

# **“INDIANS WEAR RED”**

**COLONIALISM, RESISTANCE,  
AND ABORIGINAL STREET GANGS**

**ELIZABETH COMACK, LAWRENCE DEANE,  
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*This book is dedicated to young Aboriginal people living in difficult circumstances,  
in the hope that your resistance will contribute to building a better world  
— for all of us.*

EXCERPT

It was all little cliques of just guys that were tight, little guys, like four or five guys here, four or five guys there, that were solid bros. They all kind of knew each other still 'cause we all grew up in the Youth Centre. So, you know, then you get out and everybody kind of started hanging out in the street, and in and out [of the detention centre], and everybody got tighter and tighter and the next thing you know it's just one or two of them .... First it was just like, "What do you think it is, bro? Do you wear this one or this one, a red rag or a black rag?" "I fuckin' wear a red rag. Fuck. We're Indians. Indians wear red." ... And the next thing you know we're in a fuckin' gang.

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The four of us have long been engaged in various kinds of work and research in Winnipeg's inner city. This book has benefited from what we have learned during that time from the many outstanding people working for community-based organizations in the inner city. In addition, two of us — Larry Morrissette and Lawrie Deane — have been actively involved with the issue of Aboriginal street gangs for some fifteen years now through

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As with any project that concerns issues of social inequality and social justice, and perhaps especially with work that involves urban Aboriginal people, we have been ever mindful of the ways in which privilege is so unevenly distributed in our society. We are also well aware of, and want to acknowledge, the privilege that we have been given in having the opportunity to both learn from so many Aboriginal people in Winnipeg's inner city and produce this book.

## INTRODUCTION

An elder told us a story that, on the surface, seemed to have nothing to do with Aboriginal street gangs. He told us of a time long ago when a boy was looking for answers to the troubles in his community. The boy travelled in one direction, then another, and another, until he had searched in all four directions. Wherever he sought answers he found only more questions, along with the advice to return home.

The answers, the elder was saying to us, are within each Aboriginal person, and within the Aboriginal community. That was good advice. Return home — to the traditional Aboriginal values of love and respect, courage, honesty, wisdom, humility, and truth. Reclaim those values, and use them, he was saying to young Aboriginal people involved with street gangs, to rebuild your community. After exploring the activities of Aboriginal street gangs and the colonial context within which they occur, we came to a similar conclusion.

One of us, Larry Morrissette, had asked George Courchene and his son and daughter-in-law, Eric and Sharon Courchene, to meet with us to give their views on Aboriginal street gangs and talk about possible solutions to the issues surrounding those gangs. George is an elder; Eric and Sharon are cultural facilitators. Each had been working for years with young Aboriginal people. They speak from experience. They themselves live in the traditional ways. They are thoughtful, and wise. We met in Winnipeg's North End, and it was George who told us the story about a boy's quest. We were asked not to repeat the exact details of the story because they are typically told only in the sweat lodge.

Research with Aboriginal people necessarily has to be done in a way that is respectful, and between equals. Just as we honoured George and Eric and Sharon by passing tobacco in the traditional way and providing them with an honorarium for sharing their knowledge and wisdom, we treated the Aboriginal street gang members we spoke to with a similar respect. We passed tobacco; we gave them honorariums for sharing their experiences with us. We do not approve of much of what the street gang members have done, and what some are still doing. But we think we understand why they have taken the path that they have taken. We believe that the solutions will

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come through taking a different path, one that draws deeply upon who they are as Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal street gang members saw our research project as a way of telling their stories and releasing their pain, and, because we passed tobacco, they saw the research as something that would lead to action and change. They want reciprocity; they have helped us and so we should now help them. Something should come from the conversations that we have had with them, and from their sharing with us such painful and intimate stories.

When we passed tobacco to George and Sharon and Eric, they told us traditional stories. They never mentioned the word "gang." Theirs was not a critique of "bad behaviour." They were not judgmental. They did not call street gang members "thugs" or "punks" or worse. They did not suggest or imply that they are better than street gang members. Rather, they offered a way of thinking that involves Aboriginal people understanding their identity, understanding their place in traditional societies. George Courchene spent considerable time describing traditional clan systems to us. The clan structure and extended family are important. These systems provide particular roles for Aboriginal people in the context of the community as a whole. Inherent in clan systems is the idea that each individual has certain responsibilities related to his or her role. Thus, each person fits into the community. But today, many Aboriginal people have been severed from those traditional systems, and from those roles and responsibilities, as often as not by force. They don't fit, anywhere.

The elder was saying to us, in the indirect way elders often use, that Aboriginal people need to go back to who they authentically are. Because Aboriginal people have been subjected to horrors in the process of colonization, and many have lost their way, the way forward is actually in going back, in reconnecting with traditional identities. With those traditional identities come responsibilities to be active and to promote change within their communities. George was saying that too many Aboriginal people have fallen prey to the dominant ideology of these times, and in doing so have given up their positive traditional values. They need to reclaim those values.

