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Telling the Whole Story: Native Americans and the Development of Urban Spaces

Introduction

Stereotypes of Native Americans abound. They inform nearly our entire cultural idea of who and what Indians really are.¹ They are drunks, they exist primarily in the past, and they make their homes in wilderness reservations. Keeping Indians at such a distance allows us to ignore the multitudes of problems that contemporary Indian peoples face. It places the onus for their fate entirely on them and absolves the nation of its past sins against them. Racism against Indians cannot possibly still exist because Indians hardly exist. Especially for most Americans, who are likely to think solely of Indians in their relationship to gaming, issues that challenge Native populations within their country cannot possibly be of any importance. Indians already have their reservations, what else could they possibly want? And if Indians only really exist in the past, what possible harm could come from a few innocuous stereotypes?

Except, Indians do still exist. They have existed on their reservations and within the confines of our urban areas. They have continued to exist throughout the centuries, and some have even done so away from their traditional homelands. Indian peoples participated in the massive move to urban areas in the twentieth century, and before then they were present in the

¹ Indian stereotypes inform much of the current scholarship on Native Americans. In general, see Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press, 2004). For an examination of Indian stereotypes in the Pacific Northwest see Alexandra Harmon, *Indians in the Making: Ethnic Relations and Indian Identities around Puget Sound* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and John Sutton Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2008).

nascent cities of the just-settled West.² Cities were built within the boundaries of Native lands, and as much as settler populations wished to rid a city's streets of Indians, they remained there in various capacities. The realization that Native Americans lived, and continue to live, inside the urban centers of North America constitutes the first step in a long process towards reevaluating our understanding of who and what Indians really are. Dismantling Indian stereotypes can only occur when the actual experiences of Indians are fully articulated and understood. That cannot happen until urban Indians are also considered a standard representation of Indian life, both in the modern day and the past.

Disengaging the rural Indian narrative requires understanding two distinct trends. First, an examination of the cities, such as Seattle, Washington and Victoria, British Columbia, where Indians were present throughout their development will present a compelling counter to the idea of cities as originally white places. The settlement of cities, especially around Puget Sound, could not have occurred without Indians' approval or without their labor. Second, the various factors that led to the push towards urbanization in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century also greatly affected Indians. Not only was employment available in cities, but the governmental policy of Termination literally forced some Indians to move to urban areas. This is not to imply that every Indian in every city had the exact same experience. Far from it, the different tribes in the surrounding areas of a city and the various Bureau of Indian Affairs offices within cities had a massive influence on urban Indian life. But these differences help prove the point – Indians are very much a part of the urban scene. Just as no two cities are

² For an examination of Native people throughout a city's history see Coll Thrush, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007). For an examination of Indian migration to cities in the twentieth century see James B. LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945-75* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002). For works that include elements of both see Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2010); and Nicolas G. Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

exactly alike, no two Indian experiences within cities are exactly alike. This paper will look at the first of those two trends: Indians' lives in nascent cities in the west, particularly around Puget Sound. This is not to privilege one trend over the other, but rather for the sake of time and clarity.

Indians' Cities

Indians and cities are not thought of as occupying in the same space. The history of Indians cannot also be the history of cities, and urban histories cannot also include Indian histories. The history of Seattle, Washington, a city named for a Duwamish Indian, has mainly been discussed in ways that reaffirm this narrative. Historian Coll Thrush describes the manner in which the history of Seattle has been traditionally told as, "Native history and urban history – and, indeed, Indians and cities – cannot coexist, and one must necessarily be eclipsed by the other."³ This dichotomy, especially within the cities around Puget Sound, does not stand up to interrogation. Indian history and urban history have been intimately connected. The colonial experience throughout North America necessarily included Indians, for the obvious reason that they were the indigenous inhabitants of the continent. As settlers moved across the continent new trading hubs were established and many of these hubs evolved into the modern cities that dot the United State and Canada.

