

## “It’s Just Gravel”: The Logic of Elimination in Edmonton’s Downtown Revitalization

*Kate Black*

*Edmonton’s burgeoning “Ice District” has been a frosty source of contention in the city. But criticism of the Ice District – which has ranged from its name to its funding – has hardly addressed the project’s positioning in a larger event of settler colonialism. By analyzing recent news coverage and an interview with a stakeholder in Edmonton’s urban development, I argue that the city’s downtown revitalization disregards urban aboriginal sovereignty. I find that Edmonton’s downtown core is a uniquely aboriginal space, with nearly 50 per cent of Edmonton’s urban homeless population being aboriginal-identified, while aboriginal peoples only constitute less than 6 per cent of the greater Edmonton population. In conjunction with language seeking to “cleanse” the area of perceived danger and imprint capitalist productivity in an “empty” area, I conclude that Edmonton’s downtown revitalization project operates as a settler colonialist function to eliminate urban indigenous populations. I position this argument within a greater conversation of indigenous sovereignties in Canada: how can the urban indigenous population in Edmonton be self-sustaining – let alone sovereign – when the very land they reside is under constant siege by a competing municipality?*

In July 2010, Edmonton’s City Council passed a comprehensive, 10-year plan to redevelop the city’s downtown – quietly, yet effectively, perpetuating the land’s bloody history of settler colonialism. Amid controversies of design and public consultation, little conversation has queried the impact of the new “arena and entertainment” district on those who live on the land targeted for redevelopment. Not only residing on unceded Treaty 6 indigenous territory, Edmonton’s downtown core houses a particularly dense houseless aboriginal population. Thus, this paper analyzes discourse surrounding Edmonton’s downtown development through Wolfe’s (2006) “logic of elimination” – that the settler erasure of indigenous populations for colonialist projects is a “structure,” rather than an “event.” From the early planning stages of the arena, the municipal government has failed to acknowledge the urban land sovereignty of the aboriginal peoples, while, in tandem, actively seeking to eliminate their populations from the downtown core. This paper, then, argues that by disregarding urban aboriginal

sovereignty, Edmonton's downtown "revitalization" project operates as a settler colonialist function to eliminate urban native populations – an elimination eerily reminiscent of the genocide that segued settler sovereignty over Treaty 6 in the first place.

### **Edmonton's Downtown: A Uniquely Aboriginal Space**

Given the disproportionate representation of houseless aboriginal peoples in the city's downtown, it would be irresponsible to analyze the revitalization project without acknowledging its racial significance. According to the Homeward Trust's 2014 Homeless Count, 47 per cent of the city's homeless population identifies as aboriginal (Inuit, Indians or Métis), while only constituting for 5.4 per cent of Edmonton's population. With 60 per cent of the city's aboriginal population and 56 per cent of the entire city's homeless population living downtown, in many ways, Edmonton's downtown is a uniquely aboriginal space ("Homeless Count"). However, as made clear by its looming invasive developments, Edmonton's downtown is dominated by decisions made by sovereign settler bodies. In this sense, Nichols' (2014) work suggesting the colonialist influence on aboriginal "overrepresentation" in Canadian prisons may be extended to the streets of Edmonton – aboriginal peoples are disproportionately subjected to homelessness, incarcerated by inescapable poverty and, to some extent, punished by having the land where they have established their urban lives excavated and built upon. Because this space is so uniquely steeped in aboriginal bloodlines and colonial intervention, the downtown arena project demands a reading attuned to excavating its inherently political and colonial enrichment.

We must, however, look beyond Nichols' thoughts on aboriginal "overrepresentation" in the carceral system to effectively analyze the urban indigenous situation in Edmonton. Nichols (2014) asserts that stating the numbers of incarcerated aboriginals as a mere "overrepresentation" overlooks the deeply political and colonial project ongoing within the country's justice system; the same may be said for homelessness in Edmonton – the statistics are largely attributable to social inequalities triggered by deep histories of colonial displacement. However, it is essential to recognize that the analogy does not run equally between prisons and the streets – aboriginal peoples, in many instances, actively choose to choose life downtown and have developed sustained cultural practices within the urban setting (Lawrence 2004). To ignore this vital lifeworld as a sovereign indigenous body further colonizes the project of urban indigeneity. Therefore, this paper approaches the word "homelessness" as merely a rhetorical framework, and opts for the phrase "houselessness" when possible. After all, as stated by Johnson (2013), "in Edmonton, Indigenous peoples *are* home – even people who do not have houses are still emphatically *at home*" (p. 4). While this argument tends to romanticize the devastating realities donned on the houseless in a capitalist framework, it does, however, address the resiliency and legitimacy of lifestyle lived by those in inner cities to create their own sovereign urban cultures. In fact, the municipal government's disregard for urban houseless residence as a legitimate, sovereign lifestyle, gives way to its project of indigenous erasure.