The story of the boy's quest was not intended to be literally true. The boy's personal journey took him in all four directions, consistent with the symbolism of the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel represents the values and the ceremonies and the ways of being that are passed down by the ancestors. The boy is on a quest: to find a way to heal, and to create a better life for his people. But in each direction that he searched, the boy was told that the answers lie within himself and within his community, and in particular in the ceremonies and teachings of the elders. The central core of

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a traditional Aboriginal value system is that life is a gift, and thus we ought to respect all life. That is the opposite of what the street gang members we spoke with were doing. Too often they showed little if any respect for life. So they should go back to those traditional values. The elder was making no specific recommendations; he was suggesting no particular “programs.” He was talking about the values. He was saying, go back to your traditional ways, understand your clan responsibilities, become a helper in your community. Learn how to build a sweat lodge and to do the traditional ceremonies.

The sweat lodge is a place of cleansing, of sharing with peers; in the darkness of the lodge each participant is equal to everyone else. The rocks heated on the fire and placed inside the sweat lodge by the helper are the grandfathers. They represent the wisdom of the ancestors. Those in the sweat lodge are asking the ancestors for help. They are acknowledging the healing power of the traditional ways and values. The performance of the traditional ceremonies is a reminder of the importance of life, and the importance of Aboriginal people’s extended families, their partners and children, their community. These are among the values built into George’s story of a boy’s quest. The implication is that to be immersed in these indigenous ways of being is to abandon the negative stereotypes created by colonialism, and to recognize the importance and the depth of what it is to be an Aboriginal person, and to be Aboriginal people. The answers are not “out there,” but “in here,” in the traditional value base of Aboriginal people.

The elder’s story is a story of hope. Hope lies in negotiating one’s identity as an Aboriginal person, and understanding the history of colonization and what it did to a rich and successful indigenous way of life. This is a process of decolonization, of coming to understand that the pain and misery that so many Aboriginal people have experienced and continue to experience are not a function of individual failings, but rather are the product of a historical process that caused great damage by severing almost all Aboriginal people, often forcibly, from their ways of being. A global capitalist system destroys much in its process of creating wealth, and Aboriginal people have been among those who have borne the brunt of that destruction. They were pushed to the margins of the dominant economy and culture; subjected to the Indian Act and the Indian agent; prohibited from engaging in their traditional cultural and spiritual ways. Their children were forcibly seized by agents of the Canadian state and incarcerated in residential schools, where they were separated from their families and prohibited from using their languages and taught to be ashamed of being Aboriginal. The massive damage continues to ravage Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal street gangs are a product of this process. We reap what we sow.

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George Courchene's story about a boy's quest suggests that Aboriginal people need to reclaim their traditional values, and use these as the foundation upon which they can rebuild lives and communities. This is a non-assimilationist strategy. Aboriginal people want to participate in the society in which they now find themselves. But they should do so, the elder was telling us, as proud Aboriginal people, and in the context of a deep understanding and appreciation of what it is to be an Aboriginal person.

There are no easy answers to the serious Aboriginal street gang problems that we explore in the following pages. There are no "quick fixes." The solutions are difficult, and finding them requires a good deal of rethinking of long-held beliefs — on the part of both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal communities. But in George's story of a boy searching for answers, there is hope.

## POVERTY, STREET GANGS, AND COLONIALISM

At the age of twelve Tyler left a troubled home life in his Aboriginal community and made his way to Winnipeg. Landing in the North End, one of the city's large inner-city communities, he soon plugged into street gang life and its culture. As Tyler recalled, "a lot of parties" went on — "lots of parties. Like, I remember going party to party to party in the north side." Schooling seemed irrelevant — the main attraction was just to "stay in school so you could sell drugs." That particular business arose from necessity.

You're on your own, you know, you got rent to pay, you got to do something. I remember the first thing I did was I figured out the prices of marijuana and I saved up enough to buy myself a bag of marijuana and I sold that bag and I made myself a couple of dollars off of it. So I thought, well hey, I found something to support myself.

In his mid-teens Tyler joined an Aboriginal street gang and became a striker, which meant "You got to do whatever you're told, and even though you don't agree with it you just do it, a lot of violence and a lot of, you know, crime and stuff." As he became more senior in the gang he began hustling drugs and supervising the work of other street-level sellers, which involved a regular work routine:

In the morning I'd check my phone to see who called and check my text messages. I'd go and see who's on call on the lines — 'cause we had different drug lines and different houses happening — and then organize who's working where. And then I'd drive around and I'd go pick up money and then drop off more drugs.

Violence was a central part of Tyler's life. "A lot of fighting with other youth over gang colours and stuff and ... then there's the violence of being an angry kid." His anger came "from an abusive father." It came from "not having anything for myself, just having to stand on my own two feet, yeah. So, you know, when you want to stand on your own two feet you're not going to let nobody push you around and that's pretty much how it was."

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The result was a raft of criminal charges — for stealing cars, assaults, dealing drugs, and armed robbery. “You know, you do an armed robbery with your friends, that’s a fuckin’ adrenaline rush right there.” Doing crimes landed him in a detention centre as a youth. “You’re locked in that little cell and of course it’s shitty and you want to get out of there. But at the same time you’re so immersed in that lifestyle you know you’re going to be back anyway so you make the most of it.” Turning eighteen “just opened up the doors to all the other jails.” Being sent to jail as an adult “was an ordinary life at the time. ... You just graduate to the next institution.”

