

BUILDING A PATH TO A BETTER FUTURE

Urban Aboriginal People

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The urbanization of Aboriginal people is a process long underway, especially but not only in Western Canadian cities. Approximately one-half of Aboriginal people in Canada now live in urban centres, more than live on reserves. Those in cities are faced with a host of difficulties — inadequate housing, shortage of work, unsafe neighbourhoods, racism in various forms. Aboriginal people in cities experience higher rates of unemployment, a higher incidence of poverty and lower levels of income, on average, than do non-Aboriginal people. At the same time, however, a wide variety of exciting urban community development initiatives are underway or planned as a result of the efforts of urban Aboriginal people. Remarkable creativity and energy are growing out of the hard urban lives of Aboriginal people. In this book we provide examples of both the hardships and the creative energy of contemporary urban Aboriginal life. In particular, in the final chapter of the book, we outline a very attractive and distinctly Aboriginal form of community development that is emerging out of Winnipeg's inner city and that has the potential to bring with it both positive changes for Aboriginal people and an alternative way forward for all of us.

The focus of this book is on Aboriginal people in cities. The research on which it is based took place in Winnipeg, and in particular Winnipeg's inner city. And, for good reason. Winnipeg has the largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada — 55,755 according to the 2001 Census of Canada — and arguably has the largest and most vibrant set of urban organizations created by, and run by and for, urban Aboriginal people of any city in Canada. A reasonable argument can be made that it is in Winnipeg in particular that urban Aboriginal people will carve out and create for themselves a new and better future, rooted in Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices and forged and shaped by their struggles with harsh inner-city realities. There is much of importance to be learned from the experience of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg — for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike.

Table 1-1: Population of Aboriginal People in Canada, 2001

Aboriginal origin	1,319,890
Aboriginal identity	976,305
North American Indian	608,850
Métis	292,310
Inuit	45,070
multiple Aboriginal identity	30,080
Registered Indian	558,175
First Nation/Band membership	554,860

Source: Siggner 2003: 21

We use the term Aboriginal to mean North American Indians, Métis and Inuit people. In the Census of Canada a distinction is made between those people who have Aboriginal ancestry and those who identify as Aboriginal. In most cases we use the numbers for those who identify as Aboriginal. The legal status of Aboriginal people is complicated and has added considerably to Aboriginal people's woes, as have differences over which level of government is responsible for which categories of Aboriginal people. Registered, status or treaty Indians are those who are registered under the *Indian Act of Canada* and can prove descent from a band that signed a treaty, and they have particular rights as a consequence. Some Aboriginal people are band members, some are not, and there is not necessarily an overlap with those who have treaty status. The numbers of Aboriginal people in each of these categories, according to the 2001 Census of Canada, are set out in Table 1-1.

These distinctions can and do create difficulties in urban settings. The federal government has held that it is only responsible, under the *Indian Act*, for registered Indians, and even then only those on reserve, and that non-registered Indians and Métis are the responsibility of the provinces. The large political Aboriginal organizations, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs for example, have traditionally seen their responsibilities as confined to Aboriginal people living on reserve — although this may change with the 1999 Corbiere decision, which recognizes the right of all band members, those living on and those living off reserve, to vote in band elections — while effective urban Aboriginal political organizations have been slow to emerge. The major Aboriginal political organizations, like the federal government, have traditionally seen Aboriginal people in urban settings as the responsibility of "someone else." For many years, no "someone else" has stepped forward to address in any meaningful way the needs of urban Aboriginal people. "For their part, provincial governments contend that *all* Aboriginal people are

the primary responsibility of the federal government. In short, each order of government continues to deny that *it* holds responsibility for urban Aboriginal policy” (Hanselmann 2003: 171).

Faced with this vacuum, urban Aboriginal people have been forced back upon their own creativity to build an organizational infrastructure — usually “status-blind,” i.e., available to all Aboriginal people regardless of their legal status or particular Aboriginal ancestry — to meet urban Aboriginal needs. The critical nature of this work has increased with the process of urbanization and constitutes an important part of a holistic and culturally rooted form of urban Aboriginal community development.