These cities that sprang up during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were located on Indian lands. Indians helped to literally build the cities as they built their own houses and expanded the business districts. Indians were employed in the forest industries that helped to establish some cities and they actively traded with the settlers and brought European goods into areas that were yet to be explored by the settlers. Yet, as historian Penelope Edmonds writes, "the presence of Indigenous peoples in settler-colonial cities...has often been erased from

³ Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 8.

historical consciousness.”⁴ It is imperative that such an important aspect of urban history not be forgotten or ignored. Modern cities would not have been able to become as wealthy as they are without the labor of native peoples. Native Americans allowed settlements to become established on their lands because they also stood to gain from them. Simple acquiescence of European demands for settlement was seldom the case, as Indians were keen to benefit from relations with the settlers.

Seattle was built on an area that was originally called New York by the settlers, and would come to be called New York-Alki before eventually being named after Seeathl, a Duwamish Indian. When white settlers first arrived they were far outnumbered by the Indian people who already inhabited the area. Thrush describes the original settlement as “a biracial place,” because both the settlers and the Indians lived next to each other in the village.⁵ As the town developed throughout the nineteenth century and became more urbanized Native tribes continued to use it as a stopping point while they continued their patterns of migration. For the Indian people who stayed longer in the city and had permanent settlements, either within city limits or adjacent to it, the increasing population fostered economic opportunities. The nineteenth century saw a rise in the economic standing of many Indians in the Pacific Northwest, and the proliferation of trade with white settlers helped shepherd that prosperity.

Victoria, formerly Fort Victoria and originally Camosun, literally owes itself to the labor of Indians. Edmonds, who has written extensively on settler colonialism and indigenous rights, writes, “The Lekwammen freely proffered their labour to construct the fort and were paid one blanket for every forty pickets of 22 feet by 36 inches that they could provide.”⁶ This initial exchange set the precedence for the years to come, as blankets would become a primary currency

⁴ Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, 6.

⁵ Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 34.

⁶ Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, 97.

for white settlers to pay Indians with.⁷ Working with the settlers ensured that the relationship between the Indians and the settlers could be positive for everyone. And while dealings with the white settlers eventually turned sour, the initial dealings between Natives and settlers were beneficial for all. The settlers had connections with cities on the east coast of the continent which allowed the establishment broader trade patterns. The Native Americans knew the land, could help the settlers survive the climate, and were able to provide a labor force for the growing industries in the region.

Living near centers of industry and trade also ensured that Native people would be able to take advantage of the increasing populations in the regions. The Lekwungen Indians on Vancouver Island in British Columbia are a prime example of a tribe that was able to take advantage of its proximity to a city. Participating within the economic activity of Victoria allowed many Lekwungen to earn substantial wages. The increase of wealth among them helped to shift some of the intertribal dynamics, as traditional elders and leaders became less influential than those who had held lower social standing.⁸ Through potlatch ceremonies Lekwungen could increase their social standing within the tribe. Trading with the settlers and working in the various industries, such as canneries and fishing, allowed for a steady wage. Wage labor would become an important part of life for the Lekwungen because of its implications for the social and cultural economies within the tribe.

Proximity to the growing town in the nineteenth century was vital for the Lekwungen. The expanding capitalist system utilized by the settlers enabled the Lekwungen to gain status within their tribe and made trade with the settlers easier. White settlers would employ Lekwungen for lower wages and the industries began to depend on a cheap and seemingly

⁷ For numerous examples of blankets being used as currency see Harmon, *Indians in the Making*; and for a detailed explanation of the blanket economy see Lutz, *Makúk*, especially page 57.

⁸ Lutz, *Makúk*, 81-83.

endless supply of Indian labor. John Lutz, a historian of indigenous peoples in the Pacific Northwest, argues that “not only did the Lekwungen depend on the town, the town depended, at least to some extent, on the Lekwungen.”⁹ The relationship between the white settlers and the Indians was far from commendable by modern standards and was not entirely symbiotic. However, the Lekwungen were able to profit socially and economically by engaging with the settlers in Victoria, and the settlers came to depend on the Lekwungen’s addition to the town’s economy.

