

# Redd Alert!<sup>1</sup> (Re)Articulating Aboriginal Gang Violence in Western Canada

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the articulation of a racialized moral panic surrounding Aboriginal gang violence and the community of Maskwacis, a collection of four First Nations in central Alberta, Canada formerly known as Hobbema. Our analysis is situated within the distinctive settler-colonial context through which Aboriginal gangs were mediated (Ginsburg 1991) by the mainstream commercial media as an issue of public concern in this particular Cree community and, indeed, throughout Western Canada. Drawing upon interviews with journalists, First Nation residents, and other community members in the region, our analysis focuses on two interrelated issues: 1) the “behind-the-scenes” production processes through which non-Aboriginal journalists condensed themes of race, crime, and youth to reproduce and amplify a powerful and punitive discourse that articulated Aboriginal gang violence with the broader community itself; and 2) the ways in which First Nations residents and community members—themselves the subjects of the media gaze—interpreted, internalized, and, at times actively manipulated this racialized discourse of crisis.*

It has been close to four decades since Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts (1978) published their classic text, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. This insightful critique demonstrated how mugging was racialized in the British press as a black problem: a sensational discursive construct devoid of historical and sociological analysis that criminalized entire communities as threats to the British way of life and, indeed, to white British sovereignty. The fears and anxieties that were mobilized by this “crisis,” in turn, enabled and normalized certain biopolitical interventions in the lives of residents of the United Kingdom’s most marginalized communities, especially black youth. For example, increased police surveillance of inner city (black) “trouble spots” diminished criminal protections for youths and contributed to harsher prison terms. At the same time, a general recoiling of the welfare state accompanied a spike in unemployment as a growing racial population became the “signifier” (Hall et al. 1978, 339) of a far-reaching crisis in Britain’s urban centres.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Redd Alert” is here used to underscore the media’s penchant for racializing Aboriginal peoples in Canada; however, Redd Alert is also the name of one the most notorious Aboriginal gangs in Maskwacis, and, indeed, throughout Western Canada.

Today, in Canada, in a radically different context from that of 1970s postwar Britain, the book's central themes and arguments are strikingly relevant. Located 80 kilometres southeast of Edmonton, Alberta along highways 2 and 2A, and surrounding an old flag station that was built during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), are the four Cree Nations that together comprise Maskwacis, an Aboriginal community of about 15,000 Cree members whose former name, Hobbema, had grown to be synonymous with a high-profile racialized public narrative: Aboriginal gang violence.<sup>2</sup> In the new millennium, for example, media headlines such as “Hobbema rocked by week of gang violence” (CBCnews.ca 2005a), “Hobbema Gangs get ‘Hardcore’” (Jones 2005), and “Hobbema RCMP Carry Caseload 3.5 Times the National Average” (CBCnews.ca 2005b) have routinely dominated media coverage and have framed Maskwacis as a “town in a state of crisis” (Offman 2008). Other headlines such as “Hobbema home to deadliest block in Canada” (Larson 2011), “Hobbema suffering heinous murder rate” (Rodrigues 2011), and “Man who shot Hobbema toddler blacked-out drunk” (CBCnews.ca 2010), moreover, have publicized the extreme end of violence occurring in some parts of the reserves as evidence of the failure of Aboriginal young men to conform to moral standards and the rule of law. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, for example, epitomized this coverage in a 20-minute-long special news report in which Maskwacis's Samson Cree Nation was declared a “Gang War Zone” *in spite* of Chief Marvin Yellowbird's assertion that only one per cent of the community was involved in gang activities (Kelley 2010). Even the more optimistic news stories that cover proposed “solutions” to these issues often re-emphasized the backdrop of Aboriginal youth gang violence that, by implication, is ubiquitous across the reserves. For example, headlines such as “Hobbema man proof good things can happen” (2012), “Alberta First Nations hope basketball tournament helps repair reputation” (Wingrove 2012), and “Cadets converting gang members into ‘nice kids’” (CBCnews.ca 2006) have reinforced Maskwacis's discursive reputation by subtly articulating the “good things” happening there as exceptional occurrences.

Together, these media narratives have conjured a host of Orientalist (Said 1978) images and have condensed the themes of race, crime, and youth into a broader moral panic (Cohen 1972) about the community of Maskwacis itself—a community that has, for many, become synonymous with “Indian” gangsters, thugs, and social degenerates and, beyond this, “a microcosm of everything that's wrong with the reserve system in Canada” (Simmons 2008, B1). Indeed, as Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994, 169) explained, “With the eruption of a given moral panic, the battle lines are redrawn, moral universes are reaffirmed, deviants are paraded before upright citizens and denounced, and society's boundaries are solidified.” In the case of Hobbema, the image, or “folk devil” that has been publicly circulated by the mainstream media is not a single or solitary figure, but rather an entire community of “devils” drawn powerfully along racial lines. The media's sequestering

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<sup>2</sup> This population number includes band members living at Pigeon Lake (also Maskwacis territory); however, the total number of Maskwacis residents living in the Four Nations—including Pigeon Lake—rises to 17,000 when accounting for spouses and in-laws originally from other communities.

of this devil, moreover, has been made all the easier through Maskwacis's racial, cultural, and geographic isolation. For many non-Aboriginal Canadians who have simply never been to Maskwacis—or other Aboriginal communities across Canada, especially those in remote northern regions—the mainstream media has played a fundamental and active role in selectively defining what significant events are taking place on these reserves. The media has also offered powerful interpretations and ideological frameworks for how to understand those events, especially when they are articulated with broader social issues and structures of power associated with race, violence, and crime at this particular conjunctural moment in history.

The circulation of such one-dimensional storylines about Maskwacis and First Nations peoples raises a number of important sociological issues. First, the mainstream media's fixation on Aboriginal gang violence invites questions about the specific political-economic and settler-colonial historical context within which "street gangs" emerged as a social phenomenon and as an issue of public concern in Maskwacis and, indeed, throughout Western Canada. Secondly, those same storylines prompt questions about the mainstream media's role as the articulator of the racialized moral panic over Aboriginal street gangs, the community of Maskwacis, and First Nations peoples themselves for predominantly non-Aboriginal audiences. In other words, what are the routine structures and professional ideologies of news production that set decisive limits on the labour practices of non-Aboriginal journalists who, despite having relative autonomy in their day-to-day activities, often reproduce and amplify racialized narratives about Aboriginal gang violence and the community itself? Finally, these issues raise additional questions about how Aboriginal community members themselves internalize, negotiate, and at times resist the mainstream media's racialized articulation of Maskwacis as gang-torn in relation to their own experiences of everyday life in the Four Nations territory. Indeed, as Martin Sánchez-Jankowski (1991) illustrated in his examination of Chicano street gangs in the United States, and as Loïc Wacquant (2008) reiterated, racialized moral panics often have significant punitive impacts on various communities despite the often-sizeable fissure between the media's projection of a social phenomenon (e.g., gang violence) and the everyday lived realities of most community members.

