Unsettling the Politics of Exclusion:
Aboriginal Activism and the Vancouver Downtown East Side

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Introduction

      A grandiose media spectacle erupted when the 2010 Winter Olympic Games were held in Vancouver and Whistler, British Columbia from February - March this year. But carefully obscured behind the exhibition of sporting entertainment, the evocations of national patriotism, and the prominent logos of corporate marketers was the untold story of the price dearly paid by local residents.[1] The location of the games was significant: They took place on the traditional and shared territories of the Lil'wat, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples (Four Host First Nations, 2009; Government of Canada, 2009) and while the International Olympic Committee recognized "The Four Host First Nations" as official partners, many people protested the fact that they were held on unceded sovereign Native lands and had caused the environmental destruction of essential Aboriginal ecosystems (No 2010 Olympics on Stolen Native Land, 2010: Resist the 2010 Corporate Circus, 2010). In addition, the enthusiastic spending directly related to the Olympic Games came at the cost of social sustainability for many urban poor people (many of whom are Aboriginal peoples).[2]

      Since being awarded the Olympic bid seven years earlier, billions of dollars were invested in massive infrastructure to support the 16-day Olympic and 9-day Paralympic Winter Games. As Christopher Shaw, a founding member and lead spokesperson for the "No Games 2010 Coalition" and "2010 Watch," explains, government spending to host the Olympic Games for less than a month far exceeded social expenditures on healthcare, education, housing, and job training, among others (Shaw, 2010). In fact, just one day before the opening ceremony British Columbia premier Gordon Campbell announced a $10 million dollar cut to children's services which provide crisis phone lines and help for

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[1] It is important to note at the onset that the Olympics did not take place without considerable opposition from First Nations peoples working in solidarity with local residents and activists. Groups such as the Olympic Resistance Network, 2010 Welcoming Committee, and many affiliated and participating organizations opposed the Olympic plans from the start. Their actions culminated with a 5000- person protest at the Olympic torch and opening ceremonies on February 12, 2010 (Annis, 2010; Bowen and Shannon Frontline Consulting, 2009).

[2] As Grace Ouellette notes, "Aboriginal peoples in Canada are diverse and come from many nations, but many are divided into distinct legal categories imposed by Canada's federal government" (Ouellette, 2002, p.86). It should be noted that First Nations peoples in no way comprise a homogenous group. Instead, they constitute "a number of distinct nations with different histories, cultures, economic bases, language and dialects" (Das Gupta, 1995, p.145). For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term First Nations peoples interchangeably with the terms "Aboriginal," "Indigenous," or "Native" peoples. These terms refer to the descendents of Indigenous peoples who self-identify as belonging to the large range of treaty status or non-treaty status groups in Canada, as well as Métis and Inuit peoples.
Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver, along with other urban Aboriginal peoples, are heterogeneous in terms of affiliation and legal status. Over 36,000 Aboriginal peoples (or more than 20% of all Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia) live there (Cardinal & Adin, 2005). Within the Greater Vancouver Regional District there are 10 different First Nations groups occupying 22 different reserves. The ten First Nations in Vancouver include Katzie, Kwantlen, Matsqui, Musqueam, Squamish, Tsawwassen, Tseil-Waututh, Kwikwetlem, Qayqact, and Semihamoo (Greater Vancouver Regional District, 2003). The urban Aboriginal population is increasing, with a 140% growth rate from 1981 to 2001. In 1981 the total population of Aboriginal peoples in Vancouver was 15,380. It increased to 31,140 in 1996, 36,860 in 2001, and 40,310 in 2006 (Siggner & Costa, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2009).This represents a significant increase in the Aboriginal population and one which is likely to continue.

youth with mental health problems and addictions (Annis, 2010), a fact which speaks volumes in a historical material analysis.

The exorbitant spending for the Vancouver Olympics signals a pronounced example of urban neoliberalism where "[m]ore entrepreneurial programs of urban governance, in which cities compete aggressively to attract capital, tourists, and government funds, have been identified, with a consequent shift from an emphasis on local livability and life opportunities of local residents to an externally oriented logic of the bottom line" [that is, the economic rationality of capitalism/ the logic of accumulation] (Harvey, 1989 as summarized by Blomley, 2004, my explanation added). Among those most affected by the 2010 Olympics were the residents of the Vancouver Downtown East Side (hereafter referred to by the acronym VDES).[3] Many people living in this marginalized community faced rent increases, displacement through low-income tenant evictions and increased policing and criminalization (2010 Welcoming Committee, 2010; Bowen and Shannon Frontline Consulting, 2009; Schmidt & Morin, 2007).

To put it into perspective for the larger purposes of this presentation, it must be understood that long before becoming an Olympic spotlight, the VDES became notorious throughout North America for its high rates of poverty, drug addictions, HIV-AIDS, and murdered and missing sex workers, in large part due to sensational media depictions which captured the imaginations of television audiences. However, the Vancouver zone requires more nuanced analysis than has been applied through such representations to date. In terms of material social relations, the VDES signifies a complex neocolonial history which is too-often ignored.[4] The continuance of these neocolonial relationships are historically gendered, sexualized, and racialized (Emberley, 2001, Loomba, 2005; Mies, 1998; Smith, 2005). In the Canadian case, the nation, as Jim Silver writes,

> was built on the *National Policy*. But it all rested on the removal of Aboriginal people from their homes, their confinement to reserves and the construction of an elaborate system of social control justified on the false grounds of Aboriginal inferiority. The results have been devastating for Aboriginal people. They were dispossessed of their lands, pushed onto reserves and thus isolated from the dominant culture and institutions of Canada, subjected to colonial control of the *Indian Act* and the domination of the Indian Agent, and forced into residential schools. At the heart of the process of colonization was the deliberate attempt to destroy Aboriginal people's economic and political systems and their cultures and religions- some of the practices of which were literally outlawed- and to replace them with European institutions and values. This was the strategy and policy of

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[3] Those familiar with the area often use the acronym DES or DTES to refer to the Downtown Vancouver East Side. I have chosen to employ the acronym VDES for an unfamiliar (i.e. non Vancouver-based) audience.

