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An Aboriginal Youth Gang Narconomy

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Abstract:

Native gangs in Winnipeg may function as one of the few avenues for entrepreneurship, authority, and for the production of non-hegemonic gender identities available to groups barred by race and class from other forms of capitalism or political and cultural power. Native gang *narconomies*, however, are entangled with the destabilizing effects of state-legitimated political economies. Attending to the ways that different sorts of colonial violence have become “folded” into present day institutions of order complicates our understanding of the ways Indigenous outlaws are socially produced from above and below.

Representations of lawlessness are an important structuring device both in the production of knowledge about youth street gangs in Canada and in the creation of a “moral” civil society. Many anthropological studies focus on the role the law played in the socio-cultural transformations of colonialism, examining how the law served as a core mode of domination and, from time to time, created a space for resistance by

colonized peoples. These studies also reveal however, the ways in which the law also determined the discourse within which resistance was possible (Moore 1986, Stoler 1991, Taussig 1987, Wilmsen 1989). One of the uses of law in colonial situations was to construct boundaries, social and sexual, between colonized and dominant groups. Canadian law today continues to define personhood and works to fix and police the boundaries between groups, particularly those based on race, class, and gender (Coombe 2005, Valverde 2003, Mawani 2000). Juridical categories and disciplinary and regulative protocols work to legitimate the rule of those in power and to produce a historical narrative that presents class structure and power relations as both commonsensical and inevitable. The power relations underpinning the deviant positionality through which the state produces criminal subjects of Native youth, however, are effectively obscured. Without a voice in the new constitutions and national legislation in which the questions of the rights of youth are being taken up, and without a place in a society that is implicated in global economic structures shaping long-term employment prospects, for “disorderly” Native youth, the production, consumption and trafficking of illicit goods provides a means to extort the very sort of *security* that the state denies to them. Native street gangs in Winnipeg assert mastery over their own domains by codifying and regulating subversive narratives and practices that have emerged out of the pragmatics of material and emotional survival strategies on the street. Engaging in something more complicated than mere law-breaking, street gangs selectively appropriate and combine principles of the rule of law and of the street and both licit and illicit market operations in ways that challenge conventional demarcations of “legitimate” order and commerce, contest spaces of inequality, disturb practices of exclusion, and displace normative notions of marginality.

Prohibition and Civilization

Both Indigenous peoples and youth have historically been targeted for a variety of race-specific and age-specific substance prohibitions owing to presumptions about their “boundary issues.” Prohibitive efforts to legislate morality including, but not limited to, race-targeting alcohol-prohibition laws, have approached Native peoples and Canadian youth as morally vulnerable and unable to “govern their own passions.” Aboriginal women and Native youth fare particularly poorly in the face of such Canadian “lawfare” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, Gill 2002, Razack 2000).



BLOODS

While the great majority of inner city Native youth avoid involving themselves in gang activities, they must nonetheless be able to read the signs and to negotiate the violence—structural and physical—that pervades their social spaces.

The “cultural slippage” between an individual perceived to be unable to govern his or her own drinking and the image of “the Indian” construed by provincial lawmakers is evinced in the prohibition era (varying by province, mostly from 1901-1920s), when poor alcoholic whites were turned into symbolic “Indians:” problem drinkers’ names were entered on the interdiction registry, known informally as “The Indian List” (Valverde 2004:566). The Ontario Liquor Board maintained this archive of individuals who were forbidden to buy or possess alcohol from the 1930s to 1990. The only legal precedent for this crime shaping were the race-specific liquor provisions applying exclusively to Aboriginal people in the *Indian Act*, which were rooted in missionary discourses about the Indian as a subject in need of “civilization” (ibid). The various incarnations of the *Indian Act* up until 1960 and the *Juvenile Delinquency Act* of 1908 through to the present day *Youth Offenders Act* are based in this cultural and legal framework. The legislation presumes that wards of the government and children are prone to excesses of consumption and expression and must be reigned in. Alleged to possess deficient knowledge and assessment capability for risk and consequence, these groups are “protected” by laws designed to proscribe harm-likely acts and improvident economic practices. The laws simultaneously cultivate dependency and admonish self-rule.

Nineteenth century *Indian Act* statutes governing Aboriginal peoples’ movements and property were informed by notions of Aboriginal people as child-like and predisposed to consume too much in the “wrong” kinds of spaces and to spend too much on the wrong kinds of goods and time. Deemed more likely to privilege affiliations with Native nations, Aboriginal peoples—like peer-group privileging Canadian youth—were presumed to be unwilling to cleave from their collectives and to take up the “responsibilities” of full or mature citizenship. The residue of colonial proscriptions persists in present-day juridical practices in which youth and Native peoples alike are assumed to be irresolutely penetrable—in the sense of being suggestible to influence and susceptible to promiscuity. As a consequence, both are treated as vulnerable to stronger forces such as pimps, drugs, alcohol, peer-pressure, “superstitions,” swindlers of various sorts, and so on. They are, according to the force of laws designed to “protect” and restrict them, simultaneously, susceptible to over-stimulation and senselessness (Keith 1997). Supervision and segregation have become the instruments that agents of the state employ to regulate their morality—to reduce boundary transgressions or “disorder” and to restore zones of civility.

