Resisting Marginalization: Social Networks and "Communication Communities" of Urban Blackfoot Teenage Girls

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Abstract: In this article, I attempt to show the ways in which Native youth can play an essential part in the realization of community for urban First Nations people. I do this by focusing on the extensive social networks sustained by teenage girls, to explore the ways in which they serve as a means of communication linking adults and teens in physically dispersed households in the context of the city. Based on over 32 months of participant observation of an urban Blackfoot family in Lethbridge, Alberta, this case study shows how such interconnections serve to mitigate various forms of marginalization by creating and maintaining a sense of place in a community.

Keywords: urban First Nations, youth, social networks, community, identity

Résumé : Dans cet article, je tente d'illustrer la façon dont la jeunesse autochtone est en mesure de jouer un rôle essentiel dans le développement d'une communauté pour les populations des Premières Nations en milieu urbain. Ce faisant, je mets l'accent sur les vastes réseaux sociaux qu'entretiennent les adolescentes, afin d'explorer la manière dont elles servent de moyens de communication entre les adultes et les adolescents se trouvant dans des ménages dispersés physiquement dans un contexte citadin. Cette étude est fondée sur une période d'observation participative d'une durée de 32 mois au sein d'une famille pied noir de Lethbridge en Alberta. Elle démontre comment un tel réseautage sert à atténuer diverses formes de marginalisation en créant et en entretenant le sentiment d'avoir une place au sein d'une communauté.

Mots-clés : Premières Nations en milieu urbain, jeunesse, réseaux sociaux, communauté, identité

Introduction

In this article I attempt to illustrate the importance of communicative networks among teenage individuals in processes of building and maintaining an ethno-cultural community amongst an urban First Nations group in the context of physical dispersion in the city.[1] I focus on the extensive, fluid and constantly evolving networks sustained by urban and rural teenage girls in order to show how Native youth play an essential part in the realization of community for an urban indigenous group. These networks extend across the urban domain of Lethbridge, Alberta and that of the nearby Kainai (Blood) reserve. Such networks are based upon detailed information exchange by means of face-to-face interaction, telephone conversations and virtual communication. Lobo (2001) and Proulx (2003) have described the extensive personal knowledge that geographically dispersed urban Native adults possess about one another, and this case study illustrates how some of that knowledge is acquired by focusing on the role played by urban First Nations teens in contributing to a sense of community in the city.

In urban contexts, a pattern of widely dispersed residency is common among Aboriginal peoples (Lobo 2001, 2003; Norris and Clatworthy 2003; Proulx 2003). As Hill explains (Paddison 2001), networking and information exchange are therefore more relevant than geographical territory in creating a sense of community. The overlapping communities of Native teenage girls are viewed here as "arena[s] of social relations, where individuals seek and receive verification of their personalities, preferences, and prejudices" (Markowitz 1992:150). These are "discursive communities"—social networks animated with extensive sharing of personal information through dialogue (see Proulx 2003). Delanty refers to these as "communication communities" in which "community as belonging is constructed in communicative processes" (2003:187).

Adult urban Aboriginal community building and networking are most often contextualized in reference to

development of institutions, organizations and specific political movements (Lobo and Peters 2001; Culhane 2003; Howard-Bobiwash 2003; Proulx 2003). As is the case with many immigrant minorities, there are important socio-economic reasons for these strategies as they provide resources for employment and places to live while adjusting to life in a new city or country. Networking among Native teenage girls is situated within such processes, since both adults and adolescents are developing resources and constructing a sense of place and belonging in an urban environment often perceived as rather hostile. The teens' community-building strategies are presented here as informal resistance to the marginalization and stereotyping experienced by First Nations people in general. By having survived colonial processes and resisting neo-colonial forms of exclusion, urban Aboriginal people can claim membership in a distinct type of community based upon shared experiences (Proulx 2003).

Marginalization of Native peoples is primarily discussed in macro-sociological and historical contexts (Jacoud and Brassard 2003), including the wide-ranging social, economic and political effects of colonialism and postcolonialism (Adams 1989, 1999; Frideres 1998, 2000; Friesen and Friesen 2005) and persistent negative stereotyping (Ponting and Keely 1997). Centuries of political and economic dominance has caused disempowerment and exclusion, including the one-sided mainstream ability to establish sociocultural boundaries (Frideres 1998). This paper complements the above research by showing how, at a micro-social level, urban First Nations teenage girls assert their own agency in sustaining communities with ethno-culturally construed boundaries.

It is important to depict urban Native teens as more than just casualties of macroscopic processes in order to lend balance to a large body of politically motivated research focusing on at-risk Aboriginal youth, identity crises and various pathologies. These problems are often associated with an assumed loss of traditional cultural ways, but as Haig-Brown notes, the large body of literature describing "one way acculturation and eventual assimilation" is understood by many to be a mythical construct (1995:195). Further, Aboriginal youth labelled as *at-risk* may also possess many positive qualities and develop a resilience that can facilitate success in a variety of areas (Schissel and Wotherspoon 2003).