[4] I use the term "neocolonial" as a form of naming the oppressive hierarchical power relations which began during the colonization of Aboriginal peoples and which continue to exist, albeit, in diverse manifestations today. Under colonialism, political, economic, and social privileges were formed along intertwining hierarchies of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, with power reserved for propertied white men. This includes the "long history of attempts at governmental management of ethnocultural identities within the territory now claimed by the Canadian state" (Day, 2000, p.5). Nonetheless, colonial projects never take place without postcolonial resistance (See Fanon, 2004; Mohanty and Alexander, 1991; Mohanty, 2003; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres, 1991; Said, 1978). In the VDES Aboriginal peoples have historically demonstrated resistance to sociohistorical, racial, and colonial relations with their white settler colonizers and the violences of Western imperialism.

"assimilation." It was, and for many Canadians still is, justified on the false grounds that European institutions and cultural and religious values are superior to those of Aboriginal people. The resultant colonial ideology is pervasive. (Silver, 2006, p.19)

This pervasive colonial ideology acutely intersects with the contemporary socioeconomic conditions of urban Aboriginal peoples in the VDES.

As its starting point, this conference paper (based on a larger dissertation project yet to be undertaken)[5] suggests that dismantling the long-standing politics of exclusion in the VDES requires a historical material framework as a primary means of analysis because, as it will be emphasized, the social constructions of gender, race, class, age, and ability[6] within this specific Western Canadian urban zone are mediated through existing capitalist arrangements and exacerbated through neoliberal state policy.[7] Nonetheless, while the VDES displays general characteristics in terms of the impact of global neoliberal forces, it still possesses a specific urban history to be investigated. In terms of material social relations, the VDES signifies a complex neocolonial history, a history of oppressive hierarchical power relations which began during the initial colonization of Aboriginal peoples and land appropriation, and which continue to exist, albeit, in diverse

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[5] The dissertation is entitled, "Contesting the Neoliberal/ Neocolonial City: An Analysis of Urban Political Economy and Community Activism in the Vancouver Downtown East Side." I have not yet had the chance to conduct my fieldwork on urban Aboriginal organizations within Vancouver. This paper forms the background for such a project. I am acutely aware of the need to employ a decolonizing methodology (Smith, 1999; Ouellette, 2002) in this future undertaking because, as Jim Silver notes, "we can best learn about the urban Aboriginal experience by talking with, and listening to urban Aboriginal people themselves (Silver, 2006, p.31)." It is hoped that by centering resident and activist experiences, an inclusive method of research may be attained.

[6] To provide clarification on the terms gender, race, class, and ability, I will refer to other scholars' definitions, all which emphasize the centrality of social constructions in the maintenance of existing and unequal power relations. Gender can be defined as the assignment of masculine and feminine characteristics to bodies. It involves "a hierarchical division between women and men embedded in both social institutions and social practices" (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p.1), "forms the basis for social exclusions and inclusions and constitutes inequalities in power, authority, rights and privileges" (Fudge and Vosko, 2003, p.185). Floya Anthias, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Harriet Cain (1992) use race to refer to the social significance attached to certain biological human features, physiognomic difference, or collective heredity of traits. Socioeconomic class relates to the sphere of production processes, but also social factors which cannot be solely reduced to the economy such as education, etc., which, along with others, determine social standing, power, rights, and privileges. Physical and mental "disabilities," too, are socially produced and historically specific phenomena (Shakespeare, 2006) which reinforce able-bodied norms and existing and unequal power relations. The paper takes the approach that the intersections of gender, race, class, age, and ability (Crenshaw, 1991), while still being autonomously produced social relations, compound social marginalization in this zone.

[7] When I refer to the role of the state, it is in the context of "the liberal, representative, electoral, administrative, legislative, and judicial institutions and practices articulated within the confines of a liberal constitutional framework" (Cruikshank, 1999) and which are linked to capitalist economic practices. As will be demonstrated, the referred-to capitalist arrangements which become exacerbated through neoliberal state policy in the VDES include processes including, but not restricted to, capital investment leading to development and gentrification, decreased state expenditures on social programs such as the de-institutionalization of mental health patients, and so on that involve a complex range of federal, provincial, and municipal policies in addition to historical injustices. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the political economy of urban neoliberalism has been contested and resisted and, further, local circumstances and conditions play a major role in determining characteristics of the regimes implemented at various locales (Albo, 2006; Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

manifestations today. For this reason, the complex processes of urbanization must be contextualized in terms of colonial and neocolonial state practices in the Canadian context while simultaneously analyzing the ways in which these social processes are gendered, racialized, classist, ableist, and ageist.

The urbanization of Aboriginal peoples has been clearly documented. Approximately half of Aboriginal peoples in Canada live in urban centres (Silver, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2006) and those living in cities face very specific challenges. Among others, these include inadequate housing, higher rates of unemployment, poverty and lower levels of income, unsafe neighbourhoods, and racism in various forms. Within the Greater Vancouver region, specifically, the depressed conditions in all aspects of quality of life including: cultural (and family), social (health, education, crime, and safety), economic (employment, income, entrepreneurship), and environmental (resources and land, air, rivers and oceans, and homes) have been documented by Cardinal (2006). Further evidence of Aboriginal people's social exclusion and low prioritization in terms of social spending is revealed in the fact that there is much less money spent on funding for Aboriginal peoples making the transition from rural urban areas than for new Canadians. Calvin Hanselmann (2003), for one, suggests it totals "less than five cents for every dollar spent on immigrant settlement and transition" (as quoted in Silver, Hay, & Gorzen, 2006, p.45).