Our analysis is drawn from a series of formal, semi-structured interviews with journalists, Maskwacis residents, and other community members in Maskwacis territory. The goal of these interviews was to gain insight into both the mainstream media's social production of gang violence as "news" (how the media capture, articulate, and re-articulate the lives of Aboriginal peoples) and how community members interpreted, understood, and contested the media's production of Maskwacis gang violence and notions of race and criminality. Three Edmonton-based journalists were interviewed between 2008 and 2010—each of whom was Euro-Canadian and was recruited using a purposive sampling technique based on the criterion that each had written stories featuring Maskwacis for one of the major daily newspapers in Edmonton, either the *Edmonton Journal* or the *Edmonton Sun*. The second portion of this study consisted of interviews with twenty-five Maskwacis

residents and other community stakeholders. These interviewees occupied a wide range of roles within the community—band councillors, parents, teachers, sports administrators, RCMP, and youths. Noteworthy is that these latter interviews were part of a much larger study involving Maskwacis that took place over a roughly six-year period (2008–2014) and that involved extensive relationship-building in the region (Koch 2015). Crucially, the framework for this study was forged in collaboration with the Samson Cree Nation’s band council (the largest among Maskwacis’s four Cree Nations), which formally approved this study’s protocol in September 2011.<sup>3</sup> It was, of course, impossible to include the voices of all participants in the final version of this manuscript; however, we have attempted to honour the complexity of these voices (and the community itself) by emphasizing important points of departure in their experiences of dealing with the media. It is important to underscore, moreover, that other community members who were not interviewed for this study (e.g., gang members) may have had an entirely different reading of the media’s production of Aboriginal gang violence.

### **Policing the Crisis: Background & Context**

In what follows, we explore Aboriginal gang violence as a sociohistorical and political-economic phenomenon at a distinct historical juncture, rather than simply as a particular form of street crime. Following the authors of *Policing the Crisis* (1978), it is crucial to recognize “gang violence” as a relation—a relation between crime and the reaction to crime—and to examine the social forces and contradictions within it, as well as the wider historical context within which it occurs. The issue of Aboriginal gang violence, of course, has a complex and lengthy history that is all-too-often omitted from, or oversimplified amidst, the significant amounts of incident-based media coverage produced by the mainstream media. Moreover, the settler-colonial relations that inform the context of everyday life in Maskwacis, as discussed below, have contributed to a number of distinct social issues within this particular community.

Since the 1990s, a growing body of literature has drawn important attention to the conditions under which street gangs have emerged as an issue of public concern in Canada

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<sup>3</sup> The authors were acutely aware of the troubling history and ethically dubious relationship that exists between university researchers and many Aboriginal communities across Canada and globally (among a vast literature on this subject see Battiste 2008; Kovach 2009; Menzies 2001; Smith 1999). Thus, to honour the ethical framework that was established with Samson Cree leadership, all participants interviewed for this study were over the age of 18 years. Our identities as white, middle-class men also shaped the interview process in the sense that a disproportionate number of males vs. younger females were interviewed—an approach that was also encouraged on ethical grounds due to the charged history of white male authority figures working in Aboriginal communities. Finally, in accordance with University of Alberta’s Research Ethics Board, pseudonyms were provided to protect participants’ anonymity (unless otherwise requested), and moderate editorial changes were made to certain excerpts as a means to conceal peoples’ identities further; however, at no point was an excerpt’s intent or general integrity ever compromised through this process. See Koch 2015, 46–97 for a full list of participants and a more complete description of the theory, methods, and limitations that shaped the current version of this manuscript.

(Buddle 2011; Chettleburgh 2007; Comack et al. 2013; Fasilio and Leckie 1993; Giles, 2000; Goodwill 2009; Gordon 1995, 2000; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2006; Grekul and LaRocque 2011; Henry 2015; Kelly and Caputo 2005; Nafekh 2002; Nimmo 2001; Pearce 2009; Totten 2012; Wortley and Tanner 2006; Young 1993).<sup>4</sup> In 2006, for example, Criminal Intelligence Service Canada (CISC) identified over 300 crime groups operating across the country, 30 of which were operating out of Alberta (CISC 2006, 26). The report further estimated that there were approximately 12,000 gang members and gang associates in Canada, located in every province except for Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador. By 2009, moreover, the *Provincial Threat Assessment on Organised Crime in Alberta and Northwest Territories* discovered a total of 83 gangs throughout the region, a disproportionately high number of which were Aboriginal (CISA 2009). While the expansion of street gangs has been linked to the growth of economic inequality in the neoliberal era, and the retrenchment of funding for important social services such as financial and cultural supports for new immigrants and political refugees arriving in Canada (Dickson-Gilmore et al. 2003; Pearce 2009; Comack et al. 2013), “a crucial factor in accounting for Aboriginal street gangs in Canada has been the ongoing impact of colonialism” (Comack et al. 2013, 16). Indeed, in Maskwacis, as well as in many First Nations and Aboriginal communities across Canada, the emergence of Aboriginal street gangs has been widely attributed to the legacy of residential schools and the impact of ongoing systemic racism amongst a host of other colonial processes (Comack et al. 2013; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2006; Henry 2015; Koch 2015; Totten 2009, 2012). Space prevents a full historical treatment of the vast range of colonial struggles through which Aboriginal peoples have been subjugated in Canada (among a vast literature on the subject see Miller 1989, 1996; Milloy 1999; Pettipas 1994). However, keeping in mind these historical processes and structures, the emergence of street gangs in Maskwacis territory also corresponded with two interrelated developments: 1) the mid-century discovery and development of Alberta’s biggest oil deposit on Maskwacis territory; and 2) Maskwacis’s relative proximity to several Alberta-based correctional facilities.

In 1952, an oilfield was discovered on Maskwacis’s land near Ma-Me-O Beach, the once-traditional fishing grounds of all Four Nations (York 1989). By the early 1970s, the community’s development of these resources had reached a point at which many band members were receiving royalty cheques in excess of \$500/month, a windfall that sparked a boom in the population (Contenta 2008). As the oil flowed more freely into the 1980s, Maskwacis bands were receiving royalties of approximately \$185 million per annum (York 1989, 89), a bonanza of revenue for the poverty-stricken community. On this note, Maskwacis’s resource wealth enabled the creation of a host of businesses and other opportunities in the Four Nations, including Samson Oil and Gas Inc. (an energy company), Samson Management Limited, Peace Hills General Insurance, and Peace Hills Trust (a company with a total of eight offices nationwide). New housing facilities, well-built

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<sup>4</sup> We recognize that the ambiguous definitions of “street gang” make it difficult to track such issues in Canada accurately (see Chettleburgh 2007, 18–23; Henry 2009).

schools, two local hockey arenas, rodeo and powwow grounds, an Education Trust Fund valued at approximately \$24 million, and a Heritage Fund valued at \$380 million were also products of Maskwacis's oil wealth (C. Yellowbird, pers. comm.).

