

URBAN  
TRIBES



# URBAN TRIBES

NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE CITY

Edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale



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To Jarret, who's ignited many conversations that fueled  
my desire to create this space – LC

For Jeff, with thanks for being on my team – MBL

**Two-eyed seeing “recognizes the benefits of seeing  
from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways  
of knowing, from the other eye the strengths of the  
Western ways of knowing, and using both of these  
eyes together to create new forms of understanding  
and insight.”**

**– Elder Albert Marshall  
(Mi'kmaq, Eskasoni First Nation)**

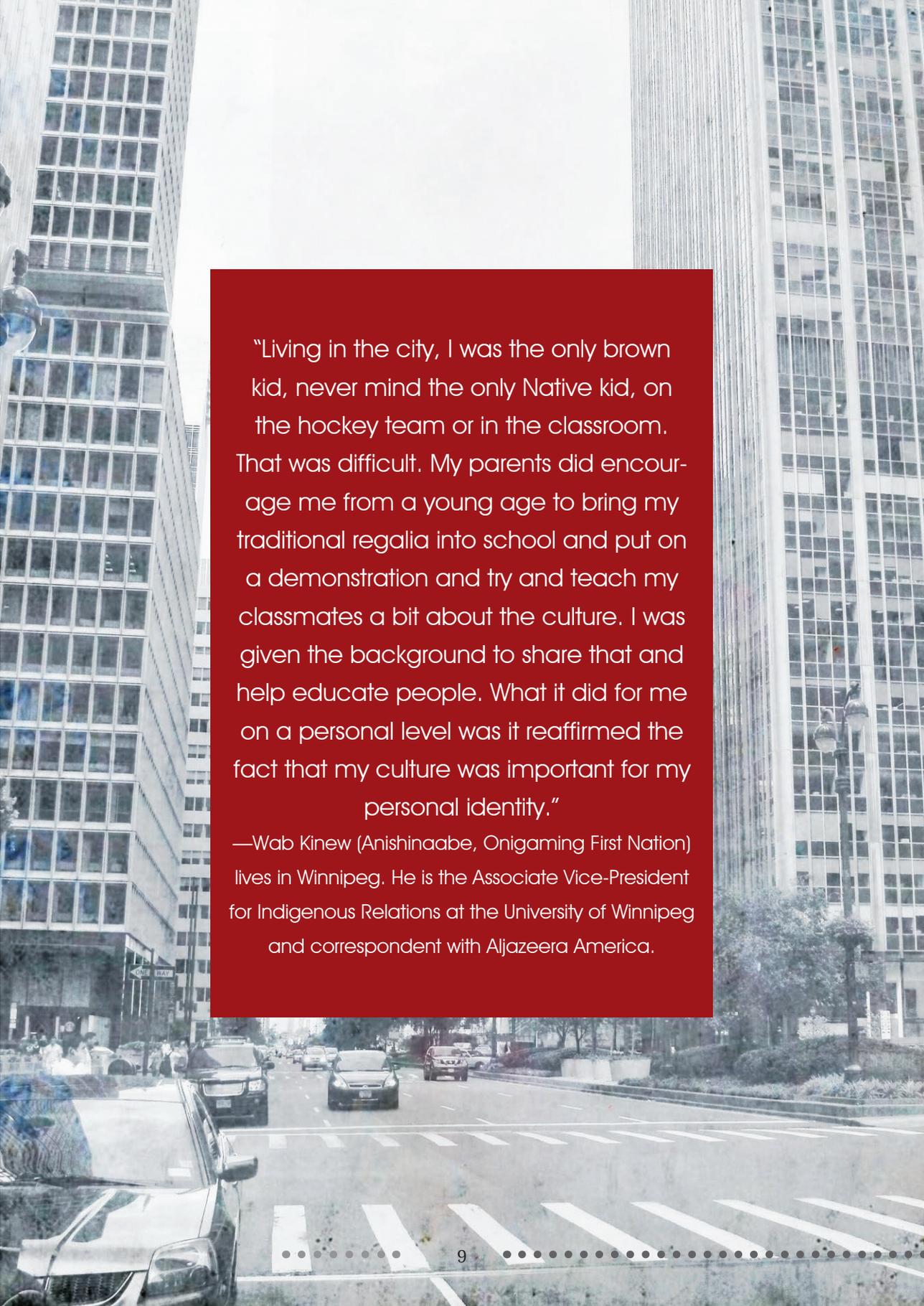
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\* In each City Quote, the traditional territory the city is on is acknowledged. Traditional territory is the geographic area that a First Nation or Native Tribe traditionally used for hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering plants, and obtaining water. It's also where ceremonies and economic and cultural activities took place.