As Satzewich and Wotherspoon observe, "a chronicle of unemployment, poor housing conditions and overcrowded dwellings, lack of basic services, alcoholism, and ill health runs through portrayals of Native life off the reserve" (Todd 2001:99). Although research on social problems in this context is both necessary and relevant, it may also contribute to stereotypes of powerless individuals (see Culhane 2003; Letkemann 2004) "afflicted with multiple pathological problems, in contrast to confident middle class whites" (Buchignani and Letkemann 1994:217). Urban First Nations people who find steady jobs and "some degree of social acceptance [tend to become] relatively invisible, while those with problems and difficulties retain high visibility" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1993:3). This paper contributes to a growing body of research emphasizing the many ways in which Native peoples demonstrate resilience by adapting in a positive manner to life in the city (Metcalf 1982; Davis-Jackson 2001; Lobo and Peters 2001; Culhane 2003; Dole and Csordas 2003; Howard-Bobiwash 2003; Lobo 2001, 2003). Much of this research is focused on understanding the role of urban Native women in urbanization processes in order to lend balance to a "male-privileged gender factor in the telling of urban American history" (Weibel-Orlando 2003:495). First Nations teenage girls make valuable but often similarly overlooked contributions, and this is an increasingly important area of study given that the number of Canadian First Nations youth is expected to increase by 400% in the next decade (Evans 2003).

First Nations Teenage Girls: Multiple Levels of Marginalization

Depictions of Native peoples are often androcentric (Albers 1983; Mihesuah 1998), portraying Native American women, if at all, in "one-dimensional, inaccurate and insulting terms, their roles in Native American society neglected and trivialized by an obsession with male warriors and chiefs" (Welch 1988:31; see Valaskakis 1999). Such dominant representations of Aboriginal women are deeply rooted in colonial history and culture and continue to be reinforced in urban settings (Culhane 2003). Similarly, although given the most attention by researchers, writers and the mass media, Native American men have been presented as stoic, mythical figures (Bird 1996)—stereotypical "noble [or ignoble] savages." Dehumanizing neo-shamanic (Wallis 1999) or neo-primitivist characterizations popularize "Indians as pre-Columbian and ancient by having them resemble pure common sense, devoid of any sophisticated rationality" (Wernitznig 2003:xxxiii).

First Nations teens belong to this culturally diverse, yet uniformly stigmatized (Frideres 1998) minority group of Native Canadians who are, in general, socially, economically and politically on the fringes of mainstream society (Frideres 1998; Harrison and Friesen 2004). Most urban Native youth are also marginalized due to their assumed membership in a culture of poverty, since many

people still think of cultural attributes as more salient than economic factors or historical circumstances in causing poverty (Cozzarelli et al. 2001). As well, many First Nations youth are placed in the highly restrictive category of "registered status Indians" by the Indian Act, which, through its paternalistic stance, continues to erode the role of First Nations women (Fraser 2002), and has "indelibly ordered how Native people think of things 'Indian'" (Lawrence 2004:25). The Indian Act gives such all-encompassing powers to administrators that it creates a "dependency mindset [contributing to feelings of] despair and alienation which are disempowering" (Ponting 1997:118-119). Finally, since most of the teenage girls discussed here are between the ages of 13 and 16, they are negotiating identities in the liminal stage of their lives between child and adult, which is another important marginalizing factor.

Reflections on Roles, Methodology and Ethics

This article results from almost three years of auto-ethnographic experience, observations, gossip, stories and other information gained from living in a home with a Blackfoot family and their many friends and relatives. Such informal methodology is not systematically rigorous, but it can provide micro-social insights that break down gross categorizations and provide a more personalized view (see McCarthy and Hagan 1992; Lovell 1997; Letkemann 2004). Further, in some cases, a lack of structured interviewing or questioning has advantages with ethical implications. The teens prefer to tell me things on their own terms, in their own way and at times of their choosing. This degree of agency is very important, as Waterston and Rylko-Bauer (2006) found when gathering narratives from family members.

I have visited people on the Blood reserve for almost 30 years, and in the summer of 2004 I lived in two houses there, where I met Faith, a single mother who wanted to move to Lethbridge with her 13-year-old daughter, Tayla. Faith said "it is better for children to grow up on the reserve and learn the language and traditions, but sometimes we single mothers have to move into the city to have independent lifestyles." Faith wanted to access higher education and employment, as is the case with many urbanizing First Nations women (Howard-Bobiwash 2003). As platonic roommates, Faith and I have been sharing a house and living as a sort of "family" since June 2004. Faith's niece Wynter, who was 14 at the time, moved in with us a month later. When Wynter moved out her 13-year-old sister Nikko took her place, as Faith and I agreed that Tayla was happier with a cousin in the house. Faith, the teens, their relatives and friends consider this to be a female-headed household as do I, since Faith is in charge of disciplining the teens and deciding who can live in the house—although she frequently consults with me.