Now, at twenty-seven years of age, Tyler reflected back on what it meant to grow up like that: “A large effect, huge, huge, you know. Where you come from is where you’re going and it’s hard to get off that track once you’re on the track.” Given his criminal record, it was especially hard getting off that track, “Even to be a fuckin’ telemarketer, you know, are you bondable? The story of my adult life is, are you bondable? And that question is a killer because then you won’t get the job.”

When Tyler finally did get a job as a demolition worker the wages were disheartening. His first day on the job he was told to break up a wall with a sledgehammer. He said he swung that sledgehammer as hard as he could and “boom,” the wall didn’t budge. “Swung it again, boom. Started sweating, thinking ‘Ten bucks an hour, what the fuck is this shit, you know? I could make ten bucks in ten minutes.’ So it was a humbling experience to get into the workforce when you’re used to so much money, and then you work for a whole day and you make so little.”

Later on Tyler got a job working with street-involved youth. He loved it, was good at it, and made a positive impact on the kids. By then, though, he had a family of his own and needed to earn a living wage. Because “youth care workers are paid one of the lowest wages in the province,” Tyler said he “would come home with little cheques and a baby on the way. I couldn’t have that. So that was the main obstacle, was the pay.” Now he was working construction, “but it’s not what I want to do.”

Tyler was philosophical about his life. “The way I think is you can’t live your life based on regret. You do what you do, your past is your past, but you can also make your future.” He refused to let his past get him down. “If anything, it empowered me and made me a stronger person.” He also has a sociological analysis of the problems permeating Winnipeg’s inner-city communities: “I think the gangs, the drugs, and the violence are just a by-product of the poverty and desperation. That’s what I think. If you really want to tackle issues that these youth are going through, then you really have to look at poverty.”

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This book does just that — we “look at poverty” to tackle the issues encountered by Aboriginal youth. One issue in particular is the emergence and proliferation of Aboriginal street gangs like the one that Tyler joined. Street gangs have long attracted public and academic attention in the United States, where there is a long-standing tradition of street gang research (for some of the earlier work, see: Thrasher 1927; Whyte 1943; Cohen 1955; Miller 1966; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Yablonsky 1962; Block 1963; Spergel 1964; Short and Strodtbeck 1965). The advent of Aboriginal street gangs in Canada, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon and research in this area is sparse (see, for example, Buddle 2011; Goodwill 2009; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008; Fontaine 2006). It was in the mid-1990s that Winnipeg garnered its reputation in the media as the “gang capital of Canada” and names of Aboriginal street gangs — such as Indian Posse, Manitoba Warriors, and Native Syndicate — became part of the public discourse. Since then, Aboriginal street gangs have become equated with the prevalence of crime, violence, and the illegal drug trade in Winnipeg’s inner-city communities (Carlson 2009; Comack and Silver 2006 and 2008).

Concerns about street gangs in Canada have fuelled calls from conservatives to “get tough on crime” and impose “law and order” solutions that include heightened police surveillance of inner-city communities, more rigorous legal provisions that define street gangs as “criminal organizations,” and harsher prison terms for street gang members (Report of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights 2012; Mallea 2011; Helmer 2009). While these “get tough” strategies offer the promise of a quick and ready solution, they will not quell the tide of Aboriginal kids such as Tyler being swept into the gang life. This is because the roots of the Aboriginal street gang issue run deeper than these solutions contemplate. The roots can be traced to the impact of global economic restructuring, to neoliberal forms of governance — and to colonialism.

Understanding why Winnipeg has been labelled the “gang capital of Canada” requires not just looking at poverty, but also acknowledging the particular *form* of poverty—specifically, spatially concentrated, racialized poverty— that has become entrenched in inner-city communities. The emergence of this spatially concentrated, racialized poverty in inner cities throughout North America is now well recognized (see, for example, Wilson 1987; Wacquant 2008). So too are the links of this phenomenon to the emergence and accentuation, especially over the past thirty years, of street gang activity (Hagedorn 2008; Klein 2007; Bourgois 1996 and 2003). Specific to the Winnipeg context, however, is colonialism and its present-day

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impact on the lives of Aboriginal people, including high rates of poverty.

Of major cities in Canada, Winnipeg has the highest density of Aboriginal people — 68,380 in 2006, representing 10 percent of the total population of the Winnipeg Census Metropolitan Area. Aboriginal people in Winnipeg constitute a diverse population. The city is home to one of the largest Métis communities in Canada. In 2006, 40,980 persons living in Winnipeg identified themselves as Métis, accounting for 60 percent of the city's Aboriginal population. Another 25,900 (38 percent) were identified as First Nations and 350 (less than 1 percent) as Inuit (another 2 percent reported multiple or other Aboriginal responses) (Statistics Canada 2010: 6). The Aboriginal population of Winnipeg is young and growing. About half (49 percent) of the population was under the age of twenty-five (compared to 30 percent of non-Aboriginal people) in 2006, and the population had grown by 22 percent in the previous five years (Statistics Canada 2010: 5).

Aboriginal people are overrepresented among the ranks of Winnipeg's poor. In 2005 over four in ten (43 percent) Aboriginal people — compared to 16 percent of non-Aboriginal people — were living under the low-income cut-off (LICO), Canada's unofficial but commonly used "poverty line." Almost six in ten (57 percent) Aboriginal children aged fourteen years and under in Winnipeg were living under the LICO, compared to 20 percent of non-Aboriginal children (Statistics Canada 2010: 13).