Race, Gender and Incarceration



Manitoba Warriors

A closer look at reckless government spending, however, draws attention to the questionable resource allocation of the Canadian state. According to criminologist Justin Piché, present-day provincial governments in Canada have earmarked nearly \$3.4 billion to build 22 new prisons and 17 additions to existing prisons. Moreover, stricter federal sentencing measures proposed under Bill C-10, which is currently before the House of Commons (HOC), will dramatically and disproportionately affect the rates of Aboriginal incarceration, and of Aboriginal women in particular. This controversial legislation, comprised of several bills previously rejected by the HOC, advances among other things, more stringent eligibility restrictions for conditional sentences, new mandatory minimum sentences for drug-related offences under two years in length, and changes to how the courts respond to youth in conflict with the law (Piché 2011).

The *Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba* report shows that Aboriginal “women move to urban center to escape family or community problems. Men on the other had, cite employment as the reason for moving” (Hamilton & Sinclair 1991:485). When they arrive in urban areas, Aboriginal women must endure multiple challenges including loneliness, racism, language and educational barriers, an unending barrage of administrative punishments as well as a lack of job opportunities. The report notes that, “what they were forced to run to is often as bad as what they had to run from” (ibid).

The crimes for which Native women are most often arrested and incarcerated are suggestive of the oppressive conditions under which they live as women and as Aboriginal people (Richie 2001; Ross 1998). Such crimes include nonviolent and minor property crimes such as prostitution, larceny, shoplifting, check or credit card fraud, forgery and counterfeiting, and drug possession (Chesney-Lind, Sheldon, and Joe 1996; Watterson 1996). The growth in the number of incarcerated women between 1990 and 2000 is composed largely of drug offenders (Ferraro and Moe 2003, Totten 2000).

Aboriginal women are triply burdened in the Canadian legal context. They are infantilized and subjected the indignities of racism and sexism in the Canadian legal

system. The Native Women's Association of Canada's report, *Arresting the Legacy: From Residential Schools to Prisons*, shows that Aboriginal women make up 87 per cent and 83 per cent of the Saskatchewan's and Manitoba's provincial jails, respectively. Between 1997 and 2007, the rate of incarceration of Aboriginal women increased by 151 per cent. The report claims that most Aboriginal women in federal prisons have been subjected to sexual or physical abuse, are impoverished, and suffer mental illness:

Despite that, the vast majority of aboriginal women are not in jail for committing violent acts themselves, a few highly publicized cases mask the fact that aboriginal women who are criminalized do not pose significant threats to public safety, but rather suffer from systemic discrimination, including and leading to: poverty, inadequate educational and employment opportunities, homelessness, addictions and mental health issues. (NWAC, nd: 5)

Since 1973, overall crime rates in Canada have decreased, according to *Statistics Canada's* latest report, released July 21, 2011. The rising rate of incarceration for Aboriginal girls from 2009 to 2010, however, dramatically contrasts with every other indicator of decline.

Native girls and women are also increasingly becoming involved in gangs, making up approximately half of the work force in Winnipeg's Native gangland. In the past, as with Native boys, girls were positioned almost exclusively on the lowest rungs of the enterprise. Younger boys and girls continue to serve as expendable drug and weapons mules. While some Native women and girls who are well connected through upper-ranking male family members are currently able to rise through the gang ranks, more become the mules, prostitutes, or sexual service providers for male gang members. As gang affiliates, among other duties, they move drugs into prisons, store stolen goods, and provide supports by way of "cash, crib and cars" for men.

Making Place

Youth offences are often attributed to cultural practices that allegedly "underdevelop" youth, such as "bad mothering" and substance or domestic abuse, rather than to the economic or political problems Aboriginal communities face. This, according to Engle-Merry, is an attractive ideology for proponents of neoliberalism in so far as it blames the havoc wreaked by expansive capitalism on the culture of the "other" (Engle Merry 2003, 64). Government regulatory bodies continue to provide "expert" management of the so-called social ills attributed to these communities, which in turn, continue to face discrimination in mainstream social, political and economic fields.