This book is about the urban Aboriginal experience and the innovative forms of urban Aboriginal community development that are emerging from that experience. Urban Aboriginal people face a vast array of problems, all of them, in one way or another, a product of the experience of and the effects of colonization. In response, urban Aboriginal people are engaged in a process of decolonization — of struggling to remove themselves, as individuals and as communities, from the adverse consequences of colonization, but doing so in their own ways. There is no template for decolonization. The way forward is being discovered and developed by urban Aboriginal people themselves. A part of this process, an important part, is the particular form of Aboriginal community development being created by urban Aboriginal people themselves as they struggle to forge a path to the future.

THE URBANIZATION OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

The urbanization of Aboriginal people is a post-Second World War phenomenon. In 1901, approximately 5 percent of Aboriginal people lived in urban areas; by 1951 that percentage was still less than 7 percent; but by 2001 almost half — 49 percent — of Canada’s Aboriginal people lived in urban areas (Peters 2006: 1). If we use Winnipeg as the example, we can see from Table 1-2 that the process of urbanization became significant in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1971 Aboriginal people comprised just over one percent of Winnipeg’s total popula-

Table 1-2: Aboriginal People Resident in Winnipeg, 1951 to 2001

1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	1996	2001
210	1082	4940	16,575	35,150	45,750	55,755

Source: Census of Canada, various dates. (These numbers are not strictly comparable due to changing Census definitions. Figures for 1991, 1996 and 2001 are for those who self-identify as Aboriginal.)

Table 1-3: Aboriginal Identity Population, Selected Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs), 2001

	Number	Percentage CMA Population
Winnipeg	55,755	8.4
Edmonton	40,930	4.4
Vancouver	36,860	1.9
Calgary	21,915	2.3
Toronto	20,300	0.4
Saskatoon	20,275	9.1
Regina	15,685	8.3
Ottawa-Hull	13,485	1.3
Prince Albert	11,640	29.2

Source: Statistics Canada 2001: 23

tion; by 2001 they comprised 8.4 percent of Winnipeg's population (Census of Canada, various dates).

Winnipeg now has the largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada, at 55,755, the next largest being Edmonton with an Aboriginal population of 40,930, followed by Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto. The concentration of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg is, among large urban centres in Canada, behind only Saskatoon, where Aboriginal people comprise 9.1 percent of the population. The concentration in other major cities is much lower: Regina (8.3 percent) is almost the same as Winnipeg. In Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Aboriginal people constitute 13.6 and 13.5 percent of the population respectively, with approximately 150,000 Aboriginal people in Manitoba and 130,000 in Saskatchewan in 2001. In Canada as a whole there were just under one million people who identified as Aboriginal, or 3.3 percent of Canada's total population, according to the 2001 Census of Canada.

Across Canada, the Aboriginal population has been growing and urbanizing rapidly. Both are phenomena of the second half of the twentieth century. During the first fifty years, the Aboriginal population in Canada grew by only 29 percent, while the total population grew by 161 percent; from 1951 to 2001, the Aboriginal population in Canada grew sevenfold, while the total Canadian population only doubled. Put another way, in the first half of the century the Aboriginal population grew at one-fifth the rate of the total population; in the second half of the century, the Aboriginal population grew at three-and-one-half times the rate of the total population. The Aboriginal birth rate continues to be higher than the overall Canadian birth rate, although not as high today, at one-and-a-half times, as in the 1960s, when it was four times the Canadian birth rate. And since 1986 there has been a trend in the Census to increased report-

ing of Aboriginal origins and identity, a process sometimes known as “ethnic mobility” — i.e., more Canadians are identifying themselves as Aboriginal (Guimond 2003).