My role in this house is complex and somewhat ambiguous. As a white male anthropologist living among teenage Blackfoot females, my research is inevitably, as Gordon makes clear, "ground[ed] in a masculine subjectivity" (Enslin 1994:538). Ethnography is not a neutral and objective discourse as it always proceeds from a gendered being (Mascia-Lees et al. 1989). Reflexivity in ethnographic encounters is best understood then as the interaction of a variety of subjectivities (Jacobs-Huey 2002).

The relative ages, material resources, ethnicities and educational backgrounds of members of this household (myself included) mirror colonial and postcolonial realities as well as the circumstances under which much ethnography is produced (McGrane 1989). These power-related factors have ethical implications, so I have chosen to focus on the positive aspects of the girls' lives to avoid making the teens feel like research subjects. As Nikko explained to her friend, "Paul's writing about us that we're important." Developing long-term, functional and satisfactory relationships with Faith and the girls required a constant sensitivity to such issues, since otherwise these issues would be detrimental to interaction in a general sense, aside from the research context. Close family-like relationships necessitate the empathy, identification and friendship that participant observation depends upon (Appell 1980). At the same time, this kind of "intimate ethnography" carries inherent ambiguities relating to methodology and ethics (Waterston and Rylko-Bauer 2006). Although the primary relationships may be familial, the anthropologist "is always present [and] there is an interplay of roles" (Waterston and Rylko-Bauer 2006: 397). In this way, "distinctions between insider and outsider, researcher and researched may be seen as a continuum rather than [as] dichotomous categories" (Christman 1988:73).[2]

The Setting

Lethbridge is a city of 77,000 situated in Southern Alberta, about 100 km north of the Montana border. The Blood, or Kainai First Nations reserve, Canada's largest in area at 1414 km^2, lies to the southwest of Lethbridge, its northeast border only a few kilometres from the city limits. The other Blackfoot reserve near Lethbridge is that of the Peigan or Piikani, approximately 90 km west of the city.

In May 2005, the most recent year for which I could find population statistics, the Kainai band had a registered

membership of 9,736, of whom 7,362 lived primarily on the reserve (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC] 2005a). The Piikani reserve is much smaller, with a population in 2005 of 3,407 with 2,285 living mainly on the reserve (INAC 2005b). In 2005 almost 3,500 registered Kainai and Piikani people reported their primary residence as off reserve. Although some live in Calgary and smaller urban centres, most of these people have taken up residence in the city of Lethbridge near their home reserves, where people reporting First Nations origin numbered between 3,200 (City of Lethbridge 2005) and 4,000 (Provost 2005:1) in 2005. It is reasonable to assume that about 2,700 to 3,000 Piikani and Kainai people had their primary residence in Lethbridge in 2006, constituting at least 3.7 or 4% of the population.[3]

The Fluid Household in a Fluid Community

The concept of household is a difficult one and household boundaries are best defined culturally rather than spatially (Berge 1989; Lobo 2003). Households provide important resources for urban and urbanizing Native peoples and Lobo describes "key households," often female-headed, as "stopping points, the locations of stability for highly mobile individuals...situated within communities that are structurally very fluid" (2003:509). My experience suggests that many urban and rural First Nations homes serve as key households at various times—especially since sharing resources is highly culturally valued (see Braroe 1975). When one of the teens is unwilling to share, Faith will sometimes tell them "you're acting white." A brief description of the history and changing composition of this household illustrates the degree of fluidity referred to.

This house is 92 years old, with 800 square feet on the main floor, and two bedrooms and a bathroom in the basement. However, when I remarked that it seemed a little crowded when seven people lived here for several days, Faith replied "if this was a reserve house we could fit a lot more people in it." I have come to realize that household living arrangements, like income, are largely meaningful relative to previous experience. Tayla once informed me that "we're *not* poor—you are not poor unless there is no food in the house, not even a Kraft dinner."

Faith's daughter Tayla was 13 when she and her mother moved to this house. For six months, Faith's niece Wynter, who was then 14, also lived with us. Later, Wynter's sister Nikko lived in the house for eight months, she was 14 at the time. Nikko had an argument with Faith and felt "picked on" so she moved back to the reserve to live with her mother. Leanne, Faith's 18-year-old niece through marriage, lived in the house for a month on three occasions when she was feeling overwhelmed and needed a peaceful home. Leanne's sister Joanna, who was 20, lived in the house for three weeks when she was having difficulties with her husband, and continued to visit sporadically with her young son when it suited everyone. Faith's cousin Emily, who was 14, lived in the house for a few weeks when she was not getting along with her older sister. Tayla's cousin Brianne, also 14, lived in the house for a few weeks when she was feeling "unappreciated" by her mother who works long hours. Emily's 15-year-old friend Betty stayed with us for about a week when she was not getting along with her family. Later Betty became Tayla's best friend and stayed over on many weekends. Eleven other teenage girls have stayed over for weekends, sometimes three at a time and all of them relatives or friends of Tayla, Wynter or Nikko. Nine of these teens are Blackfoot, eight being Kainai and one Piikani. Betty is "Cree from up north" as Tayla puts it, and one white girl or *nááp*i*yáakii* has also stayed in the house. Almost all of Faith's closest relatives have also visited the house, sometimes staying overnight, and on one occasion her nephew stayed so that he could work in the city for a month.