However, as Geoffrey York (1989, 89) explained, Maskwacis's newfound wealth also contributed to a number of pressing social issues within the community:

In the history of Canada, very few communities have ever been transformed from poverty to wealth so suddenly. As the oil money poured into Hobbema, the social upheaval was traumatic. Alcoholism increased, cocaine arrived on the four reserves, families broke apart, and the suicides mounted steadily.

Indeed, as Maskwacis's oil production increased during the 1980s and the 1990s, so too did the rates of suicide, substance abuse, and the level of violent crime across the reserves. It is important to emphasize that similar trends occurred in several Aboriginal communities during this era, even those without substantive oil resources, thus pointing to a more complex etiology and set of social and historical relations behind these issues.<sup>5</sup> Between 1980 and 1987, however, Maskwacis's suicide rate was among the highest in North America, reaching approximately 160 times the national average for women and 83 times the average for men. These numbers dropped significantly in 1988, but only after the community made a concerted effort to expand social services and introduced a 24-hour suicide intervention program (Gee 1989, 3).

At the same time, Maskwacis's youths encountered additional social pressures when they began to receive lump-sum payments of between \$18,000 and \$200,000 once they turned 18 (prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays, royalty cheques were stored in government-run trust accounts [D. Bruno, pers. comm.]). Loan sharks, con artists, and drug dealers flocked to Maskwacis in the form of street gangs that competed aggressively for a share of the community's wealth (Koch 2015, 109–19). As Violet Soosay of Maskwacis's Samson Cree Nation explained, "Drug dealers would come into the community and start giving free drugs to 16-year-olds. And when they reached the age of majority they came to collect," (Soosay 2008, cited in Contenta 2008). While such "discount" tactics are, of course, ubiquitous across a host of markets (drug deals being no exception), a number of Maskwacis youths with unprecedented disposable resources were attractive targets for gangs and other social predators; and, once their addictions set in, some of these youths also served as important conduits for the reproduction of gang violence across the community (S. Reid, pers. comm.).

It is germane to note that, despite these added pressures, the vast majority of Maskwacis youths did not succumb to any drug use, nor did they indulge in the pressures of gang membership (D. Bruno, pers. comm.). These powerful assertions of youth agency, of course, stood in stark contrast to the recent narratives that have been produced by the mainstream media about this community. Moreover, those youths who did, in fact, engage in gang activity were likely among the most marginalized on the reserves. As Jana Grekul

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Elizabeth Comack, Lawrence Dean, Larry Morrissette, and Jim Silver (2013, 35–59) examined the growth of Aboriginal street gangs in Winnipeg, Manitoba, during the 1980s and 1990s, as a result of a wide range of macro and regional colonial practices.

and Patti LaBoucane-Benson (2008, 76) explained in their analysis of Aboriginal gangs in the Canadian Prairies,

Aboriginal gang members experience structural inequality, racism, discrimination, family dysfunction, substance abuse, and violence—all indicators of marginalization. This marginalization, including lack of school and work opportunities, compounded by institutional labelling, makes the gang lifestyle an attractive option.

For Michael Chettleburgh (2008), the events in Maskwacis underscored the variety of ways in which First Nations in Canada remain governed by a political system that is inadequately suited to accommodate their contemporary needs. Chettleburgh (2008) noted that, for years, Maskwacis residents had protested against the federal government's lump-sum method of royalty compensation for Aboriginal youths; so, too, did they attempt to increase the age of majority, as well as attach more stringent conditions to the distribution of Maskwacis's oil royalties. However, despite their objections, under the *Indian Act*, and specifically the Minor Money provision section of this *Act*, the practice of distributing royalty cheques in excess of \$200,000 to 18-year-olds continued for almost two decades in Maskwacis (Chettleburgh 2008). Band members' hands were tied by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), which served as the federally appointed trustee for Maskwacis's resource revenue, and their objections were ultimately overlooked by a rigid government policy and pockets of opposition from some community members.<sup>6</sup> It was not until 2006, following a 16-year protracted legal battle and millions of dollars in legal fees, that INAC was officially removed as trustee of Maskwacis's resource revenue. Shortly thereafter, approximately \$350-million was transferred to the community and the practice of delivering royalty cheques to 18-year-olds was gradually phased out (Chettleburgh 2008).<sup>7</sup>

However, as oil royalties became depleted in the early-to-mid 2000s, infighting among street gangs intensified in Maskwacis as various groups fought over the last drops of oil money. Lester Underhill (a pseudonym), a now-retired RCMP member who patrolled Maskwacis throughout the 1990s and 2000s, attributed the escalation of gang violence to these conditions of economic scarcity:

Yeah, it was brought to the attention of those [RCMP] back then [In the year 2000],

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<sup>6</sup> Several interviewees acknowledged that a number of residents (typically, the most impoverished) in Maskwacis were actively opposed to modifying the lump-sum method of compensation, highlighting some of the divisions within the community itself.

<sup>7</sup> INAC, which served as the trustee for Maskwacis's oil money, held Maskwacis's finances under the General Revenue section of banking, a development that resulted in millions of dollars of Maskwacis's finances accruing only minimal interest rates for years (B. Barry, pers. comm.). While community leaders from both the Samson and Ermineskin Cree Nations have since sued the federal government for the mismanagement of their resources, in 2009, the Supreme Court of Canada rejected Maskwacis's requests for compensatory payments. The Supreme Court of Canada's decision was the culmination of over two decades of court battles and millions of dollars in legal fees—a figure that pales in comparison to the estimated loss of over two billion dollars as a result of INAC's mismanagement of Maskwacis's resources (Buehler 2009).

but the gangs weren't at each other to the extent that they were at this time [in 2008]. As the money started to recede there were smaller pockets of money that came forth because they had all of these youths that were receiving large sums of money when they turned 18. That started to recede quite a bit and, because of that, these guys were fighting over the last remnant of the resources that were there. You don't have that now to that extent. There is still money there, but they're not doing it out like they used to back then.

Another significant development that exacerbated the influx of gang members into Maskwacis was the community's proximity to several Alberta-based penitentiaries and correctional facilities, including the Pe Sakastew minimum-security prison in Maskwacis and the Edmonton maximum-security facility located just north of the reserves. The close relationship between prison gangs and street gangs in Canada has been well-documented in recent years, with more than one researcher labelling the distinction between these two groups a false dualism (Buddle 2011; Chettleburgh 2007; Comack et al. 2013; Goodwill 2009; Grekul and Laboucane-Benson 2006). As CISC explains, "In Alberta, Aboriginal-based gangs that once existed primarily in prisons for protection purposes have now recognized the financial benefit of trafficking hard drugs (e.g., cocaine) on the reserves" (2006, 5). RCMP members in Maskwacis have echoed these assertions and have themselves argued that the prison system, or failure thereof, ought to shoulder much of the blame for intensifying the development of Aboriginal street gangs in the community. Chief Superintendent Doug Reti, for example, the former Director of the RCMP's National Aboriginal Policing Services and a one-time service member in Maskwacis, offered these candid remarks to a Senate committee studying the effects of a new tough-on-crime law: "Many of the youth we were dealing with, if they were not gang members going into jail, they certainly were coming out" (cited in Contenta 2008).