At the same time, only 31 percent, or less than one-third, lived on what Statistics Canada describes as “Indian reserves and settlements” (Statistics Canada 2001: 5–7). In other words, and contrary to popular perceptions, more Aboriginal people in Canada live in urban centres than on reserves. Particularly large proportions of non-status Indians and Métis people live in urban centres (Norris and Clatworthy 2003: 54). The urbanization process is a disproportionately Western Canadian phenomenon. Two-thirds of the urban Aboriginal population in 2001 lived in Western Canada, and seven of the nine cities with the largest urban Aboriginal populations are in the West.

Further, the growth of the urban Aboriginal population is less due to an exodus of Aboriginal people from reserves to urban areas — in fact, there is a net movement the other way (Guimond 2003: 42; Norris 2003: 58–59) — than it is to the relatively high birth rate of urban Aboriginal people and, since 1986, to the increasing numbers of people in urban centres identifying as Aboriginal people (Guimond 2003; Siggner 2003). In fact, there appears to be a great deal of movement back and forth between urban and rural communities, in circular fashion, as opposed to a one-way flow (see, for example, Clatworthy 1996, 2000), a pattern that seems to be consistent with the international experience (Portes 1991).

The Aboriginal population in Canada is younger, on average, than the non-Aboriginal population. In 2001 the median age of Aboriginal people in Canada was 24.7 years, while the median age of Canada’s non-Aboriginal population was 37.7 years. The median age of Aboriginal people in Manitoba is 22.8 years. While Aboriginal people comprise almost 14 percent of Manitoba’s total population, Aboriginal children comprise 23 percent of Manitoba’s children (Statistics Canada 2001: 7). Based on these numbers, the Aboriginal population is expected to continue to grow relatively rapidly in the foreseeable future.

This is important for the future of Winnipeg, and for Western Canadian cities generally, because, in addition to other reasons, Aboriginal people will comprise a growing proportion of the working age population at a time when skilled labour shortages in selected industries are anticipated (Loewen, Silver et al. 2005). Mendelson (2004: 35 and 38), in his study of Aboriginal people in Canada’s labour market, found that in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan “the Aboriginal workforce will climb to about 17 percent of the total workforce over the next decade and a half.” He added that, “To no small degree, the Aboriginal children who are today in Manitoba and Saskatchewan homes, child care centres and schools represent the economic future of the two provinces,” and concluded by saying, “The increasing importance of the Aboriginal workforce to Manitoba

and Saskatchewan cannot be exaggerated. There is likely no single more critical economic factor for these provinces.”

Alongside these processes is the spatial distribution of Aboriginal people in urban centres, and their mobility within urban centres, and between urban centres and rural communities. In Winnipeg — although this is somewhat less the case in other Western Canadian cities — Aboriginal people are disproportionately located in the inner city (Hanselmann 2001a; Kazemipur and Halli 1999), attracted there by lower housing prices and by the presence of other members of their family and community. Peters’ (2006) *Atlas of Urban Aboriginal Peoples* points out that there were three Census tracts in Regina and four in Saskatoon in which Aboriginal people comprised 30 percent or more of the population in 2001. In Winnipeg at the same time, there were ten Census tracts in which Aboriginal people comprised 30 percent or more of the total population, plus one in which they comprised 50 percent or more. The concentration of urban Aboriginal people in Winnipeg’s inner city — i.e., in poor neighbourhoods — may not be as high as that of African-Americans in some large U.S. cities, but it is high, and higher than the concentration of Aboriginal people in other Canadian cities (Maxim, Keane and White 2003: 86; La Prairie and Stenning 2003: 185). A recent study found that 80 percent of recent arrivals to Winnipeg located in the inner city (Distasio et al. 2004).