While poverty can be found in pockets throughout the city, it is spatially concentrated in Winnipeg's inner city. Aboriginal people make up some 21 percent of the population of Winnipeg's inner-city communities (MacKinnon 2009: 32). While 20 percent of Winnipeg households were living in poverty in 2006, that figure was 40 percent for inner-city households. For Aboriginal households in the inner city, the figure was much higher — at 65 percent (MacKinnon 2009: 30). Understanding the poverty–street gang relation, therefore, involves attending to the ways in which colonization has contoured and conditioned Aboriginal people's lives.

Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, described colonization — especially the forced removal of some 150,000 Aboriginal children from their homes and their incarceration in residential schools — as an act of genocide against Aboriginal people that left an indelible impact on Canadian society (Puxley 2012). This genocide caused deep and lasting damage — or "cumulative waves of trauma" (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004: iii) — for generations of Aboriginal people and their families. Because of colonization, Aboriginal youth like Tyler have grown up in conditions in which "normal" has taken

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on troublesome proportions. Troubles at home, at school, and on the street, as well as troubles that emanate from being taken into custody by the state and placed into foster and group homes or in detention centres, have figured prominently in their lives. These troubles have prompted some young Aboriginal people to resist their poverty and colonial condition by acting collectively. More specifically, their resistance has taken the form of participating in street gangs.

Criminologists, policy-makers, and criminal justice officials have devoted considerable attention to the matter of defining what constitutes a “street gang” (see, for example, Wortley 2010; Chatterjee 2006; Kelly and Caputo 2005; Jones et al. 2004; Gordon 2000). Some definitions are so broad and inclusive that they could encompass virtually any grouping of young people. The U.S. National Youth Gang Survey, for instance, advises law enforcement officials that a gang is “a group of youths or young adults in your jurisdiction that you or other responsible persons in your agency or community are willing to identify or classify as a gang” (Egley and Arjunan 2002). Other analysts have singled out characteristics that are considered to be essential elements of the gang, including: having a name; displaying specific colours and insignia (rags and tattoos); using particular communication patterns (hand signs and graffiti); identifying with a certain geographical area (or turf); practising initiation rituals (such as “beating in” new members); having clearly identified leaders and followers; and engaging in violence and criminal activity (see, for example, Wortley and Tanner 2007; Chettleburgh 2007).

For the researchers in the Eurogang network, “A street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose own identity includes involvement in illegal activity” (Weerman et al. 2009: 20). As Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson (2006: 4) note, this definition accommodates how membership in a street gang can be relatively short-lived while the gang itself nevertheless continues despite the turnover of members; much of the time of gang members is spent, quite literally, “on the street”; its members can include younger (early teens) as well as older (late twenties) youth; the gang’s activities often revolve around criminal activities (such as the illegal trade in drugs); and the street gang members have a collective identity as part of the group.

To this definition we would add, as a significant factor, the political and economic context in which street gangs originate and flourish. Commenting on the Canadian experience, Jana Grekul and Patti LaBoucane-Benson (2008: 64) note, “Gang problems in Toronto are different from those in

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Winnipeg or Vancouver.... While there are similarities in basic causes and processes of gang formation that characterize gang members across the nation, the specific form the group takes depends in part on the region of the country in which it is located." In this regard, what particularly distinguishes Aboriginal street gangs is the colonial context in which they are located.

In Winnipeg's North End, Aboriginal street gangs are located in the colonial context of entrenched racialized poverty, as the experiences and insights of young Aboriginal men and women living in the North End — of people involved in street gangs — make clear. What has it been like for them to grow up as an Aboriginal person in the inner city? Why do some — but not most — young Aboriginal people become involved in street gangs? What does their involvement in street gang activity actually look like? In our three-year journey of interviews with Aboriginal street gang leaders, and in our interviews with other young Aboriginal men and women and several elders who are knowledgeable about life in the inner city, we endeavoured to develop an understanding — to the extent that it was possible for us to do so — from "inside" the inner city, and with the benefit of the voices and life stories of Aboriginal people who grew up there.

To situate our investigation, we turn to the rich body of U.S. research, especially the work of "critical gang studies" researchers (Davis 2008: xv). While Canada is different in important respects from the United States, there is much to be learned from the U.S. experience. Nevertheless, in both the United States and Canada street gang activity differs from city to city and from gang to gang, and is changing constantly. Because the street gang scene is in a constant state of flux, strictly applying any experience (U.S. or otherwise) is ill-advised.

### THE ECONOMY, RACIALIZED POVERTY, AND STREET GANGS

Researchers and criminologists have traditionally explained street gangs in cultural and ecological terms, as a subcultural response of male youth in socially disorganized, low-income urban areas. In his classic study of 1,313 gangs in 1920s Chicago, Frederic Thrasher (1927), a member of the Chicago School of urban researchers, proposed that the gangs were the result of the social disorganization of inner-city communities populated by poor, newly arrived immigrants. Given the apparent disorganization of these communities — which Thrasher saw reflected in conditions such as the disintegration of family life, inadequate schooling, unemployment and low wages, lack of recreational facilities, and poor housing and sanitation —

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the gangs represented “the spontaneous effort of boys to create a society for themselves where none adequate to their needs exists” (1963: 33). This gang involvement, according to Thrasher, was temporary; usually lasting only a generation until the immigrant community managed to become more assimilated into the mainstream society. “As immigrant groups moved up into better working class jobs and out of the worst housing, the new immigrant groups who took their place spawned new youth gangs who warred with gangs in neighboring areas” (see Hagedorn 1988: 39). Other gang researchers, such as James Short (1964), Irving Spergel (1964), and Malcolm Klein (1971), continued in this tradition by focusing their studies on the social disorganization of inner-city communities and the corresponding “group processes” of adolescents (Hagedorn 2007a: 297).