The development on this distinctly aboriginal place comes several years after Edmonton's City Council enacted policy that seemingly permits the colonialist use of space in the city. In a sense, Edmonton's Urban Aboriginal Accord (2005) euphemizes the settler-colonial relationship between the city of Edmonton and the city's aboriginal community. The one-page document acknowledges the city's

residence on Treaty Six territory, and is built on four "guiding principles": relationships, agreements, celebrations and renewal. At no point, however, does the document highlight the sovereignty of the aboriginal populace. This non-encompassing document therefore serves to support Nichol's (2014) argument that settler-colonial states perpetuate their colonial nature by disregarding indigenous states as "self-organizing, self-governing political collectivises" (p. 444). The downtown arena project, therefore, is not as much a violation of the accord as it is a demonstration of the gross failure of the accord as a political document, as it does not respect the sovereignty of the indigenous nation as a self-sustaining body.

Edmonton's denial of the urban aboriginal population as a sovereign body was clearly reflected in its deliberation process for developing the downtown region. Explicit mentions of, or deliberations with vulnerable populations, (let alone the urban aboriginal population) were fully absent from the council deliberations and community forums surrounding the redevelopment. In 2010, the city held a public consultation to seek input on the "concept, funding model, and impact" of a potential arena and entertainment facility downtown ("2010 Consultation Summary"). The method of collecting feedback, however, was not catered to vulnerable populations. Feedback was received through an online questionnaire, open houses, invited stakeholder sessions, and a "statistically valid telephone survey" – yet no formal deliberations were made with the populations that it would most likely impact to the gravest degree, those who likely have limited access to the Internet connection or phone line required to participate in the deliberations. Despite the Canadian Government's 1995 federal policy statement recognizing the "inherent right of self-government as an existing Aboriginal right," the Edmonton municipal government still exercises full control over how those who live on downtown land operate – sovereignty in its purest sense ("Aboriginal Self-Government"). With that being said, a sizeable portion of Edmonton's aboriginal population (even up to 60 per cent) are privy to the decisions made by white industry and settler municipality. A population simply cannot be rendered sovereign under these circumstances.

### *Urbs Nullius*: The Perceived "Emptiness" of Downtown Land

Discussion surrounding the usability of Edmonton's downtown is entrenched in the *terra nullius* attitude fuelling settler colonialism – that is, the land, at present, is not being used effectively, and therefore can be utilized more efficiently by the incoming developers. Or, as put by Coulthard (2014), it is "the racist legal fiction that declared Indigenous peoples too 'primitive' to bear rights to land and sovereignty... thus rendering their territories legally "empty" and therefore open for colonial settlement and development" (p. 175). Coulthard (2014) briefly expands this attitude to define the *urbs nullius* paradigm of gentrification: that the urban space is not being used effectively, and is therefore susceptible to "legitimate" construction, or "revitalization" (p. 176). In a personal interview, President of Edmonton's Downtown Community League, Chris Buyze, plainly reflected the essence of the *urbs nullius* logic of elimination. When pressed to discuss the potential displacement the downtown arena may affect on vulnerable populations, Buyze (a staunch supporter of downtown's revitalization), saw no issue with building on the "empty" land:

"Where the arena is being built is just a parking lot. It's not like we took down buildings or people's homes. It's just gravel. If somebody wants to claim that they're

being displaced because they loved the parking lot that was there, I find that a hard argument to swallow" (C. Buyze, personal communication, March 26, 2014).

To Buyze (and much of the downtown revitalization movement), the land is not being used in a "legitimate" sense (i.e. not in the same way as affluently sheltered individuals do). Thus, the *urbs nullius* paradigm does not recognize a gravel parking lot as a legitimate home, although 20 per cent of Edmonton's houseless are estimated to "sleep rough" on the city's streets (i.e. reside outside, in places not widely intended for human habitation, such as parking lots). This mindset, a blissful ignorance, constructs a slippery slope parallel to that of which legitimized the colonization and theft of indigenous land. The urban indigenous state may be quietly eliminated when their homeland is regarded as vacant, usable "gravel" to be tread and built upon.