The onset of Aboriginal gangs as a social issue in Maskwacis, and in prisons across Canada, emerged fully in the early 1990s when Correctional Services concentrated Aboriginal gang members from across Western Canada into one facility, the Stony Mountain penitentiary in northern Manitoba (Chettleburgh 2007; Comack et al. 2013; Contenta 2008; Henry 2015; Pearce 2009). In this setting, gang formation swelled to such proportions that it undermined the safety and integrity of the prison itself (Contenta 2008). Correctional Services responded to these threats by shipping Aboriginal gang members out of Stony Mountain and into different penitentiaries across Canada, including to the Edmonton Max and Pe Sakastew facilities. However, as the authors of *Indians Wear Red* explained, the strategy backfired: "[T]he street gangs responded in entrepreneurial fashion, using the new locations as a business opportunity to recruit even more members and expand their operations" (Comack et al. 2013, 124).

What accompanied all of these developments was a series of government proposals and policies that targeted organized crime and street gangs at both the federal and provincial levels—including, among other things, more rigorous legal provisions that defined street gangs as criminal organizations, stiffer prison terms for the commission of all gang-related



offenses, multi-million-dollar expansions of Alberta's provincial police force, and the federal government's endorsement of plans to expand Canada's existing prison facilities radically—all despite significant *decreases* in federal crime levels (Audette 2008; CTV.ca 2009; The Canadian Press 2012). These punitive measures, it is worth noting, have been widely criticized by scholars and social activists for their propensity to enhance racial profiling, for addressing only the symptoms of crime as opposed to its historical and structural root causes, and for inflaming the public's fears and anxieties about crime, street gangs, and the (usually ethnic) criminal Other (see Bjerregaard 2003; Comack et al. 2013; Everett-Green 2012; Wacquant 2009). These initiatives have also been criticized for exacerbating the already exorbitantly high number of Aboriginal offenders currently incarcerated in Canadian prisons (Comack et al. 2013, 26–9).<sup>8</sup> All of these issues thus underscore the importance of examining the role of the mainstream media in defining and amplifying a racialized moral panic about gang violence in Maskwacis, and of critically assessing the behind-the-scenes production processes through which stories about Aboriginal gang violence are made meaningful for primarily non-Aboriginal audiences—a matter to which we now turn.

### **The Social Production of Maskwacis “News”**

One of the most enduring contributions of *Policing the Crisis* (1978) remains its instructive analysis of the social production of crime-as-news and the objective and subjective work routines of journalists whose labour and subsequent coverage of crime are both enabled and constrained by a host of interrelated occupational structures and professional ideologies. At a broader level, for example, the labour practices of the Edmonton-based journalists who covered Maskwacis and articulated the community with a racialized narrative of gang violence have been influenced by a host of economic pressures associated with the declining fortunes of the newspaper industry itself. The collapse of the CanWest Global Empire in 2010 and the subsequent economic challenges facing the Postmedia Network (the owners of both the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Edmonton Sun*) in the digital era have resulted in mass layoffs, declining budgets, and voluntary staff retirements across the

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8 In 2012–2013, for example, Aboriginal peoples accounted for approximately twenty-two percent of all prison inmates in Canada while comprising only four percent of the total population (AROCI 2013). In Alberta, the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples increased to forty percent for those sentenced to custody in 2010–2011, despite comprising only five percent of the province's total population (Dauvergne 2012). Similar incarceration rates appear among Canada's younger generations of Aboriginal peoples as well, with Aboriginal youths aged twelve to seventeen years accounting for approximately twenty-six percent of those entering federal corrections in 2010–2011 (while comprising just six percent of the total population), and approximately forty percent in the province of Alberta (while comprising nine percent, respectively) (Munch 2012). While such figures have been generally attributed to the “enduring fragmentation” and “loss of identity” experienced through colonization (Martel and Brassard 2008, 340), as Canada's correctional investigator, Howard Sapers, noted, “the increasing costs of corrections in Canada and rising inmate numbers are inseparable from a number of significant legislative measures,” such as the expansion of mandatory minimum sentencing, the tightening of parole-review criteria, and the reduction in credit for time already served in pre-trial custody (AROCI 2012).

country. These developments have had an impact on virtually every aspect of journalism as the revenue streams from advertising and daily subscriptions continue to decline, and as journalists are increasingly required to select and produce stories with fewer resources for predominantly Edmonton-based readers—the audience commodity (Smythe 1977) that is sold to advertisers.

Beyond these objective economic conditions, the ultimate end-product of a published news story is the result of a complex production process, one “which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories” (Hall et al. 1978, 53). An important element associated with selection processes consists of the availability of resources and the institutional organization of newspapers—the structure of their workforces and the structuring of the papers themselves according to specific sections and areas of interests. One of the decisive aspects that influenced the mainstream media’s coverage of Maskwacis in general was simply that the Aboriginal community did not neatly fit into the regular sections of the daily newspapers. As a result of this issue, as well as the broader financial pressures facing the industry itself, local papers were unwilling to dedicate substantive and consistent resources (including labour) to producing a wide range of balanced features about the community. Conner Franco (a pseudonym), an Edmonton-based journalist who reported on Maskwacis between 2009 and 2011, elaborated upon these precise issues as well as the occupational and professional pressures that he encountered even when trying to produce more optimistic stories about life in Maskwacis:

Well it [i.e., a positive story featuring Maskwacis youth] was an assignment that was floating around the newsroom for a while. We had a couple of issues with it because the [*Edmonton Journal*] ... you see, it’s the *Edmonton Journal* and most of the staff work for the City Plus section, whereas most of the A section is foreign and national news. Hobbema isn’t City Plus. It’s too far to be considered City Plus. That’s part of the reason why Hobbema isn’t covered a lot of the time. So, we had to kind of twist and manoeuvre to get it into the Alberta section, which is usually a page, if that. Space is always a concern of a newspaper, as are resources, and Hobbema required the renting of a car and a full day with me and a photographer. Once those two things were approved, we just set up a day where we could go and watch the kids play. Of course, once we expressed some interest in doing that, everyone involved in it were [sic] elated to have us come, have us cover it, have us be there, be aware of it and everything. So, yeah, I think it was someone who actually called me, but I’m not sure why it happened that way. The call had come before I had even arrived at the *Journal*. It had just been kicked from reporter to reporter until someone actually got around to doing it because it was a struggle for resources. (C. Franco, interview)