Taking a decidedly subcultural approach, one that also engaged in the “othering” of lower-class youth, Albert Cohen (1966: 106–7) focused on what he saw as the “non-utilitarian, malicious and negativistic” behaviour of some lower-class boys: they “steal for the hell of it”; they challenge and defy their teachers; and they are “just plain mean” and “ornery.” According to Cohen, delinquent subcultures emerged as a “reaction formation” against the norms and values of the “respectable middle-class society” (1966: 116), such as deferred gratification, respect for property rights, and educational and occupational achievement. In these terms, street gangs are simply a response to “problems of adjustment” that lower-class boys encounter. “Certain children are denied status in the respectable society because they cannot meet the criteria of the respectable status system” (1966: 110). For Cohen, delinquent gangs represented a (male) solution to a (male) status problem: by engaging in delinquent activities, the boys take the norms and standards of the dominant culture and turn them on their head.

Walter Miller (1966) offered a variation of the subcultural approach that explained street gangs as a result of a distinct “culture of poverty” in lower-class communities (see also Lewis 1959). For Miller, the problem for lower-class boys was not their inability to conform to the middle-class value system, as Cohen had postulated, but the dominance of female-headed households in their communities. In response, young men escape to the streets and form into “one-sex peer groups” with their “focal concerns” of trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, fate, and autonomy (Miller 1966: 139). For Miller, like other “culture of poverty” theorists, class was “a subjective variable, a reflection of the outlook of certain people, not a specific place within social structure” (Hagedorn 1988: 113). Writing in 1988, John M. Hagedorn noted, “This analysis has been popular, particularly

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in today's government circles, in part because it attributes gang crime and violence to persisting individual cultural traits, instead of analyzing destructive behavior in terms of changing social and economic structures" (113).

Although still remaining within the subcultural tradition, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960: 152) took an approach different than that of Cohen and Miller. Focused on explaining the causes of delinquency, they distinguished between "two opportunity structures — one legitimate, the other illegitimate" prevailing in U.S. society. Denied opportunities in the legitimate economy, some young men in urban ghettos pursue an illegitimate means of reaching conventional economic goals. Like Cohen, Cloward and Ohlin were influenced by Robert Merton's (1938) "strain theory," which identified the tensions that occur when lower-class youth, influenced by the American commitment to upward mobility and monetary success, have fewer opportunities to realize these goals, and so develop adaptive subcultures that may include street gang involvement.

These traditional approaches, then, framed street gangs in the context of delinquency and crime and sought to explain why young, lower-class males failed to abide by the norms and values of "respectable middle-class society." In other words, they took as a given the dominant value system and structure of society — and the privilege afforded to only some individuals in that unequal society. They interpreted the issue of street gangs as a problem "of" the lower class. Discussing the lack of fit between these conventional street gang theories and her findings about Chicano gangs in the barrios of Los Angeles, Joan Moore (1991: 51) comments, "It is disturbing that so many people can read about, live near, and do research on these longstanding phenomena without noticing that they do not fit the theories."

More recently, critical gang studies researchers have broadened their lens beyond the more narrow confines of these traditional approaches by linking urban processes and unequal opportunity structures to the political economy. More specifically, these researchers situate the "astounding proliferation of U.S. street gangs" (Klein 1995: 205) in the context of the impacts of global economic restructuring on inner-city communities and the state's neoliberal withdrawal from the provision of social benefits since the 1980s (Wacquant 2008).

Over the past three decades, the increasingly global or international nature of the capitalist economy has led to significant transformations within particular nations, including the United States and Canada. Corporate restructuring and downsizing — designed to keep up with new production relations and financial systems — have led to heightened levels of inequality

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(Kerstetter 2002; Yalnizyan 2011) because employment has become more precarious given the move towards part-time, non-union jobs and outsourcing to developing countries that have considerably lower wages. In tandem with the widening gap between rich and poor has come a decided shift away from a professed commitment to social welfare on the part of governments towards an emphasis on enhancing economic efficiency and international competitiveness. Commentators have termed this new governmental rationality “neoliberalism,” as it is premised on the values of individualism, freedom of choice, market predominance, and minimal state involvement in the economy (Broad 2000; Rose 2000; Larner 2000; Pratt 1999).

The impact of this shift from social welfare to neoliberalism has been profound. The social safety net — historically designed to assist those who were out of work or in need of assistance — has been unravelled, and more and more people are being left to fend for themselves. Joblessness has become an individual rather than a social problem, while the increasing numbers of people living in poverty are stigmatized and — consistent with the individualism at the heart of neoliberalism — personally blamed for their dire circumstances (Young 1999 and 2007; Teeple 2000; Swanson 2001). The criminal justice system has been implicated in this process. Jonathan Simon (2007), for example, documents the increasing move in the United States to “govern through crime,” as social problems ranging from welfare dependency to educational inequality have been reconfigured within a crime discourse, with an attendant focus on assigning individual fault and imposing punishment. In the Canadian context, commentators have noted the increasing criminalization of poverty, as everyone from welfare moms to squeegee kids have become subject to criminal sanctions (Crocker and Johnson 2010; Hermer and Mosher 2002).