Such use of land is reminiscent of Wolfe's (2006) discussion of settler colonialism as an eliminating act, in that "modernity cannot explain the insatiable dynamic whereby settler colonialism always needs more land" (p. 395). His discussion of agriculture as the primary land-harvesting function of settler colonialism can be extended to recognize gentrification as its newest damaging form. When the amount of flat land space has been wholly occupied or "taken," as it is in the urban context, the only available next step is to improve upon, or gentrify, what already exists. Gentrification of indigenous space, too, "enables a population to be expanded by continuing immigration at the expense of native lands and livelihoods" (p. 395). Here, the definition of "native" may be extended beyond purely aboriginal populations to encompass all peoples who inhabited the space prior to gentrification. Gentrification is more than just the demolition of buildings and resurfacing of scaffolding – it is the "cleansing" of the native population to produce an acceptably hygienic population.

### **Eyes on Delta Zero: Who's Legitimate?**

The language of policing the downtown revitalization echoes this effort to "sanitize" the space, quietly seeking to eliminate its indigenous populations. The 2013 *Edmonton Journal* article, "Delta Zero: Downtown Edmonton's crime pocket" reflects the city's optimism of the construction of an "arena district" to drive down crime rates while attracting more "legitimate" participants into the space. As noted by the article, the catalyst of the revitalization project, the Rogers Arena, is being built in Edmonton's "largest crime pocket," dubbed "Delta Zero" by the Edmonton Police Services (EPS). The area between 101 Street and 105 Street, and 107 Avenue to Jasper Avenue, the article states, "has so much crime and disorder that police have created a separate district ... to manage crime," that the area "drives up total calls for service for the entire force" and creates a "drain" on Edmonton Police Services' resources ("Delta Zero"). In the article, Edmonton Community Sgt. Lawley states that Delta Zero's main drain on the police force's efforts comes from "illegitimate" users of the area, which he defines as those who "prey upon" the "legitimate" users of the area. When imagining the area in its fully "revitalized" state," he defines the "legitimate" uses as those who are entering the area to access its services, from those who are "taking in hockey games" to those "going to Boyle Street Community Services, the Hope Mission and the George Spady Centre" ("Delta Zero"). While masquerading as a function of public safety, this strict binary of space legitimacy based on one's capacity to engage with its "services" seeks to ouster those who merely reside in the area without presenting transactional "purpose."

The language utilized by city council and police describing the desired tenants of the Delta Zero space refurbishes the downtown core from one of residence to one of service, steeping the discourse of the area in a capitalist framework. Lawley does not include those who engage with the space in a transitional, "passive" manner as legitimate inhabitants of Delta Zero – that is, those who merely reside in the downtown core, as people living in their sheltered homes do, are not considered "legitimate" users of the space. Rather, the "legitimacy" discourse implies that those entering the space are doing so for a presentable reason and that they will leave once they're done "using" the area. While politically correct for the police to recognize the use of services provided to the non-affluent members of the community (such as the Boyle Community Centre) as "legitimate," this language conveniently glosses over the reality that these services do not permanently "contain" the vulnerable members of society. Moreover, these services exist in the downtown core to be available to the people who need it the most, and simply do not have the capacity to fully "house" its users away from the streets on a full-time basis. In this colonialist context, an individual's presence is only legitimate once they are being "contained" by the agents of the colonial government – whether that is paying entry fees to watch a game at the arena or housed away in a (usually temporary) social service.

Such attitudes produce the policing of non-transactional uses of space, like loitering and panhandling – restrictions that usurp the sovereignty of land from the urban citizens and into the hands of the government. Little scholarship discusses panhandling and other "alternative" revenue streams utilized by urban populations as legitimate means of living, and its policing as a colonial practice (with the exception of drug trade and sex work). Razack (2002), however, describes "nuisance laws" (i.e. laws that bar panhandling, for example) as spatial practices which "mark off the spaces of the settler and the native, both conceptually and materially" (p. 129). But this policing of transient urban lifestyles not only ghettoizes "undesirable" groups from affluent space as Razack writes, but effectively *problematizes* the actions in themselves. Living in downtown centres aren't necessarily inherently debilitating – indigenous populations lived relatively free of "poverty" as we see it today before the introduction of settler colonialism. Rather, the space becomes inhabitable when the municipal sovereignty outlaws and society subsequently shames the native's sovereignty to actively seek out methods of self-sustenance. In this sense, disallowing activities that ensure the urban population's sovereignty functions as a logic of elimination. By enacting legislation and language that makes the urban landscape unlivable for those who do not subscribe to its capitalist underpinnings, Edmonton has a clear motive to drive its urban populations out of the area. This problematic drive to erasure is particularly evident in its labelling the transient use of space (presumably to prevent such activities barred by "nuisance laws") as "illegitimate."