Inner-city residents, and in particular Aboriginal residents, experience lower incomes, higher rates of unemployment, higher rates of poverty, a higher incidence of single parenthood and domestic violence, and lower (although rising) levels of educational attainment than is the case for cities as a whole (Lezubski, Silver and Black 2000; Hanselmann 2001a; Mendelson 2004; Statistics Canada, June 13, 2005). The considerable majority of Aboriginal households live in rental accommodations, in Canada and to a greater extent in Winnipeg. Rates of mobility are high, both between urban and rural centres as a means of maintaining contact with communities of origin, and within urban centres, often as the result of inadequate housing and the lack of affordable, appropriate rental accommodation (Norris and Clatworthy 2003; Norris, Cooke and Clatworthy 2002; Skelton 2002; Norris, Cooke, Beavon, Guimond and Clatworthy 2001; Hanselmann 2001; Norris 2000). A Caledon Institute study found that 30 percent of the Aboriginal identity population in Winnipeg had changed addresses at least once in the year preceding the 2001 Census (Mendelson 2004: 41). As well as high rates of mobility and household crowding, the recent Winnipeg-based Aboriginal mobility study (Distasio et al. 2004: 17), showed 50 percent of respondents were “homeless” and therefore forced to live “temporarily with friends and family.” This is the result of the chronic shortage of housing, especially low-income rental housing, in Winnipeg. In large urban centres in Canada Aboriginal households comprise between 20

percent and 50 percent of the total homeless population (Graham and Peters 2002). Assistance for Aboriginal people arriving in the city from rural areas is inadequate. Hanselmann (2001b: 2) found that 1996–97 federal spending for immigrant settlement and transition was \$247 per person, while funding for Native Friendship Centres, which perform a similar role for Aboriginal people arriving in the city, was \$34 per urban Aboriginal person (see also Distasio et al. 2004).

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The spatial distribution of Aboriginal people in cities — for example their being disproportionately located in Winnipeg's economically and socially disadvantaged inner city — parallels their spatial distribution outside urban centres, i.e., their marginalization from the mainstream of Canadian life by their historical confinement to rural reserves. Aboriginal people's move to the city is too often a move from one marginalized community to another. The reserve system facilitated "the nearly absolute geographical separation of the colonizer and the colonized"; the move to the city produces the same outcome (Razack 2002: 129). The result is the social exclusion — i.e., the relative absence from the labour market and the core institutions of society — of a large proportion of the urban Aboriginal population. Aboriginal people's being disproportionately spatially located in Winnipeg's inner city means that many non-Aboriginal Winnipeg residents, and especially those living in suburban areas, have no personal contact whatsoever with Aboriginal people. The public space in Winnipeg offers virtually no evidence that Canada's largest urban Aboriginal population resides there (Silver 2004; Peters 2002a: 67). Aboriginal people are seldom seen working in retail shops in suburban malls, or in service sector settings of any kind. In 2002, Kathy Mallett — a long-time Aboriginal resident of Winnipeg who has been involved in many community-based Aboriginal initiatives — and I conducted an informal survey. We drove along both sides of the eastern end of Portage Avenue, Winnipeg's major commercial street, and both sides of McPhillips Avenue, another major street. Kathy entered every fast food and other retail outlet to count how many employees were working, and how many of those, based on physical appearance, were Aboriginal. The result: 221 people were working at that time in those selected retail outlets, of whom only seven were visibly Aboriginal (Silver and Mallett 2002). The public face of the city is not Aboriginal to the extent warranted by the proportion of Winnipeg's population who are Aboriginal. Aboriginal people are invisible to most Winnipeggers going about their daily activities. They are disproportionately resident in the inner city, geographically, and to a considerable extent socio-economically, separated from much of the rest of the urban population; they are much less likely to be employed in settings where they are likely to associate with non-Aboriginal

people; there is little socialization at the personal level across the Aboriginal-inner city/non-Aboriginal-suburban divide; they feel outside of, not a part of, the dominant culture and institutions of the city; and they are the victims of unrelenting racism, of both the institutional and highly personal kind (see, for example, Silver, Mallett, Greene and Simard 2002). In Winnipeg, Aboriginal people frequently make their choice of neighbourhood — the inner city, the North End — on the basis of its being a refuge from the racism to which they know their children would be exposed beyond the bounds of the inner city.