With stories that did not fit neatly into the structure of the newspaper itself, and facing competition from other, more sought-after provincially scaled news stories, many journalists, short on resources, simply declined to pursue stories about Maskwacis. Those reporters who did, in fact, endeavour to write stories and features about the community

often aspired to produce high-profile articles to compensate for the structural and cultural challenges associated with covering Maskwacis. As Bernard Small (a pseudonym), an Edmonton-based journalist who wrote numerous articles on Maskwacis between 2005 and 2013, explained,

I think it's obvious that it's more expensive to travel than it is to stay in the city. If you go through *The Edmonton Journal* or *The Edmonton Sun*, for example, there is a City Plus section. It's the city and a certain area around the city. To be honest, I don't remember if Hobbema falls into that or not. I think it might not. It might be just outside, which means that if I want to write an article about Hobbema, I would want to aim for ... I would want ... well, that kind of goes with anything ... any feature that I write, I am trying to write it for the front page. And if it doesn't go on the front page then, well ... then that's disappointing because I put a lot of effort into it. (B. Small, interview)

A consistent theme that emerged from our interviews with all three Edmonton-based journalists was the pressure to select and produce news stories about Maskwacis that were "interesting," "captivating," "significant," and "different," as well as sufficiently provocative as to warrant print space and the mobilization of resources for travel to Maskwacis. These issues, it may be suggested, underscore how the "*professional ideology* of what constitutes 'good news'" (Hall et al. 1978, 56), and, indeed, the professional aspirations of reporters, inevitably structure and shape what, and how, news stories are produced and reported to their audiences. Unable to access the requisite resources to investigate and produce ongoing nuanced coverage of Maskwacis, many journalists often aspired and, in the end, were structurally encouraged to *seek out* extraordinary and sensational stories that would merit space on a newspaper's front page. In the case of Maskwacis, this professional set of limits and pressures has often resulted in media coverage that focuses primarily on gang violence.

Joel Lao (a pseudonym), an Edmonton journalist who wrote several news articles on Maskwacis between 2008 and 2012, elaborated upon these precise issues:

The thing about a newspaper is that there has to be a hook .... You have to basically answer in the reader's mind why what they are reading matters. So, often that is something new that is happening, or something that is changing. That can be a lot harder to find in terms of good news. And that's why there is that criticism all of the time that so much of the news is bad, and so much of it is negative because, more often than not, the good things that happen in society are quietly happening and they are harder to peg down and to say, "A is doing this; B is doing this." It's just happening. The last ... my last shooting story I did out there, a woman was shot inside a house ... a known gang house, where there were a bunch of other kids, and she was not the intended target, which is why I went out there. Honestly, if there was a shooting out there that was not fatal I would not be going out there unless there was something different about it. But, in that story, I also tried to talk about how things were changing in a general sense; how there have been less [sic] of these sorts of incidents lately; how the houses have been painted so that the gang symbols

are gone now. I try to talk a little bit more about some of the programs that are out there, whereas I don't know if I could as easily write a story about just the program. It would be a lot harder to get that into the paper. (J. Lao, interview)

Joel's reflection demonstrates how the journalistic requisite to fixate upon the "extraordinary, dramatic, tragic, etc. elements in a story in order to enhance its newsworthiness" (Hall et al. 1978, 57) was especially pronounced in the context of Maskwacis news stories. The reserves' physical location outside of Edmonton, moreover, meant that other events that were "quietly happening" in the community and were "harder to peg down" were habitually eclipsed by more provocative stories that centered upon negative issues, especially Aboriginal gang violence. Alternative stories and broader features about the community often failed to meet industry standards of newsworthiness and sensationalism, at least for beat reporters.

These professional ideologies inevitably shaped the genre of the stories that journalists pursued, while also limiting the ability of journalists to frame such stories in relation to broader historical events and sociological issues, including the complex legacy of colonialism. As a consequence, news stories featuring Maskwacis were regularly presented as a "series of unrelated flash photos" (Bourdieu 1998, 7) involving Aboriginal gang violence, as opposed to a network of complex social and historical relationships rooted in unique colonial contexts. As Pierre Bourdieu (1998, 7) explained,

Given the lack of time, and especially the lack of interest and information (research and documentation are usually confined to reading articles that have appeared in the press), they [journalists] cannot do what would be necessary to make events (say, an outbreak of violence at a high school) really understandable, that is, they cannot reinsert them in a network of relevant relationships (such as the family structure, which is tied to the job market, itself tied to government hiring policies, and so on).

Noteworthy, though, is that Joel demonstrated an acute awareness of and sensitivity to the media's distorting potential and explained how, on several occasions, he actively tried to circumvent these pressures in a variety of ways. Due to professional demands for a "hook," however, Joel's inclusion of a more positive storyline about Maskwacis was made possible only through its articulation with another negative storyline featuring Aboriginal gang violence. The professional pressure to order the news in relation to a community's "primary" or "cardinal news value" (Hall et al. 1978, 54) is one of the key processes through which dominant narratives are reproduced by journalists who are themselves relatively anonymous. So, too, must stories be framed according to imagery, rhetoric, and the common stocks of knowledge about Maskwacis that journalists and editors assume a predominantly non-Aboriginal Edmonton-based readership must share. As the authors of *Policing the Crisis* (1978, 57) explained,

If the world is not to be represented as a jumble of random and chaotic events, then they must be identified (i.e. named, defined, related to other events known to the audience), and assigned to a social context (i.e. placed within a frame of meanings familiar to the audience). ... If newsmen did not have available—in however routine

a way—such cultural “maps” of the social world, they could not “make sense” for their audiences of the unusual, unexpected and unpredicted events which form the basic content of what is “newsworthy”.

For Maskwacis, of course, the primary contextualization with which the community has become recently associated has almost exclusively involved stories of Aboriginal gang violence, a narrative that itself remains “inter-textually” (Hall 1996, 232) situated within a larger colonial narrative about Aboriginal communities in Canada. Indeed, Maskwacis’s habitual framing as wild, violent, and dangerous is strikingly consistent with the legacy of a colonial narrative of Indigenous “savagery,” which has been regularly pitted against Western “civility,” a dichotomy that has been used to justify all sorts of biopolitical interventions into the lives of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Carter 1993; Comack 2012, 78; Francis 1992; Harris 2002; Wilson and Peters, 2005). Thus, stories featuring Maskwacis are made meaningful for a predominantly non-Aboriginal Edmonton-based readership through their creative re-insertion *into*, and framing *against*, this primary contextualization, which “sets the limit for all subsequent discussion by *framing what the problem is*” (Hall et al. 1978, 62). The end result, by both structure and design, is that journalists are tacitly—if not explicitly—drawn, and encouraged, to reproduce and amplify acts of racialized violence, even when producing more positively-oriented news stories featuring Maskwacis for their target audiences.