Despite these obstacles, however, "a wide variety of exciting urban community development initiatives are underway or planned as a result of the efforts of urban Aboriginal people. Remarkable creativity and energy are growing out of the hard urban lives of Aboriginal people." (Silver, 2006, p.11) Therefore, there is a need to unsettle "the narrative ghettoization of racialized spaces [and identities] as eternally Othered" (Anderson, 1998, p.203) when referring to urban Aboriginality. While it represents an extreme case of urban marginalization, it is important to emphasize that the VDES maintains a strong history of successful community activism and a high concentration of non-profit organizations for an urban centre of its size. Although it certainly signals one of the most documented cases of urban social exclusion in Canada, it has an often-ignored history of successful Aboriginal resistance and community activism. Thus, while recognizing that socially produced space in the VDES is a reflection of unequal neocolonial power relations and contestations, its potential as a site of resistance, revolution, and transformation (in other words, its potential for transformational Aboriginal urban politics) will also be analyzed.

Background: Situating the Vancouver Downtown East Side (VDES) as a Product of Neocolonial History

Like other poverty zones in Canadian cities, the VDES reveals multiple historical and interlocking mechanisms of poverty and exclusion as evidenced by chronic social "ills" including high levels of unemployment, crime rates, homelessness, mental health problems, drug addictions, sex work, and violence. Such pathologization of social problems has come to signal the pathologization of the entire neighbourhood according to Sommers and Blomley (2002). Certainly in terms of its unique spatial location, demographic composition, elevated rates of HIV/AIDS, and missing and murdered women, the VDES can be considered to represent one of the most pronounced examples

of what Peter Marcuse refers to as the "laws of exclusion" or "the abandoned city" (Marcuse, 1993). The following sections provide a detailed background of the VDES not to perpetuate its pathologization, but to help to situate it as a very unique urban zone worthy of more comprehensive study than has been undertaken to date.

Spatial Location

Any discussion of the spatial location of the VDES must first situate the geography in terms of colonial land dispossession. The area comprising the present-day city of Vancouver was occupied by the Coast Salish peoples (among them Musqueam, Squamish, and Burrard peoples) for over 10,000 years (Blomley, 1998; Brealey, 1995; Culhane, 2003; Macdonald, 1992). A 1992 map which documents the colonial transition of Vancouver displays a camp site on the current location of the VDES labeled as "q'emq'emal'ay/ Kumkumalay" or "big leaf maple trees" (Macdonald, 1992 as also cited in Blomley, 2004). People been living in the area now called Vancouver for at least 3000 years (Macdonald, 1992) and, as Dara Culhane notes, "Aboriginal people from Coast Salish and many other First Nations have maintained a continual presence in what is now called the Downtown Eastside" (p.595). This goes to illustrate that any contemporary Western cartographic representations are emblematic of the ongoing land encroachment that the Indigenous inhabitants face.[8] While keeping such cartographic erasures in mind, the larger Vancouver Downtown East Side today is generally considered to be comprised of eight distinct, ethnically diverse, historic neighbourhoods including Gastown, Victory Square, Chinatown, Thornton Park, Oppenheimer, Strathcona, an Industrial Area, and Hastings Corridor as shown on the next page (City of Vancouver, 2008).

The very location of this urban zone makes it unique among major Canadian cities. In the city of Toronto, by contrast, inner suburbs, not the downtown, primarily comprise Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods (United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development, 2004). And while many other Western Canadian cities have a downtown core of poverty, the VDES is unique in that it is located directly as a thoroughfare in the city connecting East Vancouver and the downtown business core. In fact, the average traffic volume passing through the VDES from 1996 to 2001 was 151,000 vehicles per day (City of Vancouver 2005/06). The main East-West corridor, Hastings Street, links with the TransCanada Highway and is used by visitors to access downtown hotels and tourist sites. Gastown, a historic cobble-stoned tourist attraction, and Chinatown, moreover, are both directly located on the western edge of the Downtown Eastside and draw many visitors to the VDES itself.[9] The spatial location of

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[8] Blomley writes, "[s]ettler cities reassure themselves by supposing either that a legitimate transfer of title from native to nonnatives occurred (through treaty, deed, conquest, and so on) or, more bluntly, that the land was simply unowned and empty" (Blomley, 2004, p.25). Native land claims in British Columbia, however, challenge such conceptions of "transferred title" or "terra nullus." In fact, nearly all land in the province of British Columbia is contested (Blomley, 2004; No 2010 Olympics on Stolen Native Land, 2010). For more information on land claims, see the BC Treaty Commission (2009).

[9] Some of the most expensive commercial real estate in Vancouver is just blocks away from the most dilapidated zone of the VDES where the same types of building have been converted into loft apartments and tourist shops (Shier, 2002). Ironically, the colonial dispossession of Native lands, suggests Culhane, is both erased and celebrated simultaneously in Gastown, "with its high-end tourist shops and galleries displaying Northwest Coast and Inuit art in every window from exclusive galleries to tacky t-shirt and trinket carts," (Culhane, 2003, p.603).With these buildings to the west and new condo towers rising to the south of the area, the VDES is encircled by redevelopment schemes (Shier, 2002).

the VDES is significant in that it is both the product of initial colonial dispossession and the locus of continued acts of neocolonial marginalization today. As a spatial arrangement it reflects a pronounced example of a "geography of exclusion" (Peters, 1998) which contrasts with the more affluent surrounding city areas.