Such a fluid pattern of urban residence (see Howard-Bobiwash 2003; Lobo 2003) allows families to be interdependent and sometimes teens move for periods of time in relation to available resources. In other cases, this interdependence alleviates tension in households, so that if a teenage girl is "kicked out" for her behaviour she will quickly find a place to stay with a friend. Also, if teens feel that their parents are behaving badly, they may move to a friend's house for a period of time. For many reasons, teens seem to have "multiple homes" (Lobo 2003:513) and their extensive social networking in so many households contributes to a strong sense of community among urban Blackfoot teens and parents. With so many teens living or visiting in this relatively small house, a great deal of information is shared in endless and highly animated storytelling. Once, when Tayla wanted to recount her adventures in Edmonton on the phone, Nikko stopped her, saying "tell me when you get home, so you can do the special effects." I asked Faith whether teenage Blackfoot boys network as extensively as the girls, and she replied "no, but the girls tell them stuff."

Indigenous Language, Identity and the Household

Faith, Nikko and Tayla are not fluent in Blackfoot, but they and most of their friends use and understand certain Blackfoot words, phrases and expressions. Some words commonly spoken in the household include *saa* (no),

áa (yes), *kiái* (expression of disgust, used only by females), *kí* (come on, lets go), *ma'tsi* (take it), *aní'takit*! (hurry up!), *niistó* (me/I), *ama[ssk]* (pitiful), *isstoyííwa* ([it's] very cold), *hánnia*! (really!), *póínaa'pssiwa* (bothersome), *aistoot*! (come here!), *napayín* (bread), *iníkksiistapoot*! (go away!), *tsss* (expression of disapproval) and *tsaa* (disbelief).[4] This is not an exhaustive list, but these are familiar words from childhood, and they continue to have symbolic importance in identifying them specifically as Blackfoot individuals. The words are spoken more frequently when other Blackfoot teens are visiting. Certain English words are also identified as "Indian ways of talking" as Tayla puts it. For example, the word *right* is often used instead of *very* or *really*, so the teens might say that something is taking "a *right* long time," or assert that "I *right* fooled her." Also, when hearing Tayla and Nikko describe someone as a real "savage," I asked whether another person was a "savage" too, and Tayla replied "you know, white people aren't supposed to use that word, only Indians can say it, it's like the 'N' word for black people."

Blackfoot words and "Indian" expressions complement certain important symbolically charged practices such as burning sweetgrass or smudging with sage. When Faith has a bad dream or there is conflict in her extended family, Tayla is instructed to burn sage in every room of the house and bury the ashes in four corners of the yard so that a sense of equilibrium with positive forces will be restored. As with the linguistic terms, these familiar practices and even the smells evoke culture-specific memories and a sense of cultural continuity. When Tayla's grandmother left after visiting, Tayla asked me "did you notice how she smelled? She always smells like sage, it's *her* smell." Smudging is part of public ceremonial occasions, and burning sage and sweetgrass symbolically links the house and its occupants to a larger community and to the reserve, where the sage is picked.

Indigenous language plays an essential role in the maintenance of ethno-cultural identities and communities in the face of multiple pressures towards assimilation (Friesen and Friesen 2005; Morgan 2005). Even the insertion of a few Native words into a predominantly English conversation invokes a symbolic association with cultural identity (Murray 2003; see Ahlers 2006). Moreover, Blackfoot words, expressions and practices symbolize membership in a bounded social network and lend a cultural identity to the teens' communications community.

Social Networking and the Communication Community

School

The Lethbridge Public School Division has over 500 Aboriginal students, the majority of whom are Blackfoot. The Holy Spirit Catholic School Division also has 500 predominantly Blackfoot Aboriginal students in their Lethbridge schools. Of the latter, about 300 are brought to Lethbridge from the reserve on the Blood Bus co-op, while the remaining 200 live in the city.[5] The two largest high schools in Lethbridge (grades nine to 12) are located across the street from each other, with Catholic Central High School serving 900 students and Lethbridge Collegiate Institute serving about 1,600. These high schools provide an unparalleled setting for daily socializing for both Native and non-Native teens from the city and nearby rural areas, including the Blood reserve.