It is not only that Aboriginal people experience much higher rates of poverty and unemployment and much lower average incomes than the population at large. It is also that Aboriginal people feel, and are, socially excluded from the dominant culture and institutions — employment, schools, housing, particular neighbourhoods, for example. This social exclusion is a dominant characteristic of urban Aboriginal life, and it will arise again and again in the interviews with Aboriginal people in the chapters that follow. The marginalization and social exclusion of Aboriginal people, historically facilitated by the reserve system, is being replicated in urban settings as the process of urbanization unfolds. Where are urban Aboriginal people to be found? Disproportionately in low-income neighbourhoods, especially in the inner city (Maxim, Keane and White 2003: 86; La Prairie and Stenning 2003: 185; Richards 2001; Hanselmann 2001a; Kazemipur and Halli 1999); disproportionately in institutions like the penal system (Manitoba 1991; Statistics Canada, June 2001; La Prairie and Stenning 2003) and in the child and family service system — more than 70 percent of children in care in Manitoba as of March 31, 2004, were Aboriginal (Manitoba 2003/04; see also Jaccoud and Brassard 2003).

How Did This Come to Be?

It is simply not possible to understand the circumstances of Aboriginal people in Canada — their marginalized socio-economic circumstances, their social exclusion — without acknowledging the historical and ongoing impact of colonization. This process continues to cause enormous and incalculable damage to Aboriginal people. It is not a matter that is merely incidental to an otherwise positive story of Canada's historical development. On the contrary, the process of colonization is at the heart of Canadian history; its associated ideology is still a part of our Canadian identity. Europeans arrived and dispossessed Aboriginal peoples of their land. Sir John A. MacDonald's famous *National Policy* consisted of the construction of tariff barriers behind which fledgling Canadian industries could develop; the construction of a railway system across the West to Vancouver; and the promotion of European immigration to fill the Prairies with farmers whose supplies would come by rail from central Canada, and whose grain would leave by rail to the Great Lakes headwaters or the west coast. Canada was built on the *National Policy*. But it all rested on the removal

of Aboriginal people from their homes, their confinement to reserves and the construction of an elaborate system of social control justified on the false grounds of Aboriginal inferiority.

The results have been devastating for Aboriginal people.¹ They were dispossessed of their lands, pushed onto reserves and thus isolated from the dominant culture and institutions of Canada, subjected to the colonial control of the *Indian Act* and the domination of the Indian Agent, and forced into residential schools. At the heart of the process of colonization was the deliberate attempt to destroy Aboriginal people's economic and political systems and their cultures and religions — some of the practices of which were literally outlawed — and to replace them with European institutions and values. This was the strategy and policy of "assimilation." It was, and for many Canadians still is, justified on the false grounds that European institutions and cultural and religious values are superior to those of Aboriginal people. The resultant colonial ideology is pervasive. As Métis scholar Howard Adams (1999: 6) put it:

The characteristic form of colonialism then is a racial and economic hierarchy with an ideology that claims the superiority of the race and culture of the colonizer. This national ideology pervades colonial society and its institutions, such as schools, cultural agencies, the church and the media.... the ideology becomes an inseparable part of perceived reality.

Internalizing Colonialism

Aboriginal people themselves may come to believe the pervasive notion that they are inferior. This is common among oppressed people. "In fact, this process happens so frequently that it has a name, *internalized oppression*" (Tatum 1999: 6). Or as Howard Adams (1999: Introduction) puts it, many Aboriginal people "have internalized a colonized consciousness." The results are devastating:

Once Aboriginal persons internalize the colonization processes, we feel confused and powerless.... We may implode with overwhelming feelings of sadness or explode with feelings of anger. Some try to escape this state through alcohol, drugs and/or other forms of self-abuse. (Hart 2002: 27)

The consequence of internalizing the colonial ideology, the European-based assumption of Aboriginal inferiority, is often incapacitating:

Aboriginal people start to believe that we are incapable of learning and that the colonizers' degrading images and beliefs about Aboriginal people and our ways of being are true. (Hart 2002: 27)