Most Organized Brothers

Most often comprising recent arrivals to the city and individuals newly released from or currently housed in corrections facilities, Native youth gangs incorporate individuals in transition—from bush to street, from child to adult, from weak to fit. Gangs provide a viable means for negotiating a range of new territories and processes. And, because gangs rely on a complex set of emotional and symbolic ties to internally order their members, they may be especially alluring to those who are without any connections, money, or position. Gangs seem to hail those who yearn for an answer to the demands of place. Currently, Winnipeg Native youth gangs provide participation in the informal economy, offering one solution to poverty and despair (Buddle 2011). Native youth are concerned to construct meaningful categories and to carve out domains of significance in the city in ways, and using skills, that are highly valued by and often understood only within the youth subcultures from which they emerge. Native youth gangs in Winnipeg, for example, stealthily mark the boundaries of their respective stomping grounds though both subtle and not-so-subtle tactics of intimidation and threats, but also through ridicule, rumor-mongering, and by feeding misinformation to law enforcement officials, strategically “ratting out” other gangs so as to be able to take over their drug trade areas.

Most Organized Brothers (MOB), for example, is a Winnipeg-based youth gang linked on and off with the larger, older, and more organizationally sophisticated Manitoba Warriors. Using their knowledge of the limits of the legal system to their advantage, most of the members who are under the legal age of adulthood make themselves useful to larger gangs by occupying the frontlines in the drug trade. They seldom do time when caught and are loyal to the adult gangs they service. Opposing gangs such as Indian Posse and Native Syndicate engage in solidarity-building by othering MOB, referring to them as Monkeys on Bikes, referencing popular YouTube videos that feature actual monkeys riding bikes. They mock what they perceive to be a wannabe-biker mentality and MOB’s low status within the broader gang hierarchy. MOB is affiliated with other youth gangs such as Central and Loyalty, Honour, Silence who also answer to the Manitoba Warriors. Among the youth gangs currently operating in Winnipeg, the strongest antipathies exist between Native and black gangs such as Mad Cowz and African Mafia, which are comprised mainly of newly arriving immigrants from Somalia and the Sudan.

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Gang youth mark their belonging through the clothes they wear, the gestures they make, and the alliances they forge. Gang involvement, however, is only ever partly about drug use and sales; it is part of a larger more complicated pattern of cultural production through ethnic marking. It is one of the few available avenues that marginalized youth have for making themselves. Youth gangs provide opportunities for entrepreneurship, authority, and for the production of non-hegemonic gender identities (Monsell-Davis 1986) for groups barred by race and class from other forms of capitalism (Jankowski 1991) or political and cultural power.



Indian Posse

On the scorecard of history, which registers only the accomplishments of the victors, young, poor and uneducated Native men do not count. Native girls and women matter even less (Butler 1993). What separates gang youth, however, despite the many who admonish them for having “lost their histories and cultures,” is a refusal to be registered among the defeated. In fact, what inspires many angry young men to join gangs and girls to affiliate with them is this abject defiance of defeat—a refusal to play the victim of the system, the family, or of history. Native gang youth simultaneously accommodate and resist by discursively and performatively shaping their *own* versions of law and lawlessness, countering normative renditions of legitimate order with subversive narratives and practices, often protecting themselves from predation, by performing it (Taussig 1993), or by rejecting chance and selecting their own circumstances for performing as prey.

In order to illuminate gang members’ strategies for subverting their subject positions, one must take into account those aspects of everyday being the gang itself archives, including for example, the ways members represent a complex written system through multiple media—including hand signing, graffiti, and tattoos—to respond to each other, to multiple marginalities, and to cultural erasure. Gang violence, as Sanders (1994) rejoins, is a much a “struggle over literacy” as it is over territory for in writing, society embeds ultimate control over knowledge systems. By developing their own embodied languages, tagging local businesses, and forging street-based illicit economies, gang youth take writing into their hands and bodies and turn exclusivity around on those who would usually practice it.

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Elaborating on the ways that gang violence makes, unmakes, and remakes social worlds (Das *et al* 2001) and attending to the ways that different sorts of colonial violence have become “folded” into present day institutions of order (Deleuze 1988) complicates our understanding of the ways Indigenous outlaws are socially produced from above and below (Carter 1990, Dyck 1986, Miller 1996, Tobias 1991). While Canadians abhor the unruliness that Native gangs seem to extol and position members as criminals and as threats to security and civility, Aboriginal communities tend to position gangs as culture traitors—as a source of internal resistance to unity. The general consensus in the urban Aboriginal community of Winnipeg is that in distributing new and ever more dangerous drugs and exploiting Native women and youth, Native gangs—doing the dirty work for larger Native and non-Native criminal organizations—carry forth the project of socio-cultural decay that colonizers began long ago. This is balanced by the sentiment that youth carry the residue of the residential schools and are redeemable via treatment rather than punishment.