School-age Blackfoot children with large social and kin-based networks both on and off the reserves may move back and forth between urban and rural domains more than most adults do. On a daily basis, the Blood Band Tribal buses bring children from the reserve into Lethbridge to attend city schools. Smaller buses take students from the city to attend reserve schools. On weekends, many Blackfoot teens come into the city for social activities and entertainment while others travel from Lethbridge to the reserve to visit family and friends. The Blood Tribal buses may be used as a free taxi service by some of these urban teens, who ride a bus to the reserve on Fridays after school and come back on the bus again on Monday mornings. Other reserve-dwelling teens may stay at a friend's place in the city on Fridays after school and catch a bus back to the reserve the following Monday. Reserve and city, or rural and urban domains are not as dichotomous as research often portrays (Grantham-Chappell 1998), and these teens move between them with ease—with their identities likely strengthened rather than weakened by their abilities to act as intermediaries (see Szasz 1994).

As with most teens, for these Blackfoot girls school is as much a social as a learning experience. Faith recognizes the value in this, saying "I won't home-school Tayla because I want her to develop social skills and be able to interact with others." Tayla and Nikko feel more comfortable with other Blackfoot students, who can discuss issues involving people they are familiar with and often related to. Sometimes they feel excluded from the white world, in ways that are important to them. I mentioned to Faith that these teens and their friends all seemed to be very pretty and well-dressed so that they must be part

of the "in-crowd" at school. She replied "yes, they are the in-crowd with the Indian girls, but not with the white girls. White girls don't like pretty Indian girls." Nikko, 13 at the time, told me "well I think that I'm pretty, but at school I only seem to attract Indian boys." Even the schools are assigned ethnic identities: I once asked Tayla why she mainly socialized with other Blackfoot teens, and she replied "I don't, I go to a white school you know." When helping Nikko choose words for a poem she rejected a suggestion, saying "I need a bigger word—this is a *white* school you know." Tayla and Nikko come home each day and pass information on to Faith and myself so that events at school become knowledge for adults as well. Frequently, they recount ways in which they were "picked on" by other students or their teachers.

At school, racist comments directed towards them, or to First Nations peoples in general, make a distinct impression and are topics of lengthy discussion among the girls, their Native friends, myself and Faith. Nikko recalled how one of her friends referred to "those dumb Indians." She explained to me:

> I thought she was my friend. So I said to her "do you want to meet me in the alley?" And then when I saw her in the alley she backed down [from a fight] and I said "now let me hear you say that about Indians" and she apologized so I let it go—but I can't trust her anymore.

Tayla recalled a similar incident, saying:

> I heard that [a non-Native former friend] was calling me a squaw to other people, so then I accused her of it and she denied it. But I said I knew she did it, and then she apologized. But later she went to the teacher and said that I was threatening to beat her up and texting her [typing on a cell-phone] that I would beat her up. So the teacher called me in and I said "well I wasn't texting her but I should have thought of that" and the teacher gave me a funny look.

I mentioned to Tayla that when I was in grade school, it was mostly boys who physically fought, not girls, and she informed me "boys fight really rank [violently] but now girls at school fight more than boys—you might see three boys' fights in a school year, but you will see ten girls' fights." Weakness and fear are stereotypical character traits assigned to non-Native teenage girls by Nikko and Tayla. As I was driving Tayla and her friend home from a movie, she remarked to the non-Native girl "I don't know why white girls are so afraid of fighting." Her friend demurred, replying "well, I wouldn't want to fight *you*."

Interethnic relations at school are most often non-confrontational. However, the problematic incidents, interpreted by Faith and the teens as racially motivated, make the strongest impression on the girls and are common topics of intense dialogue among members of their Native teen community. In this way, the girls' daily networking, primarily with other Blackfoot teens at school, provides a micro-social example of membership in the distinct type of urban community that Proulx (2003) refers to as based upon shared experiences related to survival and resistance. Further, since most of these teens are very familiar with life on the reserve, the people there and geographical landmarks, this community incorporates a shared sense of place and reference points (see Lobo 2001). Nikko emphasized a fundamental difference between Native and non-Native teens, saying "Tayla and me had hard lives [growing up on the reserve] and that's why we got so mature. But it's not good to be *too* mature, or you can't loosen up and have any fun."

Racism, experienced by the teens at school, is also an ongoing theme for dialogue between Faith and other First Nations adults. Non-Native parenting is often brought into these discussions since, as Faith says "children get their racist attitudes from their parents." At a macro-social level, colonialist and postcolonialist realities, including stereotyping, contribute to feelings of disempowerment and exclusion for many First Nations people. At school, the teens resist at a micro-social level achieving individual and collective strength and a measure of agency by surviving daily hardships, imposing their own stereotypes and establishing boundaries that most often exclude non-Native teens.

Movies, Hockey Games and Powwows

The girls in this household and most of their friends are enraptured by movies and hockey games. Almost every weekend I drive them to the theatres in the local mall to see the latest shows, where they meet with a group of other Blackfoot teens. If Tayla misses a movie or other event that she wished she could go to, she says things like "I have no life," in a very hurt tone. These social events are very important, as the teens can share information, discuss issues relevant to them and dress in their finest outfits. Before and after the movies, they gather in the video game arcade in the mall to socialize further with relatives and friends, many of whom have come in from the reserve for the weekend. On several occasions their networking has been so important to them that they have not seen a movie at all. When I pick them up later to drive them home, a friend will often come back to the house to stay overnight or for a few days. Tayla will have called Faith for approval.