According to critical gang studies researchers, street gangs are one of the by-products of these broader social and economic changes. In his work on street gangs, Mike Davis (2008: xvi) indicts “the impact of economic restructuring and postliberal social policy” as processes that have marginalized growing numbers of urban youth. Similarly, James Vigil (2002: 7) argues, “The street gang is an outcome of marginalization, that is, the relegation of certain persons or groups to the fringes of society, where social and economic conditions result in powerlessness.” Referring to the Canadian experience, Bernard Schissel and Carolyn Brooks (2002: 1) make the connection to “the workings of global capitalism, which, in most respects, are creating an ever increasing global underclass of marginalized people.” Some of these marginalized people turn to street gangs and the illegal drug

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trade, with its associated high levels of violence, as a means to achieving economic sustenance. In a similar fashion Hagedorn (2001: 44) observes, "In the 1980s, as the U.S. economy restructured, legitimate opportunities in poor neighborhoods fatefully constricted. In these conditions, young men began to sell drugs on a never-before-seen scale. A sharp rise in violence accompanied the carving out of new crack markets."

Following the lead of critical gang studies researchers, then, we can locate contemporary street gangs in the context of the intensification of urban poverty produced as a consequence of global economic forces and neoliberal ideologies and forms of governing that lead to reduced public expenditures directed at those who are poor. This process is also racialized, in that those who are marginalized and become involved in street gangs are disproportionately youth of colour.

Recognition of the racialized character of street gang involvement has not always informed criminological understandings of gangs. As Hagedorn (2007b: 17) notes, because the project of Chicago School researchers such as Thrasher was "to dispel stereotypes and humanize immigrants for a sometimes hostile native-born public," they emphasized gangs, delinquency, and crime as "products of areas, not ethnic groups." Meanwhile, subcultural theorists such as Cohen (1955), Miller (1966), and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) practised a "studied deemphasis on race and ethnicity" (Hagedorn 2008: 86). For these criminologists, it was delinquent subcultures that produced gang members' non-racial, antisocial, and criminal acts. For Hagedorn, however, "This is, at best, extremely one-sided. Anyone who spends any time on the streets knows that for black, Hispanic, Asian, *and* white gang members, ethnicity and race are crucial aspects of their lives" (2008: 87). In contrast, critical gang studies researchers root street gang activities in racialized inner-city poverty. As Klein (1995: 194) notes, "One of my favorite black gang members put it simply: 'Bein' poor's a mother-fucker.'" The facts speak for themselves: in U.S. ghettos and barrios it is primarily Black and Hispanic youth who form street gangs (Moore 1991; Rios 2011; Bourgois 2003; Hagedorn 2008); in Western Canadian urban centres it is primarily Aboriginal youth who form street gangs (Totten 2012; Chettleburgh 2007).

Historically, immigrants dominated street gangs in the United States, beginning with Irish newcomers in the nineteenth century. Thrasher (1927: 193) observed that gangs in the 1920s were "largely a phenomenon of the immigrant community" that was "interstitial" or temporary. Today, street gangs are "not the ethnic Europeans of the gangs of the 1920s, whose mar-

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ginality lasted only one generation” (Moore 1991, quoted in Brotherton and Barrios 2004: 35). In the case of Toronto, for example, street gang members are not immigrant youth, but rather Canadian-born youth living in low-income areas (Wortley and Tanner 2006).

The movement across and within national borders is also a factor in street gang activity. For example, Latino street gangs in California and the Western United States are a product of historical patterns of immigration from Mexico and Central America. African-American street gangs are a product of the Great Migration from the U.S. agricultural south to the northern urban ghettos of Chicago and other major U.S. cities, which began during the First World War and persisted for decades. Aboriginal street gangs in Canada are a product of a later migration, in the 1960s, of Aboriginal people from rural and northern reserves to Western Canadian urban centres. In addition, there is now a reverse flow of people that serves to spread street gang activity. Vigil (2002) describes the process of Hispanic youth coming to the United States, where they become engaged in illegal street gang activities and then later return — often deported — south of the border, contributing to the growth in Mexico and Central America of large and violent street gangs. Hagedorn (2008: 43–44) says about Jamaica, for example, “By 2004 gang violence had reached extremely high levels, in part the result of thirteen thousand deportations of gangsters from the United States back to Jamaica.” In Western Canada, Aboriginal street gang members similarly return, voluntarily, to their home reserve communities; they move back and forth between city and reserve, leading to the emergence of street gang activities on reserves (Buddle 2011; Goodwill 2009).

Indeed, street gang activity and related forms of armed youth violence have become, during the past thirty years, a global phenomenon (Decker and Pyrooz 2010; Hagedorn 2008). Klein (2007: 49) observes that during this same period street gang activity has spread from a handful of cities to many cities in the United States and other places across the world. As a result, he says:

Gang cities have become more plentiful,  
Gangs have become far more plentiful,  
Gang members have become far more plentiful,  
Gang crimes have become more plentiful.