All of these issues raise important questions about the role that mainstream, non-Aboriginal “cultural intermediaries”<sup>9</sup> (Bourdieu 1984) play in the social production of Maskwacis news and the types of relationships that can be nurtured with Aboriginal community members. Joel (introduced above) elaborated upon each of these issues in the following excerpt:

Well, with Hobbema it’s a little more ... I mean, usually with Hobbema, if there is something that has happened then we will hear about it first from the RCMP in a release that comes out to us. Sometimes we’ll hear STARS [Shock Trauma Air Rescue Society] fly out for an incident and that will kind of peak our interest. The RCMP is usually the first to tell us what happened in that sense too. It’s ... our lines of communication, on Samson especially, it can be kind of hard to keep sources out there. I mean, not a lot of people have phones out there. It’s more likely that they have Internet access than they do a phone line. It’s just different I guess. Yeah, the last strong contact I had out there ... just out of the blue their email stopped working. Every time I’m out there I really try and go and meet new people I can call so that they can tell me what is going on because it’s very small out there, especially on the Samson town site which is where most of the unfortunate action is. (J. Lao, interview)

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<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu first introduced the term “cultural intermediaries” in his book *Distinction* (1984); however, the concept has evolved considerably from its original usages (see Negus 2002). Most commonly, the term highlights the complex role(s) played by the cohort of middle-class workers engaged in “occupations involving presentation and representation ... providing symbolic goods and services” to broader audiences (Bourdieu 1984, 359).

The above excerpt reveals an enduring division between mainstream newsmakers and the proverbial “objects” of their news stories in Maskwacis. Beyond the inherent challenges of being non-Aboriginal journalists reporting on events happening in a First Nation community, the struggle for resources, time, and information has also set decisive limits upon the quality of relations that can be established between Edmonton-based journalists and Maskwacis residents. The journalistic enterprise also supports a lack of sustained contact with Maskwacis. For example, in addition to the transitory nature of journalism as an occupation—especially for younger reporters who often move to different beats or entirely different news organizations altogether—the professional enterprise itself encourages reporters to decamp immediately from various communities upon the completion of a story.<sup>10</sup> It is, moreover, increasingly rare for non-Aboriginal journalists to build enduring relationships with Aboriginal communities and/or to gain fluency in cultural protocols associated with the co-creation of meaningful and reciprocal relationships—for instance, the offering of tobacco. Finally, as Joel also explained, the ability of journalists to nurture relationships and contacts with community members is further limited by other structural divisions between urban centres and rural communities, including reduced access to technological devices and Internet services in Maskwacis.

In response to all of these issues, and as we shall see below, many Maskwacis residents have grown frustrated and disillusioned with the gang-related stories that the mainstream media has continually produced about their community. In addition, several community members with whom we spoke expressed an increasing reluctance to engage with non-locally based journalists. As a result, journalists have often relied upon the RCMP as the key arbiter and primary definer (Hall et al. 1978) of Maskwacis news, a matter that itself presents several potential conflicts in terms of balanced news production. As Vince Sacco (1995, 146) explained, “The police role as the dominant gatekeeper means that crime news is often police news and that the advancement of a police perspective on crime and its solution is facilitated”—a perspective that often serves to amplify a racialized moral panic about Aboriginal gang violence, thus setting powerful ideological limits on the mainstream media’s coverage of Maskwacis.

### **Community Reflections on Maskwacis News**

All of these issues raise important questions about how Maskwacis residents conceive of and negotiate the mainstream media’s racialized articulation of their community as gang-torn and in crisis. Indeed, while the media’s production of Maskwacis news is ensnared in a wide range of industry-specific pressures and constraints, so too are the processes of consumption filtered through an array of social positions and dispositions of different agents in a field (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997). While all participants acknowledged that gang violence was an issue for the community, a central theme that emerged throughout all of our interviews was the widely shared belief that the

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<sup>10</sup> These practices, much like those of innumerable social science scholars (Smith 1999), have regularly amplified tensions between journalists and community members.

media had amplified stereotypes about the community by focusing almost exclusively on this topic—a practice that had a powerful punitive dimension that further isolated residents from a host of public services, programs, and key sites of cultural exchange.

Jason Seright, for example, a former schoolteacher and principal in Maskwacis, explained how the media's one-dimensional representations of the community as gang-ridden enhanced racism and contributed to the exclusion of his students from interscholastic sports leagues throughout central Alberta:

We wanted to get into the high school leagues, you know, rather than just playing against reserve schools. We wanted to get established in cross-country, golf, basketball, volleyball .... They were trying to say that we didn't qualify or follow the rules, but what happened was that there was an increase in some of the violence ... or the media was portraying the community as not a safe place. That got out and then ... and some of the other people jumped on the bandwagon and said, "We don't want to go there. They've got gangs. They've had some shootings. It's not safe for us to go there." Yet at no point in that whole time, from 2000 to 2008, did anybody ever tell us or say that safety was an issue or anything like that. (J. Seright, interview)

Jason's reflections demonstrate how the ongoing segregation of Maskwacis—a practice with roots in a far greater colonial history—has become more pronounced in the wake of the media's production of a crisis of Aboriginal gang violence on the reserves. For Jason, the racialized moral panic has ultimately encouraged people from neighbouring towns and cities to terminate and/or avoid relationships with residents of Maskwacis altogether as a result of the fear of suffering a potentially violent assault while on reserve. In a similar vein, when asked about the media's relationship to their everyday lives, most community members accused journalists of fanning the flames of racism and recalled a host of their own personal experiences of racism and marginalization. These experiences ranged from everyday acts of avoidance and prejudice in the city streets of neighbouring towns and cities, to racial profiling in restaurants and shopping centers in central Alberta, to a variety of other exclusionary practices in elementary schools, health centers, hospitals, and other key sites of cultural exchange.

Emily Bradshaw (a pseudonym), for example, is a Euro-Canadian schoolteacher who has worked full-time on the Ermineskin Cree Nation in Maskwacis for over a decade. In the following interview excerpt, she describes how Maskwacis faces substantive challenges in terms of recruiting teachers (and presumably individuals from other occupations) to come and work in the community due to the media's depiction of Aboriginal gang violence:

I mean, you hear a lot from the media. You hear a lot through the media that just doesn't match what you know of the community, you know? People here talk jokingly about it being a "warzone." I used to have people saying, "Do you feel safe out there?" I had one colleague who was in her first year teaching out here and her parents made her quit because they were worried about what they were hearing in the news. I just ... the only way I can describe the media is that it just doesn't match what I know of the community. (E. Bradshaw, interview)

Reflections such as these serve as a reminder of an inherent privilege associated with whiteness in Alberta. As Métis scholar Chris Andersen (2011, 165) explained, “An unfortunate reality of colonialism is that non-Indigenous people get to choose when and how they have relationships with Indigenous people(s).” For example, non-Aboriginal teachers (as well as journalists and academic researchers, for that matter) enjoy the privilege of going to and from Maskwacis as they please, facing little reprisal for either avoiding or terminating their relationship with the community. Conversely, for Maskwacis residents, the decision to eschew relations with dominant institutions or with individuals from outside of their community carries with it a more punitive dimension. As one resident reflected on these unequal social conditions, “By right, I can say that I don’t want to go to Red Deer because there was a murder there last week and I fear for my kid’s safety, but it just doesn’t have the same effect” as outsiders saying that they do not want to travel to Maskwacis (J. Crier, interview).