Further exuding the native populations of the urban centre as "un-civilized" bodies is the increasing language of surveillance surrounding the revitalization. Repeated statements from police in city newspapers, and city documents cite the influx of "legitimate" users in the downtown space will drive out the "illegitimate" users (which as, discussed before, can be expected to be largely houseless and largely aboriginal). This rhetoric drives the sovereignty to "let live" into the hands of those who do not necessarily reside in the downtown core. Lawley, in the previously quoted *Journal* article, mentions the benefit of increased "peer surveillance" with the greater influx of "legitimate users" infiltrating the area: "It's the citizens basically policing their own community, and that, to me, is a much better model than having a cop on every corner" ("Delta Zero"). Similarly, EPS officer Tony Harder states that with

the downtown revitalization, that "bringing more of the regular folks with regular jobs" will "dilutes whatever issues are occurring" ("Edmonton Revitalization"). These two statements, in particular, illustrate the eliminating settler mindsets at work. The legitimate, affluent people with "regular" jobs are imagined to literally "dilute" the "illegitimate" populations in the downtown region – who, we can assume, do not have "regular" jobs. This language is perpetuated by Buyze (2015), in his short article "Finer Focus for Finer Living" in the Downtown Community League's community magazine, *the Yards*: "A safer core is a clean core," he writes. "Having eyes on the street and identifying problem spots helps us work to address these concerns with downtown's beat cops" (p. 4). Again, the "regular," affluent aggregate is assumed to be able to drive out "problems" with their surveilling presence. While none of these statements explicitly mention what these "problem spots are," they are clearly speaking to the undesirable people taking up space in the downtown core – there's no sense in having "eyes on the street" to police nature, after all. In short, having "eyes on the street" hands the sovereign power over to those "legitimate" users of the Delta Zero space to police who is welcome and who is not.

Here, Coulthard's idea of *urbs nullius* may be expanded to not simply encompass the perceived primitive lack of productivity in indigenous space, but an absence of civility. In another *the Yards* article, Edmonton Ward 6 councilor, Scott McKeen (2014) adopts the project of rehabilitating alcoholic aboriginal peoples as a further degree of downtown revitalization. He writes that houseless urban aboriginal peoples "remain infested with these shameful trickle-down effects" of residential schools, whose "lives are third world at best" (p. 16). He quietly links these "street alcoholics" to causing "much of the social disorder [on Edmonton's] streets" and that they live "pathetic lives of misery." In this last line, McKeen's statements suggest their true intent: creating more spaces for "street alcoholics" are not rooted in rehabilitation – they're a swift method of clearing undesirable populations (which, as he admits, are uniquely aboriginal) from the street. Temporary attempts at rehabilitation will clear "social disorder" so the city's sidewalks are fit for the affluent to walk without fear of touching third-world miscreants. Sadly, Coulthard's description of *urbs nullius* doesn't seem to be enough to encompass the crude desires to reform the humans to better the streets of Edmonton. These sentiments are widely sanitized by city communications offices and "revitalizationist" rhetoric, but clearly, at the hearts of some developmental pursuits, lies the blatant desire to erase broken cultures.

It is unclear whether Edmonton's aboriginal peoples will surely be displaced following the downtown core's "revitalization." It is, however, undeniable that the language and actions used to preface the building in the area are drenched in settler colonialist ideology. The aboriginal population in Edmonton can never be self-sustaining – let alone sovereign – when the very land they reside is under constant attack from a municipality that threatens to disassemble their attempts at urban sovereignty. Gentrification is certainly pleasant for the affluent (and is admittedly so for this white settler writer). We cannot speak about revitalization, however, without acknowledging its intent of erasure: erasure of indigenous land sovereignty and erasure of the symptoms of our unequal society. The blood trails left by gentrification may be invisible, but we must not forget the historical bloodshed that punctuates settler-colonialist conversations of "revitalization."

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