While critical gang studies researchers have drawn attention to the impacts of economic restructuring and the neoliberal withdrawal by the

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state from the provision of social benefits as crucial factors in explaining the proliferation of street gangs globally, a crucial factor in accounting for Aboriginal street gangs in Canada has been the ongoing impact of colonialism.

### COLONIALISM AND RESISTANCE

Colonialism in Canada has a long history of oppressing Aboriginal people. The European settler society pushed Aboriginal peoples off their historic lands onto economically marginal reserves where they were subjected to the harsh terms of the Indian Act and the control of the Indian agent. First Nations people were prohibited from engaging in a wide range of activities. For example, they needed a pass from the Indian agent to leave the reserve (a system adopted by South Africa's apartheid regime), and many of their cultural and spiritual practices (such as the Potlatch and Sun Dance) were outlawed. First Nations and Métis economic and political systems were undermined or destroyed, and their children were forcibly seized by the state and confined in residential schools, where they were forbidden to speak their languages and were taught to be ashamed of being Aboriginal (Milloy 1999; RCAP 1996; Hamilton and Sinclair 1991; Grant 1996). As Schissel (2002: 120) points out, "Residential schools were run like modern-day youth and adult prisons in Canada."

The incarceration of Aboriginal children in residential schools and the deliberate attempt by that means to destroy Aboriginal families and cultures has had devastating effects on Aboriginal families, exemplified by the astonishingly high numbers of Aboriginal children taken into care (Brownell 2012; Hamilton and Sinclair 1991; Kimelman 1985). Although Aboriginal organizations have been increasingly taking control of child welfare for First Nations and Métis children, these children continue to be overrepresented in child welfare caseloads. Cindy Blackstock (2003) estimated that there may now be as many as three times more Aboriginal children in the care of child welfare authorities compared to those placed in residential schools at the height of those operations in the 1940s. For Pete Hudson and Brad McKenzie (2003: 50), these figures are not surprising, "in that the effects of colonization, including underlying socio-economic issues as well as family breakdown and parenting problems, are not erased simply by the creation of community-based child and family services agencies." As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996: vol. 3 chap. 2) noted, most of the parents who had lost their children to the child welfare system

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were themselves the clients of that same system — which suggests a historical process that is difficult to disrupt. Indeed, one can draw a direct line of descent from residential schools to the “Sixties Scoop” — the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their own families to (typically non-Aboriginal) foster families, which began in earnest in the 1960s — to the large numbers of Aboriginal children today who are in care and in youth detention centres of various kinds, and from there to the large numbers of Aboriginal adults in penal institutions. Colonialism is, among other things, a story of the institutionalization of Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people have not simply acquiesced to colonialism and the damage it has wrought. Rather, they have endeavoured historically to resist through various means and strategies. The Red River Resistance of 1869–70 and the Saskatchewan Rebellion of 1885, both of which were led by Métis leader Louis Riel, stand as well-known examples of Aboriginal people’s response to colonial domination. Less visible forms include the efforts of Aboriginal parents to resist the residential school system by hiding their children so that the youngsters could not be taken away or returned to the schools, and the strategies that the children themselves adopted to disrupt and subvert the attempts to “civilize” them (Silver 2006a; Knockwood 2001; Miller 1996; Haig-Brown 1988). The resistance is not confined to the past. In more recent times, Aboriginal people have resisted incursions on their land and violations of treaty agreements, exemplified by the Mohawk blockade in the town of Oka, Quebec, in 1990, the occupation of Ipperwash Provincial Park by the Stony Point First Nation in 1995, the Mi’kmaq fishing wars on the open waters at Burnt Church in Atlantic Canada in 1999–2000, and the Idle No More movement, which began in 2012 (see, for example, King 2012; Hodgins, Lischke, and McNab 2011; Hill 2009; Paul 2006).

Colonialism and its effects have contributed to the grinding, racialized poverty of inner-city communities such as Winnipeg’s North End, a quintessential “colonized space.” Colonialism has also produced Aboriginal street gangs. As Aboriginal writer Nahanni Fontaine (2006: 116) argues, “Aboriginal gangs are a product of our colonized and oppressed space within Canada — a space fraught with inequity, racism, dislocation, marginalization, and cultural and spiritual alienation.” The prevalence of Aboriginal street gangs in Winnipeg’s inner city constitutes a form of resistance to colonialism, albeit one that has had negative consequences.

## STREET GANGS, STREET SOCIALIZATION, AND RESISTANCE IDENTITIES

Observing that street gangs and related phenomena are now global, Hagedorn (2008: xxiv) argues, "Gangs are unmistakable signs that all is not well and that millions of people are being left out of the ... globalizing economy." Gangs are the product, he says, of the emergence of what Davis (2006) calls a "planet of slums." Here, racialized and impoverished youth scramble to survive and are "socialized by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions" (Hagedorn 2008: 31; see also Anderson 1999). Vigil (2002: 99–100) states:

One of the first goals of the street is to determine where one fits in the hierarchy of dominance and aggression that the street requires for survival. Protection comes from seeking associates who are streetwise and experienced and willing to be friends. In turn, this prompts the youth to return the favor by thinking and acting in ways that his friends approve. The new social bonds are reinforced, a sense of protection is gained, and new behavior patterns and values are learned.