Socializing at the mall and going to the movies or arcade are perhaps common features of the lives of most urban teenage girls and boys. However, it becomes significant in terms of the urban Blackfoot community primarily because these girls interact almost exclusively with other Blackfoot teens. Intra-ethnic conflicts are generated as well as resolved at these social events and constantly shifting alliances create new reference groups. Also, as in the schools, Native and non-Native people interact there and conflicts may occur between them. Once again, conflicts in entertainment venues are often interpreted by Tayla and Nikko as racially motivated, so a sense of meaningful, distinct and bounded First Nations identity is fostered. Such problems are reported to Faith and I in detailed stories. Stories often involve ways that the Native girls resolved issues verbally and "stuck up for themselves" and each other without resorting to physical measures and yet being willing to if there were no other recourse. Recently, when driving Tayla and Nikko to a movie, Tayla announced her "retirement," saying "I don't fight anymore, not unless I have to." Faith always tells the girls that they must "have each other's backs [step into a fight if a second person does]," and not "ditch [leave]" each other. Backing down from inter- or intra-ethnic conflicts is unacceptable behaviour, indicating weakness and poor character, which are traits associated with white people.

Although the mass media undoubtedly have some negative effects on cultural identity retention, the symbolism, imagery and discourse of sources such as movies are not simply passively absorbed. Spitulnik (1997) demonstrates ways that, in the context of a specific socio-cultural group, phrases and discourse styles extracted from mass media are socially circulated and "recycled and reanimated" in everyday usage. She argues that this process creates "common linguistic reference points" for group members. Urban Blackfoot girls already have important shared linguistic reference points through their usage of certain Blackfoot words and phrases. English referents derived from popular culture are mediated, shared, accepted or rejected through discursive interaction in a social network comprised almost solely of Blackfoot teens. The mass-mediated content they receive vertically is shared laterally in a manner specific to their communications community. Such "interpersonal routines and framing devices [contribute to] creative reworkings" of language, symbolism and imagery (Spitulnik 1997:180).

Hockey games bring many more urban and rural Blackfoot teens together than movies do, and each time I pick up the girls and their friends, I count about 50 Native youth in the foyer of the arena. According to Tayla, there are always about 50 Native teens of roughly the same age sitting together. After the games they gather to socialize, catch up with relevant news and decide what they will do later in the evening. These games are usually held on weekends when youth can attend parties and other events.

Nikko and Tayla are conscious of being visible minorities at hockey games, but they maintain this as a positive identity by disparaging the racist (or perceived as racist) comments of non-Native teens, who are then assigned undesirable characteristics such as rudeness and, particularly, cowardice. As with interaction at schools and movies, stories told after hockey games often emphasize their bravery in situations of conflict. After attending a recent minor league hockey game, Tayla and Nikko entered the truck very excited, and said "we almost got into a fight tonight." Tayla stopped Nikko's story, asserting "I want to tell it" and recalled the incident, saying:

> Two of the players were fighting on the ice [a Native teen and a non-Native teen], and then Rob got kicked out, but he was standing near the ice, and whenever the other player went near him he taunted him, and then the two Dads got into it too, and there was a scuffle, and then the Dads got kicked out too. Then we heard screaming coming from the washroom, so we went in, and the two Moms were fighting, and there was a younger girl trying to get them apart, and she looked at us and said "what are you laughing at, bitches?" and we said "we're laughing at *you*." So we almost got into a fight—it was an awesome game and good thing we didn't miss it.

When the girls return from a hockey game they bring much information with them, and once again, it is not about the event itself as much as the people they interacted with. Like the schools and movies, hockey games constitute face-to-face interaction of members of a closely-knit communications community, objectifying commonalities and providing new topics of discussion for subsequent days. By emphasizing situations of conflict, and discussing them extensively, the teens develop an immediate, daily sense of belonging to a discursive community based upon "distinctly Native" characteristics of survival, resistance and shared interests (see Proulx 2003).

There are a few important annual events that bring urban and reserve dwelling Blackfoot teens and adults together and similarly enlarge references of discourse to the extent that stories about these events will be discussed sporadically until the next event occurs. These are the Blood Indian Days powwow on the reserve in the town of Standoff, and several others held on various southern Alberta reserves. These events take place in the summer

months when teens are not in school (late July and early August). There is also an indoor powwow and rodeo held in Lethbridge in January.