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“Living in the city, I was the only brown kid, never mind the only Native kid, on the hockey team or in the classroom. That was difficult. My parents did encourage me from a young age to bring my traditional regalia into school and put on a demonstration and try and teach my classmates a bit about the culture. I was given the background to share that and help educate people. What it did for me on a personal level was it reaffirmed the fact that my culture was important for my personal identity.”

—Wab Kinew (Anishinaabe, Onigaming First Nation) lives in Winnipeg. He is the Associate Vice-President for Indigenous Relations at the University of Winnipeg and correspondent with Aljazeera America.

# Roots

When I was sixteen, I officially became a punk rocker. I know you're probably asking yourself, "How does someone 'officially' become a punk rocker?" More probably you're asking yourself, "Why would someone want to officially become a punk rocker?" For me, becoming a punk rocker was a simple physical action but a very difficult emotional and intellectual one. The physical part is that I got my sister to take a pair of scissors and then a razor and cut, shave, and shape my hair into a really big Mohawk.

This isn't such a big deal today but back in 1981 it kind of was. The rebellious punk movement was still defining itself, having moved beyond the chaotic Sex Pistols era of the 1970s and into a more focused and super-charged political and social movement. To wear your hair in a Mohawk back then meant that you wanted to make a big statement. But you were also prepared to be teased and taunted by your peers, picked on by many of your teachers, treated as an embarrassment by your own family, and certainly singled out by the cops every chance they got.

So why bother, right? Why purposely choose to become the focus of abuse and disdain and laughter? Why walk around looking different than your peers, so many of whom you don't feel a connection with? Why choose to stand out from this crowd that you feel is so conservative, so mild, so accepting of everything, this crowd of young people who seem afraid-afraid of exploring their world, of making comments about it, of speaking out against what they clearly see is wrong? Why separate yourself from a herd like that?

Let me back up a minute. At the age of 16, I'd just experienced a very difficult time in my life. I was trying to come to terms with the realization I wasn't perfect, that I was actually facing an illness, but one I didn't know how to beat. It wasn't a physical illness. I had just quit as the captain of my football team not because I couldn't physically play but because mentally I had no drive anymore. A year before I'd begun to give up on life and had been feeling it drain from me every day until on the night of my sixteenth birthday, I couldn't take it anymore and tried to drain all of it out at once. My attempt at taking my own life that night thankfully failed. I am so grateful today as a person who can look back a little ways and see how great the path that we call every day life actually is. But this isn't just a story about that. This little story I'm trying to tell you before you jump into the pages of this amazing book that is *Urban Tribes* is actually about finding my roots.

That word roots strikes me as kind of interesting at this moment. By cutting my hair into a Mohawk, by cutting most of it off on the sides of my head right down to my roots, I was actually on the road to finding my true roots.