Resistance has become a key theme in critical gang studies research. In his ethnographic work in East Harlem, Philippe Bourgois (1996 and 2003) describes the "street culture of resistance" that arose in opposition to the exclusion of young El Barrio youth from mainstream society. While not a "coherent, conscious universe of political opposition," this culture involves "a spontaneous set of rebellious practices that in the long term have emerged as an oppositional style" (2003: 8). Centred on drug-dealing, violence, and crime, El Barrio street culture has distinctly contradictory tendencies. Although it "emerges out of a personal search for dignity and a rejection of racism and subjugation, it ultimately becomes an active agent in personal degradation and community ruin" (2003: 9).

Other critical gang studies researchers have drawn upon the work of Manuel Castells (1997) to explain the response to global uncertainties and social exclusion on the part of alienated and racialized youth. Castells maintains that "resistance identities" are created by subordinated populations in response to oppression and operate by "excluding the excluder." As Victor Rios (2011: 102) explains:

In feeling excluded from a network of positive credentials, education, and employment opportunities, young people develop

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creative responses that provide them with the necessary tools to survive in an environment where they have been left behind and where they are consistently criminalized. They develop practices that seem to embrace criminality as a means of contesting a system that sees them as criminals.

Rios concludes that the forty young Black and Latino men he studied in depth over a three-year period engaged in “acts of survival and crimes of resistance.” These young men “were clearly aware of, recognized, and had an analysis of the system that criminalized them” (2011: 103). Rios maintains that the youth, rather than just engaging in the search for respect and dignity that Bourgois (1996 and 2003) identified, were acting “as a conscious revolt against a system of exclusion and punitive control that they clearly understand” (2011: 103). He adds: “Instead of remaining passive and allowing the system to shame, criminalize and exclude them, the boys continued to produce scattered acts of resistance. From stealing at the store to cussing out the police officers who had once brutalized them, the boys engaged themselves in deviant politics” (2011: 120). In a similar fashion, Kathleen Buddle (2011: 173) describes Aboriginal street gang members in Winnipeg’s inner city as being “unwilling to passively succumb to marginality.” As a result they participate in a process of “defying exclusion by ‘others.’”

Far from being passive victims of social forces largely beyond their control, then, racialized youth involved in street gang activities become engaged in acts of resistance against the dominant society that has marginalized and excluded them. These acts of resistance are not merely a passing phenomenon. They are deeply rooted products of economic structures that offer no hope, and they represent the response of racialized youth who, in the absence of conventional opportunities, carve out their own form of (often illegal) economic survival, taking on particular identities in the process. As Hagedorn (2008: 160) asserts, “The gangster identity ... this contested resistance identity is no longer a transient subculture of alienated youth but a permanent oppositional and racialized culture arising in the wake of the retreat of the state” (for a similar analysis of the British case, see Pitts 2011: 173).

Street gang identities also arise from the repressive response of the state. For Rios (2011: xiii), the state “had not abandoned the poor; it had re-organized itself, placing priority on its punitive institutions, such as police, and embedding crime-control discourses and practices into welfare institutions, such as schools.” In findings similar to those of Scott Decker and Barrick Van Winkle (1996) in St. Louis and Elizabeth Comack (2012)

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in Winnipeg, Rios discovered that all of the boys he followed over a three-year period had negative interactions with the police. These interactions "shape the meanings that young people create about themselves and about their obstacles, opportunities, and future aspirations," creating "worldviews and identities diametrically opposed to the youth control complex and mass incarceration" (Rios 2011: 7, 5). Yet, by developing such resistance identities, street gang members further alienate and exclude themselves from the dominant society.

### MASCULINITY, FAMILIES, AND STREET GANGS

Many are the negative aspects of this resistance, not the least of which is the expression of an exaggerated form of masculinity that emphasizes toughness and male bravado and is performed, in part, through various acts of misogyny and sexual exploitation.

Much has been written in recent years about the issue of masculinity and how it informs men's involvement in criminal activities. One of the key criminologists to probe the relation between men, masculinity, and crime has been James Messerschmidt (1993, 1997, 1999, 2004, and 2005). Messerschmidt draws on the work of R.W. Connell (1987, 1995, and 2000); specifically, the concept of "hegemonic masculinity," a particular, idealized form of masculinity that is culturally glorified, honoured, and exalted. In his earlier work Messerschmidt (1993: 82) described the hegemonic masculinity prevailing in Western societies as being "defined through work in the paid-labor market, the subordination of women, heterosexism, and the driven and uncontrollable sexuality of men. Refined still further, hegemonic masculinity emphasizes practices toward authority, control, competitive individualism, independence, aggressiveness, and the capacity for violence." As Messerschmidt (2001: 70) makes clear in his later work, however, hegemonic masculinity "is neither transhistorical nor transcultural; it varies from society to society and changes within a particular society over time." A "pattern of practice" that plays out at the local, regional, and global levels (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form to which other masculinities are subordinated.

Masculinity, then, finds expression in different social contexts depending upon the resources available. Corporate executives in the boardroom, for example, will practise a masculinity that does not require resorting to physical violence as a means of exercising their power. In contrast, racialized and economically marginalized men who have been denied the social and