Map 1: Vancouver Downtown East Side

Source: City of Vancouver, Downtown Eastside Revitalization, 2008
Reproduced and modified with the permission of the City of Vancouver. [10]

<u>Map Notes:</u>

I recognize that by centering the nation state (Canada), a particular region (Western Canada), a specific province (British Columbia), one city (Vancouver), and a precise urban zone within that city (the Vancouver Downtown East Side), I am in danger of falling prey to colonial impositions of space. For this reason, I would like to clearly acknowledge the legacy of colonization on both the peoples and the Indigenous territories of the Coast Salish peoples (among them Musqueam, Squamish, and Burrard peoples) which now comprise the VDES.

Keeping these problematics of cartographic erasures in mind, for the purposes of quantitative analysis I will be basing my VDES boundaries on the City of Vancouver Downtown Eastside Revitalization Map (2008) shown on the previous page. The area included within these boundaries is comprised of four different census tract profiles: 9330058.00, 9330057.02, 9330057.01, and 9330059.06 (listed as 58.00, 57.02, 57.01, and 59.06 on the map). I have extrapolated the information for this analysis based on the information found in Statistics Canada (2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2006e) and MapArt Publishing (2009).

Demographic Composition

Approximately 15,000- 16,000 people live within the two square miles which comprise the central VDES (Allford, 2008; Blomley, 2004). The central urban zone is commonly referred to as "Canada's poorest postal code,"[11] with high unemployment rates (estimated at 22 percent) and average annual incomes consisting of about $12,000 (Culhane, 2003).[12] Forty percent of the residents rely on government transfer payments rather than employment for their incomes (City of Vancouver 2005/06). There is an uneven gender divide among the population. Of VDES residents, 62% are male and only 38% female. Most (61 percent of the VDES residents) are "non-family persons" or single men (City of Vancouver, 2005; City of Vancouver 2005/06). Allford writes, "People here are ethnically diverse and they're older and poorer than elsewhere in the city" (Allford, 2008).[13] Similar to Canada's other poor neighbourhoods, roughly half of the residents of the VDES are visible minority immigrants, with Chinese people making up the largest immigrant population (Mason, 2007).[14] In Vancouver, as in many other settler cities, Aboriginal peoples exist as impoverished minority groups with higher numbers of First Nations peoples in Victory Square and Thornton Park (Peters, 1998; Mason, 2007). "Anyone passing through inner-city Vancouver on foot, on a bus, or in a car," Culhane asserts, "cannot help but SEE in a literal sense, the concentration of Aboriginal people here. For most urban Canadians, and visitors from elsewhere, this is an unusual and often surprising visual experience on which they feel compelled to remark" (Culhane, 2003, p.

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[11] Incidentally, all postal codes in the VDES begin with "V6A."

[12] The fact that the VDES has continued to increase in population since the 2001 census (Statistics Canada 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2006d), indicates the pressing importance of addressing issues of poverty in the zone. Culhane's figures reflect the income of the central VDES. In my examination of the larger region, the four census tracts ranged in median incomes from $11,433, to $38,004 according to 2006 census data concerning all private households. The compilation of this data indicates an average median income of $19,483 overall, but which is constituted by three very poor areas, one of which (census tract profile 9330058.00) is nearly five times lower than the Vancouver median income of $55,231 (Statistics Canada 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2006d).

[13] As of 2001, half of the population of the VDES was over 45 years of age (City of Vancouver, 2005/06).

[14] 36 percent of the population is Chinese in the VDES (City of Vancouver, 2005).

593).[15] This visibility contrasts with the historical attempts of assimilation and erasure promulgated by the Canadian state.

      Analysis reveals that there is considerable movement among First Nations peoples between rural areas, reserve areas, and within and among cities, with indications that most Aboriginal inhabitants of the VDES have moved from other areas of British Columbia or other places in Canada (Blomley, 2004; Currie, 1995, as cited in Benoit, Carroll, and Chaudhry, 2003; Hanselmann, 2001; Hou and Bourne, 2004). Rates of mobility among Aboriginal peoples are often high, both between urban and rural centres as a means of maintaining contact with communities of origin and within urban centres, often as a result of inadequate housing and the lack of affordable, appropriate rental accommodation (Silver, 2006). The problems of First Nations peoples in urban centres are exacerbated because of differences in cultures, the loss of traditional Indigenous values and spirituality, and the absence of a support system for Aboriginal people in the city. Many urban First Nations peoples feel alienated from both the non-Aboriginal government and their own Indian band governments (Ouellette, 2002). These problems, therefore, must be considered a form of neocolonial displacement. They emphasize how social exclusion is intimately connected to the legacy of colonial practices in Canada. The visible presence of so many Aboriginal peoples in the VDES dispels taken-for-granted notions of the city as a white settler space and serves as a reminder of the colonial history of the zone. Further, because the VDES has a unique urban demographic among Canadian cities, it provides a good case study for Aboriginal urban politics.

      Neocolonial displacement and resulting marginalization are evidenced by high levels of homelessness and migration among Aboriginal peoples in the VDES. Of the two to three thousand homeless individuals (Allford, 2008), two-thirds of those sleeping on the street are First Nations individuals with Aboriginal women being strongly overrepresented among the homeless population of Vancouver (BC Housing, 2000; Vancouver Agreement Secretariat, 2004a, as cited in Mason, 2007; Pivot Legal Society, 2006). This group also constitutes 13 percent of shelter users (Hanselmann, 2001).[16]

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[15] The latest census figures from 2006 estimate that 40,310 First Nations peoples (representing slightly less than 2 percent of the total city population) reside in Vancouver. Because census data relies on fixed addresses and there is a high rate of mobility among urban Aboriginal peoples, this figure is likely lower than the actual population.