Native peoples did not just provide cheap labor for burgeoning industries. Settlers often expressed a voyeuristic desire to see Indian houses and to visit the sections of towns that housed many of the Indians. Edmonds writes of the Lekwammen Reserve in Victoria and describes the European population as being fascinated with the prospect of living in such close quarters to Indians. “Ideas about spectacle, slum life, dirt, and disease prevailed and gave rise to a colonial touristic experience,” and created opportunities for Indians to become an expected sight within city limits.¹⁰ That settlers equated Indian residences with squalor would become emblematic of many racist attitudes that helped to shape policy throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Aside from using Indian homes and neighborhoods as tourist destinations, European settlers set up an entire tourist industry around migrant Native hop pickers in Puget Sound. Northwest cities along the Pacific became destination cities for people from eastern parts of the country.¹¹

Seattle provides a worthwhile example of just this phenomenon. Thrush writes, “Seattle became an entrepôt...for encounters with the Native peoples of the North.”¹² Northwestern cities

⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰ Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, 196.

¹¹ Raibmon, *Authentic Indians*, 88-97.

¹² Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 115.

became the nexus for last-chance tourism for white settlers to glimpse disappearing Native cultures. White settlers continued to stream into the western areas of the continent during the nineteenth century, which necessarily continued to impact Native peoples. Tourists wanted the chance to see Native peoples in what they believed were authentic environments. Even though Native Americans resided in cities and worked in the industries that helped develop the cities, European settlers did not consider urban landscapes the proper venue for glimpsing Native cultures. Indian tourism became incredibly lucrative for Native peoples, and they were encouraged to act in a manner that seemed more authentic to the tourists. Tourists would pay to take photographs of authentic-looking Indians and for authentic Indian items, such as baskets, which were in high demand.¹³

As the identity of these cities became connected to the Indian tribes that were close at hand they began to push that identity through local boosterism. City society in Seattle was defined largely by the Native roots of the city, and Native icons dotted the urban landscape. The Tilikums of Elttaes, a civic booster group made of white businessmen in the 1930s, pushed an image of Seattle as a prosperous city while using Native imagery to promote its unique status.¹⁴ Appropriating Native images and traditions, such as the potlatch, to promote the city exemplified the status of Indians within the city. While Indians had been pushed to the margins of society, their culture could still be useful to the white residents who wanted to capitalize on the already established Indian tourist industry. Solidifying Seattle as an Indian city ensured that Indian imagery, if not Indian people, could be a hallmark of high culture. The Indian imagery that the boosters used, such as the Tlingit totem pole in the Pioneer Square neighborhood, was regarded as safe because Indians were aspects of the past and far removed from civilized society.

¹³ Raibmon, *Authentic Indians*, 116-119.

¹⁴ Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 133.

However, that the city was defined so completely by its relation to its Native past exposes how unreal that belief was.

Outside of the Pacific Northwest, the area around Los Angeles, California was home to numerous Native American tribes. The Spanish mission system reached into the basin in which Los Angeles sits and established a presidio in the eighteenth century. While Native Americans numbered around 133,000 in 1770 in California, that number had dropped 90 percent by 1910.¹⁵ The steep decline in population is attributable to numerous causes, including disease and racist policies, but it helps to define the lands as originally being Indian lands, even the urban locations. North American lands were not settled in a uniform way by European colonizers, nor were the experiences of one Indian tribe the same as another. However, certain parallels can be drawn across the continent, and various trends become clear when they are closely inspected. One incredibly important trend in the process of urbanization, and one that is often overlooked, is that the European settlers were settling on Indian land. Settlement could not have occurred without at least the tacit approval of the Indians who resided in the area, and in most instances settlement occurred with the direct assistance of the area's Indians.

In the cities of southern California that grew out of Spanish missions, Indian people worked in numerous positions. Historian of American Indians and the American west Nicolas Rosenthal lists some of the occupations as, “masons, carpenters, plasterers, soap makers, tanners, shoe makers, blacksmiths, millers, bakers, cooks, spinners, shepherds, and vaqueros, among other occupations.”¹⁶ All of these people were important to the establishment of these cities. Around Puget Sound, Seattle would not have become the prosperous trading center that it is without the aid of the Indians. Coll Thrush forcefully states, “Let there be no mistake: without

¹⁵ Joan Weibel-Orlando, *Indian Country, L.A.: Maintaining Ethnic Community in Complex Society* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 12.