What made my Mohawk particularly abrasive to my teachers is that, at the time I cut it this way, I was being forced to attend an all-boys Jesuit

high school called Brebeuf. Jean de Brébeuf was a real life person, a man who came to Canada in the mid 1600s to bring Christianity to the First Nations of Quebec and Ontario. Long story short, the same Jesuits who ran my high school held their namesake in great regard, and every student who came through the doors of Brebeuf was reminded almost daily that the savages who ended up capturing him and then torturing him to death were the Mohawks, the same ones who wore their hair down the middle of their heads. I'll never forget the first day I walked through the doors of this school I so desperately wanted to get kicked out of, and seeing the looks on the Jesuits' faces as I walked proudly by, my hairstyle, I hoped, sending fear into their very hearts. My haircut became something even more symbolic than a contemporary statement. It was a historical one as well. With a simple haircut, I began the long road to finding my own roots.

I come from a mixed blood family of mostly Irish, Scottish, and Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) heritage. What I only now realize I was doing back in my rebellious teen years was rebelling not just from my anger at a system that seemed loaded to only help those who held all the power already, but rebelling against the idea that it was only cool to try and force yourself into being a certain type. At my school at the time, it was only cool to be the preppy one with the right haircut and all the right clothes. If you did this, then all the right friends would naturally flock to you. I realized I didn't fit into that mold. The rest of my life to date is coming to the realization that molds might not be the best thing for us humans to try to fit ourselves into. We're not jello, after all.

I no longer wear my hair in a Mohawk. That particular style lasted about three or four years before I decided it was time to move on. But what that original act of rebellion did do was set me on a path that I still walk today. My life to date has been one of questioning things that don't always seem to add up. As a mixed-blood person, I can't believe or accept that my First Nations ancestors were savages and that my European ancestors came to North America to teach these savages the true path. I refuse to let others tell me who I should be. I refuse to try and be somebody or something that I am not in order to fit into the crowd. And I especially refuse to allow those who have all the power to treat those who don't with impunity. As a person who has the blood of both the European and the First Nations in me, that day I cut my hair into the style of those who were being oppressed was the day I accepted that, in a lot of ways, I was no longer part of the "in" crowd.

It's weird to think about but a simple haircut can really do that. It can really change not just others' views of you but your view of yourself and the world around you. Come to think of it, maybe it isn't that weird after all. How we physically present ourselves to the world is how we want the world to understand us, how we want the world to read us, so to speak. And being a writer, I want the world to read me carefully. It's my hope, dear reader, that the world reads you exactly the way you want it to, as well.

– Joseph Boyden

# Editors' Notes

"So, just how connected are you to your Indigenous roots if you live downtown?"

It happened at a gathering last year when I was asked this very question. I found myself blundering a bit as I was trying to come up with some concrete examples so I could prove to this Irish man just how Indian I am. Would my community involvement do it? Or how about my strong Tsilhqot'in lineage? Suddenly I realized how absurd this situation was. Why was I feeling the need to prove myself?

I shouldn't have been so surprised by his question. I and many other urban Indigenous youth have grown up being told that we can't really be Native if we are living a "modern" life in the city. There's this deeply held notion that in order to be authentically Indigenous, one must live on a reservation, or one's traditional territory, and have a deep connection to one's land.

Yet for hundreds of years, Natives have chosen to make their homes in cities for educational

and employment opportunities. Others migrated to metropolitan areas because they were forced off their "rez" due to government policies, or residential schools, or because they were taken into foster care.

**Fifty-six percent of Natives live in urban settings both in United States and Canada. (see p.130)**

Indigenous, urban, and "millennial." We are the focus of many studies, reports, and speeches and are mentioned often in mainstream media. And yet we are still somehow intangible for many. And in some cosmopolitan cities, we are almost rendered invisible.

We're diverse in our opinions, lived experiences, and points of cultural connection but similar in our desire for defining our identity and creating culturally safe spaces in our communities and our cities.

– Lisa Charleyboy (Tsilhqot'in from Tsi Del Del)

**I**n *Urban Tribes*, we wanted to shine a light on the underreported stories of urban Natives – the artists and the academics, the bankers and the biologists – the growing number of urban Native professionals who are still largely invisible.