Of this total Aboriginal population, 70 percent live in the core of the VDES and make up between 9 to 40 percent of residents of the urban zone depending on a wide range of estimates (Allford, 2008; Benoit, Carroll, and Chaudry, 2003; Blomley, 2004).

Women, moreover, head the majority of Aboriginal households (Culhane, 2003; Mason, 2007). Aboriginal women are statistically overrepresented in most urban areas for a variety of reasons. Because of restrictions on property ownership and legislation such as Section 12(1)(b) of the revised 1951 Indian Act which caused Aboriginal women marrying non-Aboriginal men to lose their status, many First Nations women became excluded from band membership and residence on reserve. The Indian Act, suggests authors such as Ouellette, must be recognized as "Canada's main legal instrument of colonialism" (Ouellette, 2002, p.39). The 1985 amendment (Bill C-31) eventually allowed for the reinstatement of persons who had lost Indian status through voluntary or involuntary disenfranchisement but despite these recent changes to the Indian Act, many formerly disenfranchised First Nations peoples continue to reside in urban areas because of inadequate land bases and resources on reserves, unwelcoming attitudes by band members, a lack of resources, housing, educational and job opportunities, and limited health services (Ouellette, 2002).

[16] This figure is not reflective of the much larger homeless population. *The Greater Vancouver Regional District suggests that Aboriginal* people who are homeless avoid shelters, that shelters do not serve this population well, and that they are underreported in the sheltered homeless data (*Greater Vancouver Regional District, 2005, as cited*

Not only is there a correlation between low income levels and homelessness, but it has been established that there is a clear link between homelessness and mental health in Canadian urban settings, particularly among women (Haniff-Cleofas and Khedr, 2005). The British Columbia government cut residential mental health care in Vancouver in 1994, resulting in many middle-aged patients migrating to single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels in the VDES.[17] Michael Mason notes that, by the year 2000, mental disabilities for the neighbourhood residents were escalating and that "mental diseases or disorders in the 45-54 age group for the neighbourhood were 3.6 times that of [the rest of] Vancouver" (Vancouver Agreement Secretariat, 2004a, p.71, as cited in Mason, 2007, p. 2369). With such a large and increasing homeless population, the VDES is fertile ground for further investigation into the connection between homelessness, gender, and disability. Furthermore, using national statistics on Aboriginal rates of disability and low income as a guide (Canada, Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2006; Assembly of First Nations/First Nations Information Governance Committee, 2007), one can predict that there will be a parallel or even more acute intersection of race, gender, class, disability, and marginalization in the VDES. The high numbers of First Nations peoples, homeless people, and people with mental health issues living in the spatial arrangement of the VDES signal an unparalleled form of urban marginalization requiring further investigation.

Illicit Drug Use and HIV/ AIDS Rates

As Culhane (2003) notes, the VDES "has become a focal point in emerging local, national, and international debates about the causes of, and solutions to, widespread

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[in] Pivot Legal Society, 2006). As a masculinist space, the streets present specific dangers to homeless women (Huey and Berndt, 2008), and to Aboriginal women in particular.

[17] Single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels are a distinguishing feature of the VDES. The VDES has a high concentration of low income housing. Over 90 percent of dwellings in the VDES are rented (Blomley, 2004) and over half of the low-income housing units in the VDES are in privately owned and managed residential hotels and rooming houses (Baxter, 1997; City of Vancouver 2005/06). These houses often charge more than the basic welfare shelter allowance of $325/month (Blomley, 2004), yet the 100 year-old heritage hotel buildings are the last remaining places where poor people (many of whom have physical disabilities, mental health problems, drug or alcohol problems, or HIV/ AIDS) can afford to live in the city of Vancouver (Baxter, 1997; Eby as documented by Schmidt & Morin, 2007). Residents live in rooms which average ten by twelve feet, sometimes with only a hot plate for cooking, and share communal washrooms (Baxter, 1997). While being far from ideal, they are an alternative to homelessness. Development projects have resulted in the displacement of SRO residents. The renovation of Gastown as a means of heritage preservation between 1968-1975 resulted in four hundred SRO rooms lost and the displacement of large numbers of people (Sommers & Blomley, 2002). Redevelopment, city closures, and fire resulted in a decrease of 6300 rooms between 1970-1997, with only 4000 new social housing units being produced (Smith & Derksen, 2002).

Most recently hotel owners are taking advantage of City of Vancouver bylaws to upgrade and improve buildings as a means of obtaining higher profits than the low rental incomes. Instead of putting money into improving the buildings, this results in tenants being evicted (often illegally). The empty buildings are easier to sell and become part of redevelopment and gentrification projects (Eby as documented in Schmidt & Morin, 2007). The result of the conversion process is that tenants who are unable to afford housing end up living on the streets.

practices of intravenous injection of illicit drugs and the spread of HIV/AIDS" (Culhane, 2003, p.594). The escalating numbers of HIV/AIDS deaths along with drug fatalities first drew attention to the VDES as an urban crisis zone. Between 1996 and 2002, 188 people died of HIV/ AIDS, and at one point, the VDES was denounced as having the highest rate of HIV/AIDS transmission in the Western world (The Trade and Convention Centre Community Impact Team (TACCIT), 1999 as cited in Benoit et al., 2003). Crack cocaine and heroin abuse resulted in high rates of drug-related fatalities and, as a means of dismantling the open drug scene, the first medically supervised injection facility in North America was opened in September 2003 and resulted in high participation by intravenous drug users (Mason, 2007). Investigation into HIV/AIDS statistics reveals a gendered and racialized crisis. Culhane provides some perspective in her assertion that, "A less publicized aspect of Vancouver's HIV/AIDS crisis is that infection rates are significantly higher among women than among men, and about twice as high among both male and female Aboriginal intravenous drug users than among non-Aboriginals" (Culhane, 2003, p.596).[18] This fact reveals how the intersections of gender, race, and class provide a pronounced example of neocolonial legacies which affect residents' health and ability in the VDES.