John Crier, the coordinator of Maskwacis’s youth hockey program, elaborated upon the mainstream media’s role in stereotyping the community and the subsequent racialized double standard that has ensued for youth who travel off-reserve to play in various sports competitions:

We get labeled everywhere we go. *The Edmonton Sun* labels us pretty definitively. Every time there is a shooting or a death in the community, *The Edmonton Sun* is all over it. I mean, it was front-page news when my nephew passed away from a gunshot. That was from the drive-by. He was sleeping in his bed and he died. The news was all over it. Our boys were labeled as killers, going from town to town. Our bantam boys went to Stettler and one of those boys on the team called them “Baby Killers.” “Why don’t you go home, you baby killers?” That’s, you know ... how do they get labeled like that? What does a 13-year-old say to that? He’s going to be mad, especially if one of them is related to my nephew. He was enraged. The ref has no idea what’s going on and starts kicking them all out. The fans are feeding into it. The parents in Stettler are feeding into it. All they see is angry ... angry Native kids. And they’re going to label them too. “They’re getting mad for no reason.” That’s how it is everywhere we go. It’s a common label, that we’re always angry, that we’re violent, and the other stereotypes that we’re late, lazy, always into drugs and alcohol. It’s tough for the kids. I know what they’re going through. (J. Crier, interview)

John’s reflection is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, it is impossible to deny the significant outbursts of gang violence that have occurred within some corners of Maskwacis. To deny these tragic events, of course, would be to undermine the very real stories of violence and victimization that several community members have shared with journalists with a view to drawing critical attention to something that, for many, has become a pressing social issue. In this specific instance, the mainstream media had covered a very real tragedy associated with gang violence in the summer of 2012 when a drive-by shooting resulted in the accidental death of a five-year-old boy who was sleeping in his bed—John Crier’s nephew. However, as John also noted, the accumulation of the mainstream media’s



coverage and amplification of Maskwacis gang violence in recent years has had a profound impact on community members in other ways. For example, the racist responses and xenophobic comments by non-Aboriginals who have themselves embraced the racialized moral panic about the community have, on occasion, incited Maskwacis youths to react violently to the (usually unrecognized) “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1998) to which they have been exposed in various contexts—in this case, within the distinctly white subculture of youth hockey. The provoked reactions of Maskwacis youths have, in turn, been used to validate the very stereotypes held by non-Aboriginals, a development that only serves to alienate Maskwacis further from integrated realms of culture. As Stuart Hall (1997, 231) explained, “In representation, one sort of difference seems to attract others—adding up to a ‘spectacle’ of otherness.”

Several community members underscored how innumerable residents, especially young people, have internalized the mainstream media’s continual production of this spectacle of otherness. Carter Yellowbird, for example, is a father of two, a businessman, and a former pro rodeo athlete from the Samson Cree Nation in Maskwacis. In a July 2012 interview, Carter highlighted the impact of the mainstream media’s stereotypical coverage and its fixation on Aboriginal gang violence:

They [residents] kind of make fun of it [the media], you know? But really, they don’t realize the harm that it’s causing the community. You look at the high unemployment rate and economic development. Who’s going to come on reserve, on Samson Cree Nation in Hobbema, to do business with the First Nation? They kind of laugh about it and shrug off what they’re talking about, but it doesn’t really hit them what effect it can have on the community, right? ... The press does something to a person and to a culture. It takes away the culture. It takes away the language. It can affect the language. ... It takes away the culture and language because people are afraid to be seen as being from Hobbema. A lot of people I know, like the kids ... my kids. I see that in my kids too, my youngest kid. She’s not in Hobbema. She’s in Red Deer. She told me that she would get picked on and pushed aside because she was “a girl from Hobbema” and “her dad lives in Hobbema.” That’s how it affects a person and takes away a culture. You can end up being ashamed of who you are. (C. Yellowbird, interview)

For many community members—even those living off reserve—the broad public narrative that has engulfed Maskwacis has not only had profound cultural and economic consequences, but has often penetrated their very psyches and cultural identities. In response, many community members have attempted to subvert such imagery by making fun of it and by embracing an attitude of overt ambivalence towards the stereotypes that the mainstream media have circulated about Maskwacis and about First Nations peoples. However, the pressure of having to perform such compensatory acts can inflict other forms of collateral violence within peoples’ lives. Indeed, as Robin Kelley (1994) also discovered in his study of 20<sup>th</sup> century race politics in the southern United States, “The inner pain ... generated by having to choke back one’s feelings in the face of racism could create tensions”

(8). For Carter Yellowbird, the “inner pain” that was generated by having to perform such tasks in the face of racism ultimately diminished pride in Aboriginal culture and contributed to the erosion of Cree language and other cultural practices. The “Redd Alert” issued by the media regarding Maskwacis gang violence, Carter believed, has not only segregated the community from its neighbours, but also alienated community members from their own culture. As Frantz Fanon (1967, 116) explained about “internalization” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “I am the slave, not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance. I am ‘fixed’ by it.”

Similarly, Ashley Bluejacket (a pseudonym), a long-time sports administrator from Maskwacis, shared her frustration with the mainstream media’s treatment of the community, and the cultural impact that the ongoing narrative about Aboriginal gang violence has had on community members:

When you look into the success stories, I mean, there are so many of them. We’ve invited the media so many times. “Hey, we’re having midget [hockey] provincials here!” We would only get one little tiny write-up in the *Wetaskiwin* or *Ponoka* newspaper. Four kids were selected to be flag bearers for the World Juniors. “I’m not available,” said the media. We called the *Edmonton Sun*, the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Wetaskiwin Times*, and the *Ponoka Herald*. *Ponoka* came out and, you know, what did they do? They picked one boy. There were four boys that got picked! ... Still, if you really look into it, what they did was, “The boys are from this gang-torn community,” you know? “So-and-so had problems growing up and is trying to point out the right path for his kids.” That’s great, but there was still a part of it that, well, you know what they’re focusing on. I mean there is just no background. That happens over and over with so many things. There are so many other stories. That just floored us.

Thus, despite the regular attempts by community members to encourage journalists to come to the community to cover various events and stories, these invitations were often ignored. As noted earlier, moreover, the journalistic requisite to fixate on stories with a “hook” was especially pronounced in the context of news stories featuring Maskwacis. As Ashley explained, stories that did not feature gang violence as the dominant narrative were typically permitted only by way of their articulation with another negative racialized storyline, or were simply dismissed altogether. Maskwacis youth, in this sense, remain stereotyped not only by virtue of their non-whiteness, but more specifically as a result of their “Indianness,” which has habitually isolated them as either the perpetrator of Aboriginal violence (e.g., the gang member) or, in the context of a more “positive” news story, as its victim, struggling for relief in a gang-torn community (Gilroy 1987).