A vicious cycle begins: the assumption of their inferiority is internalized by Aboriginal people themselves; in response, many Aboriginal people lash out in self-abusive ways, reinforcing in the minds of the non-Aboriginal majority the assumptions of Aboriginal inferiority that lie at the heart of the colonial ideology. The more Aboriginal people internalize the colonization processes,

the more we degrade who we are as Aboriginal people. All of these internalized processes only serve the colonizers, who then are able to sit back and say “see, we were right.” In colonizers’ eyes, the usurpation is justified. (Hart 2002: 28)

It is not possible to exaggerate the impact of the internal damage and pain that many Aboriginal people carry as a consequence of colonization. Though invisible to most non-Aboriginal people — who see only the outward, behavioural manifestations of what Aboriginal people have internalized — this internalization of the colonial ideology explains much about contemporary urban Aboriginal life.

Residential Schools

Residential schools have played a vital part in this destructive process. Although there is much more to colonization than the residential schools, a consideration of this aspect of the process is instructive. The residential school was a key “instrument of colonization” (Milloy 1999: 254). Aboriginal children were taken, often forcibly, from their parents and submitted to a deliberate and systematic process designed to strip them of their culture and their Aboriginal identity. The process began when they arrived at the residential school:

The transformation of Cree children began the moment of their arrival in the schools. Their identities were immediately physically altered as each child underwent a disrobing and received a thorough scrubbing and a haircut. Each child was then dressed in near-identical, European-Canadian-style, uniform-looking clothing that served to further strip any outward appearances of indigenous forms of individuality and cultural identity. Newly registered children were given Christian names, and the use of their traditional languages was forbidden. Behaviour was controlled by the application of numerous regulations, the regimentation of daily routines, and the administration of forms of punishment that were often unduly harsh, even for the standards of the time. Parents were discouraged from visiting their children to prevent their children from lapsing into traditional behaviour and to discourage homesickness. (Pettipas 1994: 80)

The point was to destroy Aboriginal cultures, “to kill the Indian in the child”

(Milloy 1999: 42), not only by what was done in the residential schools, but also by excluding the family and community as the means by which to pass on the culture. "Through this system, the traditional role of the parents, relatives, and elders as producers and transmitters of culture and ideology was undermined" (Pettipas 1994: 215; see also Siggins 2005: 146). The results were devastating. As one residential school survivor told us when being interviewed for Chapter Five:

We were more or less orphans and we got punished if there was anything that we did that resembled Native spiritual culture or traditional practices. All these things were evil and had to be completely eradicated. An imposition of values on another culture, that's what it was... the havoc that Native people experienced in their early adult life... was very severe.... Two-thirds of my life have been severely affected, negatively affected, as a result of being a survivor of this system. I hated people, I hated White people, I hated churches, I hated God, I hated government. These things I hated because they destroyed my life, brought it to a standstill... no hope, a useless existence with no future in mind and all I had was bitterness and anger.

It was, as Milloy has described it, "an act of profound cruelty rooted in non-Aboriginal pride and intolerance and in the certitude and insularity of purported cultural superiority" (Milloy 1999: 302). Manitoba's Aboriginal Justice Inquiry rightly called it: "a conscious, deliberate and often brutal attempt to force Aboriginal people to assimilate," and noted that now, "for the first time in over 100 years, many families are experiencing a generation of children who live with their parents until their teens" (quoted in Aboriginal Justice Inquiry 1991: 514–16). The result was a "loss of parenting skills through the absence of four or five generations of children from Native communities, and the learned behaviour of despising Native identity" (Milloy 1999: 299). One of the people we interviewed described this as:

lots of disconnection, no connection to the family other than you know that's your Mom and Dad... but you don't feel any connection. So at [residential] school, it was difficult as a result of being institutionalized and then being sent into a home where you don't really know people... you've been away from them for five years and you've spent a total of two months every summer... it was more stressful being at home than it was in the institution. So very young, I started running away when I got back, when we came back as a family unit.

Another added:

Our family relations had to be repaired, they were... severed and almost