Missing & Murdered Women

Finally, despite the high HIV/AIDS rates, Aboriginal women have proven to be the most vulnerable group in the VDES for other reasons. As of 2005, sixty percent of the more than fifty women missing in the VDES were Aboriginal (Thompson, 2005). Women began disappearing from the VDES as early as 1978, but were ignored by the police and city officials for twenty years until advocates, journalists, and academics joined women's families to galvanize support.[19]

Robert Pickton, commonly known as a "pig farmer"[20] from Port Coquitlam, B.C, was eventually charged with first-degree murder in the deaths of twenty six women who went missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. At the time of his conviction for the second- degree murders of six women in December, 2007, thirty-nine women still remained missing (Bowen and Shannon Frontline Consulting, 2009; CBC News, 2008; 2007a; 2007b). The plight of the murdered women in Vancouver is intricately linked to historical colonial processes in which both Native bodies and Native lands are considered inherently violable (Smith, 2005). As The Native Women's Association of Canada

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[18] Hepatitis C is also a significant health problem in the VDES (Hunter, 2000; Pivot Legal Society, 2006; Pratt, 2005). Of the approximately 4000 intravenous drug users, 90 percent are infected with Hepatitis C and 30% with HIV (Allford, 2008).

[19] The indifference towards missing Aboriginal women is paralleled on "The Highway of Tears," Highway 16, stretching from Prince Rupert to the West and Prince George to the East in the Northern half of British Columbia. Prior to 1995, over thirty-two Native women went missing in this area. "Police," Rachel Thomson notes, "paid little attention until Nicole Hoar, a non-indigenous woman, disappeared in 2002 on the highway" (Thompson, 2005, p.8). See Culhane (2003), Pitman (2002), and Pratt (2005) for further analysis of the lack of attention concerning the missing and murdered women in the VDES along with the Native Women's Association of Canada (2008) for information on over five hundred cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls across Canada.

[20] In fact, Robert Pickton was not a commercial hog farmer, but raised other animals along with pigs. Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young draw attention to the connotations attached to the label "pig farmer" (Jiwani & Young, 2006). The term "pig," they suggest, resonated with news audiences because it was historically connected to sex workers and also reproduced the image of a masculine, "hillbilly" culture.

states,

> The effects of colonialism and discriminatory federal legislation and policies on Aboriginal women and girls have been severely negative and have weakened their role and position in both Aboriginal and Canadian society. This degrading of Aboriginal women's role and responsibilities in society increases their vulnerability in a number of areas, including their vulnerability to being targeted for violence. (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2008, p. 2)

The serious levels of racialized and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women and girls in the VDES represent a contemporary manifestation of these complex relations in which gender, race, and neocolonialism form a "dangerous intersection" (Smith, 2005; Razack 2002). As a result of gendered colonial processes, Aboriginal women continue to experience violence in the VDES. The tragedies of the missing women signal the racial and gender aspects of the overall dehumanization of marginalized residents of the VDES.

The preceding analysis of the multiple social problems which the VDES faces reveals that the dark period of colonialism has not yet passed, but instead has metamorphosized into more contemporary, yet equally repressive, urban manifestations, replete with numerous social ills. Many of these are directly linked to both historical state processes and more recent state austerity in terms of social spending and capital investment in development projects.[21] Therefore, there is a "pressing need to study t*he public policies and the social structures that refract their relationship* and foster the continuing isolation of the racialized urban core and its residents" (Wacquant, 2008, p.117). Nonetheless, these social problems alone, while providing evidence that the VDES is an unusually troubled urban zone, do not fully capture the unique essence of the area. As will be demonstrated in the next section, the VDES also merits study as a successful example of community resistance in the form of substantive social activism by Aboriginal peoples.

Social Activism in the Vancouver Downtown East Side:
Examples of Aboriginal Community Resistance, Revolution, and Transformation

By looking only at the social problems which VDES residents face, structural explanations for poverty and the agency of residents in contesting such representations become obscured. It is important to understand that the VDES is not only a site of chronic social challenges, but also the locus of highly concentrated and very successful activist movements engaged in community development initiatives.[22] As Culhane notes,

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[21] As just two examples of the state's role in creating a system of social insecurity (Wacquant, 2008), mental health patients migrated to the VDES in search of affordable rent when provincial healthcare cuts were introduced and the high number of homeless people in the community is directly linked to the city's promotion of development and gentrification projects.

