



Book Review

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Indigenous Women And Street Gangs: Survivance Narratives

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In *Indigenous Women and Street Gangs*, Amber, Bev, Chantel, Jazmyne, Faith, Jorgina, and Robert Henry profile six narrative accounts of street gangs (henceforth referred to mostly as “street lifestyles”¹) in Western Canada. The fact that each of the first six authors possess a lived experience of street lifestyles makes this book highly unique, as well as informative of broader discussions and understandings of the complex pathways into, within, and beyond street lifestyles. The women’s stories are accompanied by a series of photographs that have been carefully selected and, in most cases, taken by the women themselves, along with a corresponding explanation that describes their selection at the end of the book. This adds another layer of insight into the lives of these women, and further positions them as co-authors firmly engaged in the research process and the re-presentation of their stories.

The book’s introduction locates the six narratives within the broader context of settler-colonialism, which helps to distinguish the Indigenous form from other forms of street gangs and street lifestyles in Canada. The introduction could have gone further in identifying the historical antecedents that have shaped the women’s environments and relationships to street lifestyles (e.g. by alerting the reader to residential schools as well as other historical patterns of dispossession and displacement in Canada and Western Canada specifically), but I appreciate the desire to focus principally on contemporary manifestations of settler-colonialism as exhibited through the women’s narrative accounts. In this regard, the book succeeds in drawing attention to a range of social factors that have shaped the women’s involvement in street lifestyles, most notably the gross inadequacies of foster care and other systemic failures in Canada that cut differently across racial lines. These social factors are well-articulated throughout the book, and are evenly distributed across the lives of these women as they navigate the inadequacies of various other social institutions, including education, housing, and the criminal justice system.

As noted in the book’s opening pages, research on Indigenous street gangs and street lifestyles in Canada is extremely limited. Consequently, the narratives that have been popularized in films and the mainstream media have largely overshadowed the sorts of self-styled narratives captured in this book, including stories of compassion, kinship, and Indigenous survivance (Vizenor 2008). Research on street gangs has also mostly solicited

1 Following the authors of *Indigenous Women and Street Gangs*, I use “the term street lifestyles to acknowledge that people can move in and out of a street gang, while simultaneously continue to engage in those behaviours that are attributed to street gangs and their members” (xii). The authors further argue that “The term street lifestyles seeks to push researchers, policymakers, and the broader community to define the specific behaviours that are attributed to street gangs, and to simultaneously reinforce the notion that entering and exiting street gangs is an ongoing process” (xii).

the voices of frontline workers (e.g. social workers, police) or male gang members, thus relegating women to a more passive or victimized role within the hierarchy of the street gang. However, as the self-styled narratives in *Indigenous Women and Street Gangs* reveal, the lives and identities of these women are far more complex and multifaceted than most academic accounts or stereotypical media projections could hope to capture. Indeed, the women profiled in this book held a range of roles and relationships within the street gang, including leaders, soldiers, sisters, partners, mothers, and even grandmothers.

The six narratives are organized in a way that invites readers to consider the life histories of these women, drawing attention to their complicated family backgrounds, beginning from childhood, growing through adolescence, early adulthood, motherhood, and into the present day. While the narratives are somewhat fragmented (as memories tend to be), they are compelling, insightful, and deserving of a wide audience. Moreover, they afford rare insight into the raw and complicated emotions that accompany street lifestyles. For example, the women rationalized their connection to street gangs for a host of different reasons: for protection from abuse; to be a part of something; to feel powerful; to gain respect; to add fun and pleasure to their lives; and to not be forgotten. Ironically, it is for these same reasons that many of the women have exited the street lifestyle. In so doing, they found hope in family, motherhood, culture, and sometimes just in hope itself. Without exception, the women are genuine, self-critical, and forgiving in their accounts, and the reader is left with a greater understanding of the complexity of their lives.

The book's introduction states, "Across these narratives, we see common themes of trauma and neglect. We also see, however, that women found ways to process their experiences, with fear, aggression, and violence giving way to a sense of pride, resistance, and resurgence of their bodies, minds, and lives" (xiv). To this list, I would add an additional theme that persisted across each of the six narratives: the eternal longing to both give and receive love. I was inspired by the ability of these women to still love unconditionally despite all the heartbreak and abuse they had endured. These women remained passionate guardians of their families, their self-identified communities, and of their belief and commitment to love, and to hope for love; this is at the core of their stories. As one woman (Chantel) described, "I have love and I have hope. I have a story" (48). As is often the case, expressing love is a messy business, especially when a person has been socialized through a lifetime of trauma.

Ultimately, the book succeeds in challenging the "pornification of street lifestyles" whereby images of violence, lawlessness, sexuality, and social injury overwhelm the beauty and complexity of survivance within the lives of these women. It is a must-read for anyone working with street-involved women and offers an important contribution to the literature on Indigenous street gangs and street lifestyles. More importantly, the book is a testament to the will and resilience of the six Indigenous women whose stories grace its pages.