I grew up in a rural community in southwestern Ontario going to school with Native kids from the Delaware Nation at Moraviantown. But in my adult life in Toronto, the tens of thousands of Natives who I shared the city with were largely invisible to me. And, urban Native youth were rarely – if ever – discussed in terms of an audience for the children’s books and magazines I was working on.

In 2012, the Idle No More movement really woke me up to the fact that what I, my family, and many of my friends and colleagues “knew” about the urban Native experience was based almost entirely on tragic news reports and the underlying stereotypes and prejudices they often inadvertently fuel. And I wanted to be part of changing that.

Our research and interviews for *Urban Tribes* were driven by our curiosity to learn more about the wide-ranging experiences of urban Native youth and the ways in which they stay connected to culture. We reached out to young people from ages 13 to 35 living in large cities across North America and asked them to share their stories in their way through their words, music, and visual art. Their opinions and experiences are diverse, but the racism and discrimination they face is often disheartening. Yet these youth share a common perspective on their culture. Whether they are living in New York City or Vancouver, Los Angeles or Winnipeg, whether they’ve just moved to the city or their family has lived there for generations, Native culture and community are an essential and cherished part of their urban lives, an integral part of their identity, and a key component of their successes. We’re honored to share the words and works of these Indigenous youth. They inspired us and we hope they inspire you.

– Mary Beth Leatherdale



# TRIBAL CITIZENS

Native millennials stay connected to and draw strength from their culture and identity in diverse ways in the city.





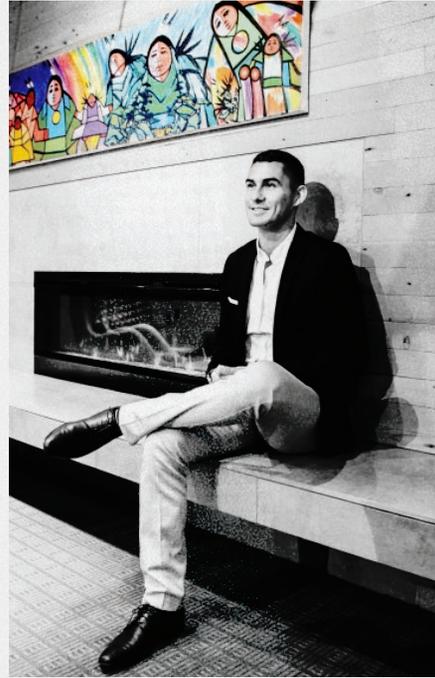
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**Do you feel pressure living in Vancouver to get caught up in the consumerist culture?**

Absolutely. The media not only bombards us with advertisements, but also in order to be accepted into most city cultures, you must dress and act the part. You can have the most amazing ideas, a genuine personality, and intellectual superpowers, but if you do not look like you belong to the group with which you seek an audience, your message will likely fall on deaf ears.



**What do you wish you could change about city life?**

A great deal. The city really is representational of the elitist attitude our species exhibits toward the rest of the natural environment: that only humans matter, that we care not for what needs to be destroyed in order to maintain our desired level of comfort and convenience. City life will only change once our economic systems change. We must stop overconsuming.

Passionate about supporting the spiritual, social, and economic well-being of Indigenous peoples, Tyson Atleo has been raised as a leader to respect Nuu-chah-nulth cultural values.





# HALIFAX

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## Traditional Territory - Mi'kmaq

“Living as an urban warrior in Halifax has strengthened my spirit culturally. I see many Natives feeling welcomed here by the Native community and being free and empowered to tap into our roots. The friendship center offers more than I had growing up on the rez. Halifax has embraced my #SpeakMikmaq language movement, encouraging me to strive higher.”

– Savannah “Savvy” Simon  
(Mi'kmaq, Elsipogtog First Nation), founder  
#SpeakMikmaq, motivational speaker

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