[22] As evidence of the high concentration of community services, The 2005/2006 Downtown Eastside Community Monitoring Report provides a fairly comprehensive list of such agencies including 10 "Emergency Shelters," 12 "Community Centres and Meting Places," 39 "Health and social services in the DTES," 8 "Childcare Centres," 18 "Schools and Education Facilities," and 48 "Community food security resources" (City of Vancouver, 2005/06).
This is not to say that the VDES community or its services are in any way homogenous or without internal divisions. While residents in the VDES may all experience social challenges, they by no means experience them equally and sharing a physical urban space does not necessarily produce a common culture or harmonious social relations. Associations such as the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA)

many people in the VDES "struggle daily to maintain and create community, to initiate and support change, to survive. The Downtown Eastside is an active and activist neighborhood with a long tradition of labor and anti-poverty organizing" (Culhane, 2003, p.599).[23]

Among community groups, a number are of notable influence. Because SRO hotel units charge more than what most people on social assistance receive (Baxter, 1997), the remainder of the money required for food and lodging involves creative action on the part of poor people. Residents of the VDES get by on their limited incomes by means of food services and community centres such as the Carnegie Centre which provides a library, seniors' centre, learning/ literacy centre, cafeteria, art gallery, auditorium and gym, dark room and pottery room, and other free programs and outreach services (Baxter, 1997; City of Vancouver, 2007). The Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA), established in 1973 is one of the largest and most successful community organizations in Canada and serves as an influential actor in the promotion of social housing advocacy, community support programs, and services (Blomley, 1998; Downtown Eastside Residents Association, 2008; Gerecke, 1991; Sommers and Blomley, 2002; Sommers, 2001). Without a doubt, social struggle and community resistance to gentrification, private, non-neighbourhood development, and displacement have shaped the landscape of the VDES and there have been considerable neighbourhood improvements based on the self-advocacy of residents (Blomley, 1998; Sommers and Blomley, 2002).

Aboriginal peoples, as well, are directly involved in VDES community development initiatives, "the process by which people in a neighbourhood participate collectively in solving problems that they themselves have identified" (Wharf & Clague, 1997, p.249 as quoted in Silver, Hay, & Gorzen, 2006, p.40). As Ouellette notes, "Aboriginality does indeed affect the lives of Aboriginal people in urban centres, but it is also Aboriginality that unites urban Indians in addressing local everyday problems" (2002, p.87). This community development in Vancouver, "involves people (directly or

have succeeded in their campaigns to establish higher levels of social housing and a community centre. In addition, the community as a whole has united successfully at times against gentrification and privatized development plans. Such instances include opposition to the development of the seaport at CRAB Park where activists and Native organizers justified their claims by linking them to First Nations title (Blomley, 2004). Blomley (1998) suggests, however, that within the context of "collective ownership" of the VDES, sex workers, drug dealers, and First Nations peoples are still often marginalized. This reflects the Foucauldian governmentality approach which suggests that communities are deeply embedded within and among hierarchical power relations. In this case pre-existing power hierarchies influence the activist potential of the community. For this reason, it is imperative that Aboriginal community initiatives are undertaken by and for Aboriginal peoples themselves.

[23] The historical actions of labour organizations in the VDES are well documented by authors such as McDonald (1996), Sommers and Blomley (2002), and Blomley (2004). In the early 1900s streets and parks played a central role in the advocacy of working class and immigrant residents of the East end against "the local Anglo elite that owned the buildings and properties where they lived and worked" (Sommers and Blomley, 2002, p.29) including the historical Woodward's department store. During the 1930s, many employment demonstrations took place on Hastings Street. Much of the contemporary infrastructure in this neighbourhood developed in the 1960s as non-profit organizations responded to community demands for services and political representation including opposition to urban renewal, anti-poverty organizing, and activism over housing displacement (Sommers and Blomley, 2002). Blomley suggests that in recent years in the VDES, activism draws on a "broadly socialist vocabulary, using an analytical frame that, for good reason, focuses on concepts such as poverty, social marginalization, the power of the 'yuppie,' and so on" (Blomley, 2004, p.148).

through organizations) taking democratic control by participating in planning, bottom-up decision making, and community action" (Wharf & Clague, 1997, p.249 as quoted in Silver, Hay, & Gorzen, 2006, p.40).

Native women, in particular, have taken on a role in community organizing as a continuance of their "long and life-sustaining legacy of respect and empowerment within traditional indigenous societies" (Guerrero 1997, p.115). Ouellette explains,

> Not only have many Aboriginal women had to face change and adapt to new situations because of federal legislation, many registered band members have also had to migrate to urban centres in search of a better quality of life. As a result, they have had to adapt to urban life, and many are caught between two worlds, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Ironically, it is also within the urban centre where Aboriginal women are most involved in the preservation of Aboriginal cultures, languages, traditions, beliefs, and values. It is also in the urban centre where Aboriginal women become the most vocal. (Ouellette, 2002, p.88)

As in other urban areas which are pivotal locations for First Nations women and their efforts to create a space for themselves beyond the patriarchal relations that exist on reserves (Peters, 1998), Aboriginal women[24] have taken on significant roles in the VDES as community organizers, ritual specialists, spiritual icons, and political leaders (Culhane, 2003). They often define and implement a holistic and distinctive form of Aboriginal community development.

Many Aboriginal women in urban centres belong to more than one organization (including non-Aboriginal organizations) as a means of addressing issues that concern their communities. Community groups such as Creative Women Craftworks seek social justice and change in the VDES through art and creative entrepreneurship (Pullen and Matthews, 2006). In addition, the Chee Mamuk Aboriginal Program engaged in an outreach project for five communities including the Vancouver Native Health Society in the VDES. Their 2010 project entitled, "Reclaiming Tradition: Around the kitchen table: A model for HIV, hepatitis and sexual health education" illustrates a successful and culturally appropriate model for HIV, hepatitis and sexual health education for Aboriginal women and serves as a model of Aboriginal women's community capacity building (Chee Mamuk Aboriginal Program, First Nations Inuit Health, BC Centre for Disease Control, & Provincial Health Services Authority, 2010).
There are also a large variety of community-based organizations in Vancouver which cover health and social services for Aboriginal women. These include, among others, the Anderson Lodge Women's Shelter, Atira Women's Resource Society, Circle of Eagles Lodge Society, the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre, the Big Sisters of BC Lower Mainland, the Urban Native Youth Association, Vancouver, Native Health Society, Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter (Government of Canada, 2010).