Powwows are especially important in symbolizing Aboriginal identities and objectifying them in a public setting. At the last winter powwow, all the girls dressed in their best outfits, and Joanna and Faith went to a neighbourhood pub. I asked them why they had returned so quickly, well before the powwow began. Faith replied that they only had one drink each, and Joanna explained with the wry comment "we could only have one drink—tonight we have to be *Indians*." Faith and all the teens are very conscious of mainstream stereotypes of Natives as alcoholics, often resulting from impressions of a very visible minority of homeless or "street people" applied by default to all First Nations individuals (Culhane 2003; Letkemann 2004). Tayla says "those Indians downtown give us all a bad name." The teens think of "real Indians" as non-drinking individuals, in touch with spirituality and tradition. This is the image they want to present, especially at powwows, where the girls view themselves as representing not only the Blood tribe, but probably more importantly, their own families and close relatives, some of whom will also be in attendance.

Indian Days lasts for three days, and the girls have a large tent that they set up near relatives of about the same age. They come home with many stories after these events, having used this time to renew relationships and create new ones in a very personalized face-to-face manner. Tayla told me excitedly "Brianne kissed 13 boys at Indian Days, and some of them had girlfriends! Everyone is talking about it." Eight months later, Tayla is still impressed with this incident, and she recently teased Brianne, saying "I hear you swapped a lot of spit at Indian Days, are you going to do that again this summer?" They take pictures—not primarily of the colourful costumed dancers, but of themselves with their teenage relatives and friends.

As at schools, hockey games, rodeos and movies, but more extensively at the powwows, urban and reserve-dwelling Blackfoot people mingle and visit. To these teens, urban or reserve residence is not as important as with whom individuals live, which teens are "going out [exclusively dating]," breakups and political alignments, and problems or accomplishments deemed significant. At powwows, unlike the other events, the teens' stories tend to de-emphasize conflicts. I have never heard of any fighting at the three Indian Days events they have attended while living in the house. There is an understanding that they are all sharing a socially and symbolically significant event and demonstrating a common cultural heritage, so their behaviour should reflect pride and a related sense of community.

Faith tells the girls that the extended family will be judged by their behaviour at Indian Days and they "better not make the family look bad." They are well aware of the truth in Faith's statement that "I *will* hear about what you were up to there, from a mom, dad, a grandparent or other relative, so be good." When Tayla and Nikko travel to another geographical area, they do not really leave the communication community, as the sense of distance is greatly diminished by the effective information exchange of what Proulx (2003) and others term the "moccasin telegraph." These events provide a sense of shared Native history, tradition and symbolism that further distinguishes the teens' community as bounded from that of non-Native teens. At such events, the sense of exclusionary marginalization is reversed: I asked Nikko whether she wanted to take a non-Native friend to a powwow, and she replied "well I don't know, she's white and she might not fit in."

The Internet: Virtual Community

Hundreds of Blackfoot teens in Lethbridge, on the Blood reserve and throughout southern Alberta, are closely connected on a daily basis through the Internet, being particularly regular users of the MSN Network. Tayla currently has over 200 friends on her MSN contact list, and she "chats" with these people online every day. The number of people she simultaneously chats with varies from about 30 to over 100. Being younger and spending less time on the internet, Nikko has fewer MSN contacts, but when she is online she is usually chatting with about 20 of her friends. Teens without computers or internet access at home can still maintain a list of MSN contacts and activate these on friends' or school computers.

Tayla, Nikko and their friends share a great deal of personal information online, such as which girl has been found to be pregnant, who the father is or is thought to be, which teens are dating, who has cheated on their boyfriend or girlfriend, friendship alliances and animosities and all the pertinent details of constantly fluid and shifting relationships. Through endless stories Tayla and Nikko convey these details to Faith and me. Tayla once told me, "guess what? Remember Connie? You drove her skating with me once. Doug got her pregnant! He wanted to go out with me you know—good thing my Mom told me we were fifth cousins." Online, such information can be shared instantly with hundreds of members of their community, so that they are a very tightly knit group based on discourse, much of which also includes adults. Although most of the people Nikko and Tayla converse with online are also those with whom they socialize in face-to-face interaction in the household and at schools and events, the internet allows for a much broader spectrum of dialogue

that is not geographically confined to Lethbridge or the nearby reserves.

Most importantly, extensive internet activity, usually several hours each day, demonstrates a resistance to marginalization by giving the teens an opportunity to participate in mainstream mass media. Faith and the teens frequently lament the general absence of Native people in movies, television shows and so forth. They and their friends use the forum of the internet to create and maintain elaborate personal websites with pictures, likes and dislikes, poems, wishes and so forth—in effect reinserting themselves, along with their communications community, into a mainstream media venue. Tayla noted, "you know Paul, *thousands* of people can look at my webpage!"

Conclusion

The Blackfoot teens I interacted with demonstrated an active resistance to the exclusionary effects of marginalization. Within a macroscopic context of economic and political disadvantage and persistent stereotyping, at a micro-level they create a positive sense of belonging through membership in a communication community with distinct ethno-cultural boundaries. The constant sharing of information through virtual means, along with face-to-face interaction in the household, at schools and at various events, results in a real sense of urban Blackfoot community in Lethbridge that has little to do with residential location. The teens' community incorporates reserve and city domains, illustrating that an urban–rural contrast does not adequately describe the intricate lives of most urban Native youth as they move through the "multiple social worlds that constitute on- and off-reservation life" (Dole and Csordas 2003:357).

