler foodways as a bio-political invasion. That is, as a lived experience of settler colonialism and Canadian federal Indian policy, statecraft, and interventionism (rather

than as a sociological reflection of free subjects making personal choices about what they eat).[32] Belcourt describes the politics of Indigenous food access by underscoring how on-reserve "junk food invades your diet and . . . the convenience store stymies personal agency" under conditions of food scarcity and unaffordability, given that "the protracted craving to eat junk food is stalled by the petty knowledge that those kinds of products are bad for you and that there is little you can do about it."[33] The lack of choice and food freedom in northern communities is a useful example of how settler governmentalities have functioned within the colonial project.

Settler governmentality refers to those spaces and processes when "apparatus[es] of the state come to embroil itself with the business of knowing and administering the lives and activities of the persons and things across a territory."[34] As a concept, governmentality is extremely relevant in the Canadian context, where settlers prefer the façade of political liberalism and benevolence as opposed to more overtly visible draconian modes of rule.[35] For example, Andrew Crosby and Jeffrey Monaghan have gone so far as to argue that, as a concept, "settler governmentality reflects the particular rationalities of governance that animate Canada's relationship with, and governance of, Indigenous peoples."[36] Going further, the pair cite Wolfe's "logic of elimination" to describe how, despite its liberal edifice, Canadian "settler governmentality implements techniques to eliminate Indigenous life-worlds."[37] Here, Canada's Food Guide serves as a fitting example of settler governmentality, given the extent to which it seeks to align the individual and everyday choices of Canadian and Indigenous subjects to the goals, values, practices, and priorities of the settler state. Charlotte Biltekoff notes that "dietary ideals are cultural, subjective, and political,"[38] and efforts to encourage people to eat "right" are inevitably about shaping, creating, and reforming particular subjects, especially those situated as "the other." Thus, what presents itself as rational, normalized, taken-for-granted, and common-sense nutrition advice and praxis, often involves two kinds of violence that operationalize the "logic of elimination." First, as Belcourt observes, foods linked to "dietary ideals" are frequently unavailable or unaffordable on many reserves, ultimately producing death and disease in a necropolitical fashion of physical suffering and violence. Second, eating like settlers represents, for Indigenous peoples, a form of social death or cultural genocide through what Veracini identified as "settler gastrocolonialism" and the destruction of Indigenous foodways.