Further examples of Aboriginal community development in the VDES include the Aboriginal Front Door and partnerships with various community centres such as the Carnegie Community Centre. The Aboriginal Front Door Society, for example, "offers a

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[24] Just as First Nations peoples do not constitute a homogenous group, neither do Aboriginal women. Evelyn Peters explains, however, that "First Nations women have experienced in common the discriminatory elements of the Indian Act and the social construction of spaces where Aboriginal people have been assigned in the colonial imagination and in fact. On this issue, they constitute an 'imagined community' (Mohanty, 1991, page 4, following Anderson, 1983) with a common context of struggle" (Peters, 1998, p.665).

supportive space where Aboriginal people in the Downtown Eastside can reconnect with traditional approaches to community and healing" (Aboriginal Front Door Society, 2010). It provides community meetings, adult education, arts and crafts, drumming, healing circles, and elder training and also functions as a culturally-relevant entry point towards drug and alcohol treatment (Ibid).

The United Native Nations (UNN) is another Aboriginal organization which extends beyond Vancouver. It represents approximately 90,000 Aboriginal people within British Columbia, with membership open to anyone of Aboriginal ancestry. Its decolonizing method, as explained on the website, is to qualify members,

> solely on Aboriginal ancestry, not on the artificial definitions created by an outdated Canadian Indian Act. The UNN currently has a membership base of 11,000+ people. Our major concern is to properly represent and protect the interest of Aboriginal people who currently do not have a voice on government decisions affecting their life and culture. The UNN supports on and off reserve, status and non-status, Métis and Inuit people from all areas of BC. The UNN will inform the federal and provincial governments on policy development in relation to urban Aboriginal issues and generate funding opportunities for specific initiatives to address socioeconomic issues in the areas of education, employment, health and wellness, safety, housing and justice. The UNN membership is organized into local chapters throughout BC. Each local is managed independently of each other and other organizations. Provincial head office provides support and guidance as requested. (United Native Nations: Working together for our children, 2007)

In this manner, the United Native Nations provides an example of a successful community organization working towards self-determination. It has alliances with the Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council :"The Vancouver Urban Aboriginal Voice" which includes the following organizations: the Circle of Eagles Lodge Society, Kla-how-eya Aboriginal Centre, Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents, Environmental Aboriginal Guardianship through Law and Education, Lu'na Native Housing Society, Aboriginal Community Careers Services Society, Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Services, Urban Native Youth Association, Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society, Healing Our Spirit: BC Aboriginal HIV/ AIDS Society, Pacific Association of First Nations Women, Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society, Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of British Columbia, Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association, and the Aboriginal Mothers Centre Society (Ibid). Other Aboriginal organizations within Vancouver include Aboriginal Youth Safe House, Native Education Centre, Aboriginal Mother Care, and Native Health Centre (Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society, 2008).

As is the case in other urban centres, the preceding examples of Aboriginal organizations have formed in Vancouver because urban Aboriginal peoples are committed to restructuring their lives (Silver, 2006).[25] These community initiatives are

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[25] Not to be remiss, it should be noted that Aboriginal umbrella organizations such as the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP), the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), and the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) have also been very active in the context of urban Aboriginal peoples (Graham & Peters, 2002).

those in which people themselves identify the problems they want to solve and the ways they want to solve them. This type of community development does not imply the adoption of the attributes of the dominant culture (Silver, Hay, & Gorzen, 2006). Instead, these emergent forms of urban Aboriginal community development are rooted in the distinctive value of Aboriginal cultures in personal healing and community building and are built around the traditional Aboriginal notions of sharing and community (Silver, 2006). They provide challenges to the neocolonial impositions of political space, provide alternative urban political opportunities, and help to assert the self-determination of First Nations urban peoples in Vancouver.

Conclusion

   The Foucauldian conception which emphasizes that power relations are not top-down or hierarchical, but instead, multifaceted, proves useful in an analysis of community organizations within the VDES. Power can exist in every relation and where there is power, there is resistance in multiple forms and the potential for "reverse discourses" (Foucault, 1990). The themes of resistance, survival, and possibility become pivotal in a historical material analysis of the VDES. Beyond the obvious social challenges, close examination reveals it as a community rich in activism with the potential for transformational urban politics. A comprehensive examination of the VDES requires, therefore, an assessment of the degree to which transgression of social challenges can be empowering and can provide a blueprint for radical change which sows the seeds of new spatial orderings (Cresswell, 1996).

   While socially produced space in the VDES context is a clear reflection of unequal neocolonial power relations and contestations, it can also be an important site of Aboriginal resistance, revolution, and transformation. As Silver notes, the historical roots of contemporary Aboriginal challenges are to be found in the process of colonization. The solution, therefore, "is to decolonize ourselves- Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike" (Silver, 2006, p.28). He writes,

> Urban Aboriginal people face a vast array of problems, all of them, in one way or another, a product of the experience of and the effects of colonization. In response, urban Aboriginal people are engaged in a process of decolonization- of struggling to remove themselves, as individuals and as communities, from the adverse consequences of colonization, but doing so in their own ways. There is no template for decolonization. The way forward is being discovered and developed by urban Aboriginal people themselves. A part of this process, an important part, is the particular form of Aboriginal community development being created by urban Aboriginal people themselves as they struggle to forge a path to the future. (Silver, 2006, p.13)

As I have attempted to demonstrate in this paper, while the VDES can be considered to represent an extreme case of urban marginalization exacerbated through the forces of contemporary neocolonialism, when examined through the lens of community resistance and activism, it signals the potential for transformational urban Aboriginal politics. In so doing, it provides a template for decolonization and a model for other urban Aboriginal communities.

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