By sitting together as a group of individuals who share a common ethno-cultural background and communicating so closely and effectively on a daily basis, these teens at least partly reconstitute "non-Native" events such as movies or hockey games, and "white schools," with a Native identity. This reconstitution may operate on a larger scale, as Lobo (2001) describes ways that, through a network of social relationships, urban Aboriginal people lend a Native identity to the city, particularly by the use of shared reference points. Being grounded by Blackfoot words and practices in such fluid households, their communication community is symbolically and literally relevant in multiple contexts. Their extensive participation on the internet allows them to enter the world of mass media, while once again meshing this expanded community with the household.

Youngstedt observes that ethnic groups may develop "fluid, overlapping face-to face, imagined and virtual communities to mitigate their marginal position" (2004:39), and these appear to be central strategies for the teens living in the house. Tayla, Nikko and their teenage friends and relatives often emphasize social interaction and information sharing as more important than the formal content of schools and events. This indicates that their social networking and discursive community is of the highest priority. It is a community that "finds its focus in relationship dynamics and the more abstract realm of shared knowledge that informs and shapes action" (Lobo 2001:75-76). Tayla and Nikko belong to a true communications community shaped "not only by relations between insiders and outsiders, but by expansion in the community of reference and the construction of discourses of meaning" (Delanty 2003:130).

I follow Todd's (2001) assertion that the notion of being trapped in a void between two cultural worlds is untenable. Tayla, Nikko and their friends appear to act more as cultural brokers, with strong identities integrating elements of Native and non-Native society (see Szasz 1994). For these youth, living in the city may in fact throw into relief those things that are conspicuously not "Indian," coinciding with a rise in cultural awareness (see Dickson-Gilmore 1999). Their complex social networks and communication communities allow these teens some agency in resisting the exclusionist forces of marginalization while integrating with an urban environment and retaining a strong sense of identity as First Nations people. Further, since Tayla and Nikko share most of their information with parents and relatives, the communication community includes adults and contributes to an inclusive sense of community for them as well.

It is impossible to generalize from one case study and further research is needed in order to examine the roles of First Nations teens in processes of urbanization, community-building and identity. Tayla, Nikko and their friends manage to sustain a positive Blackfoot identity in both rural and urban contexts, and in this way mitigate marginalization as part of a dynamic collectivity. Native identity is very important to them, along with their ability to place themselves in relation to an ethno-cultural community that is never completely open to non-Natives. Tayla once informed my parents that "Paul thinks he's Blackfoot, but he can never be one you know." Recently when I used an expression identified by her as an "Indian way of talking" she chastised me, saying "Paul, you're *not* an Indian," to which Faith replied "he can still *talk*."

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Notes

1 This is a case study of an urban Canadian Blackfoot extended family comprised of Faith, a single mother, her teenage daughter Tayla, two of her nieces, Nikko and Wynter, as well as their many friends and relatives. For purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout.

2 To Faith and the teens my duties as a participating household member are far more important in situating me than my rather marginal status as researcher (see Wax 1980). Since I do all of the grocery shopping, and Faith and I take turns doing the dishes, cooking and organizing the kitchen, while the girls clean the rest of the house, to them I assume many traditionally "feminine" roles. Once when Tayla saw me preparing food, she chuckled and remarked "you look like a woman." She instructed me on the way her grandma made certain dishes, and my stew is now "almost like grandma's," according to her. My spending so much time on the computer is also associated with femininity. I carry out many duties they associate with masculinity like general repairs, yard work and taking out the garbage, which Faith informs me "is a man's job." Faith once told me "you are the only male role model in my daughter's life," and in order to be effective, I attempt to demonstrate some balance regarding gender associations in my household roles as well as my general demeanor.

When the idea of writing about these teens coalesced I explained my intended research to Faith and the girls and asked their permission. They consented and also told all the visitors that I was writing about them. All of the data presented here ultimately come from Faith, her daughter and nieces. I omit contextual ethnographic information that could embarrass or identify anyone mentioned here. Maintaining a concept of consent as a "negotiated and lengthy process" (Wax 1980:275), I also made Faith and the girls aware of what I included in the paper, giving them the power to veto it. Using Faith as a guide is appropriate, since she is very protective of teenage household members and visitors.

3 These statistics must be taken only as rough indicators for several reasons. Questions about ethnicity are commonly given to only a sample of the survey population (Norris and Clatworthy 2003). Also, many people do not take part in census and population survey counts. When reserves are located near an urban centre, the movement of people back and forth is very extensive and practically impossible to quantify (Frideres 1998).

4 Blackfoot spellings are taken from Frantz et al. 1995.

5 This information was provided by Mr. Ira Provost, Director of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Programming for the Lethbridge School District #51, and Mr. Ray Viel, Director of Religious Programming for the Holy Spirit Catholic School Division in Lethbridge.

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