

Book Review

*Indians Wear Red: Colonialism, Resistance, and
Aboriginal Street Gangs*

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Book Review

Indians Wear Red: Colonialism, Resistance, and Aboriginal Street Gangs, Elizabeth Comack, Lawrence Deane, Larry Morrisette, and Jim Silver. Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2013. 166 pp., \$19.99 paper.

In *Indians Wear Red*, Comack, Deane, Morrisette, and Silver provide an illuminating account of Aboriginal street gangs in Winnipeg, the “gang capital of Canada.” Based on empirical data stemming from interviews with Aboriginal gang members, as well as Aboriginal women and elders, the book demonstrates how colonization, marginalization, deindustrialization, and neoliberalism have created deplorable conditions for Aboriginal youth living in the city’s North End. This racialized and colonized space serves as a precursor for gang formation and involvement, and it is through this lens that the authors argue that Aboriginal street gangs are the result of collective action amongst Aboriginal youth in an attempt to resist their social and economic exclusion. Examining recruitment, poverty, the drug market, violence, the revolving door of prison, and the element of masculinity, the authors are careful to differentiate Aboriginal street gangs from other groups by exploring and emphasizing the importance of the “trauma trails of colonialism.” This unique element is at the forefront of recommendations for future change, as the book argues that the decolonization of *people*, as well as of *spaces*, is necessary in order to curb the presence of Aboriginal street gangs.

Given the dearth of research on Aboriginal street gangs, as well as the holistic approach taken by the authors, there are many reasons to be enthusiastic about this book. Examining the emergence of Aboriginal street gangs within changing social, political, economic, and familial milieus, the book is able to connect macro-level systemic structures with micro-level processes, demonstrating how larger oppressive structures often have very tangible and traceable consequences on Aboriginal youth. This conceptualization provides readers with a rich understanding of how colonial expansion served as the catalyst for the cycle of poverty inflicting many Aboriginal communities today, stressing that the effects of colonialism continue to be both persistent and consequential. This perspective further enables the authors to demonstrate that Aboriginal street gangs are a form of collective resistance rather than the result of cultural pathology or moral failure, debunking commonly held stereotypes that often underlie the moral panics associated with them.

There are, however, some limitations of this work. Most notably, little connection is made between the experiences of Aboriginal youth in Winnipeg and the experiences of disadvantaged Aboriginal youth across Canada. Indeed, Winnipeg’s specific history is critical to examining why it is home to Aboriginal street gangs. However, the sole emphasis on the situation in Winnipeg detracts from readers’ understandings that these conditions are not unique to Winnipeg and that the “trauma trails” of colonialism suppress many Aboriginal communities throughout the country. This is especially pressing since the direct correlation between *specific* colonial institutions (i.e., residential schools) and the

realities of many Aboriginal persons today is also marginally discussed. Considering such connections in greater detail could provide readers with a more developed context, and could also illuminate the important, yet often unrecognized, relationship between colonialism and Aboriginal involvement in crime more generally.

Overall, the book is insightful, thought-provoking, and engaging while approaching a highly controversial and extremely understudied phenomenon with an appropriate and holistic lens. Accordingly, *Indians Wear Red* is a significant contribution to the field and provides a strong foundation for future work.

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