Other community members, however, recognized that the mainstream media could procure socioeconomic benefits, even if Aboriginal gang violence served as the backdrop to other stories about Maskwacis. According to Trent Young, the 23-year-old director of the Maskwacis Community Cadet Corps Program (MCCCP)—an RCMP-affiliated after-school program that emerged in 2005 as a means of countering youth gang violence across

the Four Nations (see Koch 2015)—the mainstream media has periodically served as an ally to the MCCCCP:

I believe that this [the MCCCCP] was the first-ever positive thing that I ever heard of coming from the media. And, of course, the cadets program was a positive thing. So, yeah, I think the media played a really big part in selling this program, especially to get NCPC (National Crime Prevention Center) funding. Because it went political and because it was televised and all of that stuff, like, they made with the snap of their thumbs ... they said, "You have to fund this program." It extremely helped us.

For Trent, then, the media provided the MCCCCP with unprecedented "positive" exposure and far-reaching coverage that encouraged other political and business leaders to invest in the cadet corps program—a suggestion that Trent substantiated by citing an unsolicited \$900,000 grant that the MCCCCP received from the NCPC.

However, several hard decisions had to be made by community members such as Trent in order to harness the mainstream media's more generative properties. To secure coverage, for example, Maskwacis MCCCCP administrators decided to align their program actively and creatively with the professional agendas and storylines of non-local journalists and, in the process, relinquished some representational autonomy. In turn, subsequent headlines such as "Doing Drills Instead of Drugs" (Pavlin 2008), "Hobbema Recruits Teens from Gangs" (McLean 2006), and "Group Mentality Helps Rescue Aboriginal Youths" (Rogers 2005) celebrated the cadet corps as an effective response to the crisis of gang violence in Maskwacis, and largely ignored the vast range of alternative experiences and agendas that also accompanied the program's development (Koch 2015). While such stories may have provided an important counter-narrative with which to balance the overwhelmingly bleak portrayals of Aboriginal dysfunctionality, they may also have made it difficult for non-Aboriginal newsreaders to imagine a space *outside* the MCCCCP's protective purview where the threat of Aboriginal gang violence was not ubiquitous in Maskwacis. Moreover, the RCMP's close affiliation with the MCCCCP invites important questions about a) whether this particular youth program was imbued with greater symbolic value in the mainstream media due to the police's aforementioned role as gatekeepers of Maskwacis news, and b) the range of alternative programs, voices, and experiences that may have been omitted from the public transcript and may have challenged the biopolitical practices associated with the Cadets Corps, or the RCMP for that matter. Still, in this instance, MCCCCP administrators and community members skilfully mobilized the mainstream media's coverage of Maskwacis to secure additional resources, albeit under conditions not entirely of their choosing.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This article examined the articulation of a racialized moral panic surrounding Aboriginal gang violence and the community of Maskwacis. In so doing, we illuminated a number of issues related to the behind-the-scenes production processes through which non-Aboriginal journalists condensed themes of race, crime, and youth to reproduce and

amplify a powerful and punitive discourse that equated Aboriginal gang violence with the broader community itself. In addition, we further examined the ways in which First Nations residents and community members—themselves the subjects of the media gaze—interpreted, internalized, and at times actively manipulated this racialized discourse of crisis. All of these issues were located within two distinct yet interlocking social contexts: for Maskwacis, community members' reflections on the media gaze were situated squarely within a context in which Aboriginal gang violence has emerged as a political-economic phenomenon in Western Canada; for non-Aboriginal journalists, their reflections on reporting were contextualized amidst the increased economic pressures and ideological frameworks that have continued to set powerful limits on the newspaper industry.

In light of these precise pressures, *Journalists for Human Rights* (Pierro et al. 2013) have offered a number of salutary recommendations, including that all journalists and media personnel be provided with in-depth training on Aboriginal cultures and colonial history in Canada. Possessing fundamental knowledge of colonial history in Canada, whether through course work or by way of other pedagogical means, such as meetings with elders, could facilitate more ethical and historically nuanced analyses of colonial power in stories that are not solely articulated with racialized violent imagery—imagery that has historically mobilized public opinion against Aboriginal communities. Relatedly, far greater value needs to be placed upon the long-term personal and professional investments of non-Aboriginal journalists in Aboriginal communities to enhance their relationships in distinct cultural and community contexts. Finally, a more concerted effort is required on behalf of news agencies, as well as by the universities and colleges that train their staff members, to hire and develop a greater number of Aboriginal journalists and news workers who remain underrepresented in the media (see Pierro et al. 2013).

None of these recommendations, however, will radically alter the political economy of Western media and the economic dynamics that underscore news production, including an ever-shrinking economic base and a corresponding reliance on diminishing advertising dollars from primarily non-Aboriginal audiences. In the years to come, then, there may be even greater opportunities for Indigenous media to affirm Indigenous sovereignty, “the way Indigenous peoples choose to represent their worlds” (Hokowhitu 2013, 119). In Maskwacis, for example, many of these changes are already taking place outside the terrain of dominant settler institutions. Hawk Radio, for example, is a community-owned and -operated radio station that broadcasts local news and entertainment to a listenership spanning a 50-mile radius from the station's on-reserve location, and across the world via its online broadcasts (hawkradio891.com 2016). The *Nipisihkopahk Acimowin* newsletter, moreover, provides residents of the Samson Cree Nation in Maskwacis with monthly print and online publications authored and controlled by community members who also use a host of online and social media resources to communicate with each other and to share their ideas and insights with members of the general public (C. Yellowbird, pers. comm.).

One prescient example of this communication style occurred on January 1, 2014 when, after two years of petitioning the federal government for a formal name change, the Cree

name “Maskwacis” was officially restored to the region. Translated into English, Maskwacis means “Bear Hills,” a phrase reflective of the region’s unique topography and local Aboriginal culture, and a clear rejection of the Canadian government’s past attempts at colonial rule through labelling. Though far from extensive, much of the mainstream media coverage of this event emphasized how the name change signalled a “long-desired step to empower the community bestowed with a name convenient to English speakers” (Cryderman 2013); an assertion of “freedom of identity” (Morey 2014); a “fresh start” (Robertson 2014); and a sign of “hope for change” within Maskwacis (Gerson 2014). Implied in almost every news article was that the new name signalled the local Cree community’s attempt to establish distance from the social issues that have been habitually associated with “Hobbema,” especially gang violence. Yet instead of drawing on the well-rehearsed narrative of Aboriginal violence and negativity, a Maskwacis web release simply heralded the name change as marking the restoration of “pride in Cree values, languages, culture and history and a sense of belonging among our Nations, especially our youths” (Samson Cree Nation 2013). This example, it may be suggested, illustrates how Maskwacis community members continue actively to resist and negotiate the attempts of outside forces to label and define their community and identities as Aboriginal peoples—in this instance through the production of Aboriginal identity as an outcome of the choices made by Aboriginal people.

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