Those cultural activists who have made great personal sacrifices in the battle for Aboriginal rights may share with gangs an interest in the repudiation of the Canadian legal system and an interest in supporting cross-border trade as a treaty right. Their paths diverge, however, regarding the production and marketing of local products. Cultural activists insist that products must be consistent with core cultural values. Even former gang members are disturbed by the growing use of meth and coke by current high-ranking gang members. This would indicate that the political sensibilities and desires for self-governance motivating the founding members of the larger Native gangs in the late 1980s have all but dissolved in the current climate. Former members who have transformed themselves into pro-youth workers consistently point out that few gang members ultimately find in gangs the answers they so desperately seek to their existential and material dilemmas.



Native Syndicate

In registering as mere “noise” (cf. Rancière 1999: 29) and without voice or social, economic, or political power in or outside Aboriginal circles, gangs continue to provide a transitional space and a discursive place for those Native youth who are unable to articulate their agency through

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conventional or community-sanctioned registers. Like the Mexican gang youth whose lives Zatz and Portillo (2000) document, Manitoba Native youth sometimes see themselves as agents of anti-colonialism (Alfred 2008), point to the police as troublemaking interlopers, and charge the media with failing to cover the economic problems that pervade poor, non-white neighborhoods. Looking askance at statutes that protect only the wealthy, moreover, gang members may conceive of their activities as valid forms of material redistribution and legitimate means of emotional redress.

The widespread use of drugs within gangs today signals that more is at work than straightforward profit-seeking. The gang members with whom I work continually concede that they use drugs to numb their pain. Drug use, while not particularly constructive, is one means of making it from today to tomorrow when placelessness becomes untenable, and futurelessness becomes unlivable. As the urban underclass is left to fend increasingly for itself, the “creative destruction” that gang involvement avails, offers one means to challenge conventional demarcations of “legitimate” commerce, to contest spaces of inequality, to disturb practices of exclusion, and to displace normative notions of marginality.

Increasingly, Native youth “age out” of gangs as they mature. In their late 20s, many have served prison time and do not wish to return. Some begin families and undertake addiction counseling, entering a recovery phase. Despite the desire for transcendence of the gang life, there remain few employment opportunities for individuals with criminal records who lack both educational credentials and the accumulated knowledge of “learning to labor” that their Euro-Canadian counterparts often possess.

The local drug economy has transformed, moreover, such that it is entirely feasible to operate as an independent producer by purchasing large quantities from Asian and more established Native gangs who possess the networks and organizational capacity required to transport drugs, tobacco, and other profit-generating goods across international borders. Drug sales have become normative in the inner-city urban Aboriginal subculture of Winnipeg, such that it is not uncommon for non-gang affiliated Native youth to describe a post-secondary educational financial strategy that is based on weekly drug sales. The caps on Federal Native education funding and the virtual impossibility of accessing the student loan system, make the drug economy, despite the violence of the narco-culture that attends it, a pragmatic and rational prospect. The situation is not likely to change moreover, until the political focus shifts from supply reduction to demand reduction.



Posse Killers

Historically, the Canadian state has sought to police morality and to circumscribe likely boundary digressions through legislation, governing youth and Native persons through supervision, suppression, and segregation. The penal management of inequality and bureaucratic disciplining of racialized neighborhoods, structures virtually every aspect of urban Aboriginal peoples' lives. Race- and class-targeted legislation continues to work to structure Canada's relations with its others and to remind Native subjects of their "proper" stations and functions. Legal scholar, Rosemary Coombe asserts that, "legitimate" social movements are governed by a cultural politics of place denoting cultural and ecological attachments to territory. These are accommodated by neoliberal orders because these forms of difference can be formulated in commodity terms (2005: 37). "The Indian" in Canada's remote north who lives off the land is a useful tourist motif and a marketable form of distinction. Native peoples in Winnipeg's North End, on the other hand, assert rights based on forms of cultural difference that are difficult to articulate with the conceptual framework of modernity. Urban Indians in the Canadian ideoscape are very much matter "out of place." Identified as having failed to live up to formulaic renditions of "traditionalism," urban residents are structurally ambiguous and defy the morality of properly construed (marketable) cultural difference, and defacing the logic of the commodity (ibid).

"Legitimate" Indians occupy the remote spaces of the public imagination, far from actual material encounters with the so-called "rightful" occupants of the city. Pictured in the contemporary presses as having fallen from a redemptive traditionalism. Blamed for failing to possess the very capabilities that the residential school complex robbed them of—namely their languages and cultures—urban Aboriginal peoples are denied meaningful civic participation both in Canadian and First Nations politics. They are the no-accounts. Efforts to reduce the demand for drugs must necessarily address the symbolic criminalization of *all* urban migrants. The escape-seeking which fuels the demand for drugs is likely to diminish when the categories informing the symbolic construction and material management of "problem" populations are recalculated, taking into account Indigenous values.

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