¹⁶ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 13.

the labor of Indians, Seattle would have been stillborn.”¹⁷ That the Lekwungen saw the city on their lands, Victoria, become a center of trade was, as John Lutz writes, “not entirely a coincidence...the Lekwungen played an important role in the series of events that led to Victoria being chosen as the capital of the colony-cum-province and subsequently becoming the province’s largest urban center in the nineteenth century.”¹⁸

Indians were an indispensable part of the founding and creation of the cities throughout North America. Urban areas would not have been able to develop without them. Their approval of the presence of settlers was required for villages to even begin to prosper, and Indian labor was required to build and expand the villages and forts into the sprawling urban areas that they now are. All of these aspects of settlement occurred because Indians were also able to benefit from the circumstances, at least at first. The exposure to larger markets helped to increase their social standing within their tribes and the developing industries provided opportunities for work that already fit into the migrant labor patterns that Indian tribes had developed in response to ecological shifts. Ultimately, the most important part of the development of the west coast during the nineteenth century is that it was done with the Indians. Settlers streamed to the Pacific coast in response to gold rushes and innumerable other incentives. The areas in which they chose to reside were first and foremost Indian areas, and the urbanization that followed the population boom was made possible because of the work that Indians had done to the cities.

Conclusion

As Coll Thrush argues, “Indian history can and does happen in urban places.”¹⁹ Urban history and Indian history are intimately intertwined in North America. Not only have all of its cities been built on Indian land, but also because of the governmental policies that specifically

¹⁷ Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 47.

¹⁸ Lutz, *Makúk*, 50.

¹⁹ Thrush, *Native Seattle*, 180.

targeted Native Americans in a concerted effort to “Americanize” them. Interactions with Indians in North America have been guided by racist assumptions and stereotypes since European settlers first set foot on the continent. While it should not come as a shock that many of the same underlying assumptions still inform relations between Natives and non-Natives, it should be rectified. One of the first steps that can be taken towards changing these assumptions is redefining our understanding of what Indian history is. If Indian history is properly understood within the context of American and Canadian colonial history, then it is possible to accurately place Indians within the proper frameworks of urban histories. Urban environments are not bereft of Native Americans, and the Native Americans that inhabit these areas are not less “Native” because they are not living on reservations.

Native Americans helped build cities like Seattle, Victoria, and Los Angeles. Without their labor those cities would not exist in the form that they currently do. Without their acceptance of the settlers on their land, the villages that spawned sprawling urban landscapes would not have taken hold. Throughout the entire life of the cities in North America, Indians have been present. It behooves scholars to understand urban environments through the lens of Native Americans’ experiences within them. To do so enables a clearer understanding of the impact of the pan-Indian movement and the Indian activism of the 1960s. It allows for a stronger grasp on important topics in Indian history, such as treaty negotiations and the Termination era. Moreover, it forces us to come to terms with the fact that Indians are not separate from cities. Urban history necessarily must include Indians, and Indian history cannot be complete without cities in which they lived and that they helped to create.

Expanding our understanding of the frontier to include urban areas will greatly increase the value and veracity of Indian scholarship. Penelope Edmonds writes, “Colonial frontiers did

not exist only in the bush, backwoods, or borderlands; they clearly sat at the heart of early town and city building.”²⁰ She is absolutely correct, and the sooner that that shift in thinking occurs the better. Indians lived their lives in all stages of urban development. They were not relegated to the extremes of society where they could only exist in stereotypical forms. They participated in urban economies and the social life of early cities. The cities would not have remotely the same identities were it not for the influence of Indians on their culture. The frontier was a region of conquest where the settlers could engage with Native Americans within their homelands. Cities have to be considered a part of that homeland for a complete and accurate representation of Indian history to take hold.

Historians have the task of examining the past and showing the importance of the people and places that occupy it. For Native Americans, part of that past includes urban life, which flies in the face of all of the stereotypes of Indians that still influence how they are viewed by many people. Nicolas Rosenthal argues, “With so much of the American Indian population affected by urban areas...it is crucial that historians...reimagine Indian Country, or take urbanity seriously, as they move the field forward.”²¹ As historians continue to write and explore the history of urban areas in North America and the history of Native Americans it is imperative that they do so with the understanding that the two topics are intimately related. Doing this will help dismantle stereotypes and will provide greater insight into our past. And it simply is the accurate and professional way forward for historians.

²⁰ Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, 5.

²¹ Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 4.

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