

My Urban Rez

Marvin Francis | November 1st 2004 | 1

I am part of the massive migration of Aboriginal peoples to the city. I was raised by a single mother who moved us to Edmonton (and many other places) from the Heart Lake First Nation to avoid residential school for my siblings and me. Since then, and I have been on my own since I was 16 years old, I have lived in many sites: small towns, the bush and the highways, but the longest period of my life has been in the Urban Rez, especially Winnipeg and Edmonton.

The first city experience(s), loaded with culture shock, had mostly negative impact. The in-your-face racism of the seventies, when I first began to live on my own, led to extreme difficulty in finding a place to rent, employment and acceptance in the urban culture in general. As a result, I often have had to live in “the hood,” where the sounds of a blaring siren become normal. As a writer, perhaps this was beneficial as I weaved my way through the pawn shops, the Main Street strip and its competing cousins in other cities, the hot-dog carts, the panhandlers, the cash-your-check joints and all of the other street signposts. I watched the first appearances of graffiti grow from artistic to social menace, and I was not surprised. The Aboriginal gang cultures also scratch for space in the urban landscape, as gangs from other segments of contemporary society surface. All of these violent, down-and-out ingredients formed my first impressions of this city environment. My reaction is perhaps best told in poetic form. The poem “Furby Shakespeare” (at right) grows from my reality of living next door to a crack house on Furby Street in Winnipeg.

Furby Shakespeare

Oh Romeo, Romeo, bum me a smoke

pogey check, pogey check, where art thou?

Traffic jams all stages of a life of the street of my mind

star-crossed drugs love

feed me feed me lethal feed me deep

furby theatre thrives

purple fountains from the veins

mini tragedy mini comedy all live

no script cuz furby plays end

it's curtains today go home now

However, the Urban Rez, for someone arriving from an isolated community, has much more to deal with. Elevators, escalators, how to catch city buses, the tightrope you must walk when the police stop and harass, the poge (EI) shuffle, the welfare dance and the dead-end job all have to be mastered to survive in the Aboriginal urban landscape. Of course, there are Aboriginals who have moved to the burbs, who have jobs and favourable credit ratings, but these generally are the exception. Fast-food outlets, convenience stores, taxis and the bars all grab their share of the Aboriginal migrant dollar. This is hardly news, as arson replaces the smoke signals from a campfire. The hearts of the cities, the malls, are all loaded with things that you cannot buy, but the monster of media demands that you do. My poem, "mcPemmican," clarifies my opinion of our fast-food, throwaway culture:

mcPemmican

first you get the grease from canola buffalo then you find mystery meat you must
package this in bright colours just like beads

let the poor intake their money take their health sound familiar chase fast food off the
cliff speed beef deer on a bun bury in the ground

special this day mcPemmican "cash those icons in

how about a mcTreaty"

would you like some lies with that?

The city is a place where money rules and if you must, and many do, you trade your culture for cash. Although genuine Traditional Aboriginals exist, the plastic Shaman slinks along the fringes of the actual Aboriginal culture(s), preying on those who need help the most. Any Aboriginal artist, whether they are visual, or a writer, or any of the other arts must contend with the market's expectations, especially the European market; many want stereotypical art or nothing. Contemporary, avant-garde work does not sell as well as a painting of Aboriginal deities, or the rural, hunting, natural landscape imagery, or enticing shots of Indian maidens. The Noble Savage still graces the covers of Harlequin romances. However, to a downtown Aboriginal writer, eagle feathers are hard to come by, and significantly, to pretend that you are Traditional is a moral crime in my mind.

My urban experiences are not all street and quick food. It is hard to explain the sheer luxuries of second-hand book stores and libraries and garage sales for someone who is compelled to read, and comes from the bush. Most of my reading material when I was a kid came from a drugstore rack: lots of Agatha Christie, heavy on the Mickey Spillane, and Edgar Rice Burroughs were the norm, along with those highly influential comic books. I had to earn the cash for these myself. All this reading led to writing, at first comic books, and then playwrighting and poetry and performance art that now all blend together, including the written word, to form my local arts scene. Poetry readings,

workshops, education and access to publishing happen for the most part in the city. You also encounter many cultures from around the world and this diversity allows you to be diverse, too, rather than the attempt to be the Native role model that is modeled on European standards, especially with regard to dress. Second-hand clothing stores are another bonus of the city.

Winnipeg, with its high Aboriginal population, is one place where you can walk downtown and meet other Aboriginals. Regina is like that, too, but a city like Calgary or Toronto has few Aboriginals visible downtown. Certainly there already exists an Urban Rez, as the city Natives increase dramatically every year. Winnipeg is large enough in Native population to have an Aboriginal writers' group, a Native, artist-run gallery and a strong arts presence that literally feeds an artist (writer, visual, etc.) by offering inroads for beginning writers or visual artists, and has all the important networking and necessary feedback while adding variety to the local arts scene. The city offers this, and the galleries, the museums and the theatres are available to some. This is not available in the bush. Yet, for me, there will always be a little bush; under the cement is the earth.

The scramble for housing, food and so much more, gives the city that hard edge. You cannot go fishing or hunt. Sewers clog the Red River, while an Aboriginal does not carry a gun downtown as a rule, ducks or no ducks. One difficulty that Aboriginals face in the integration in the city is a direct result of a hierarchical, consumer-driven society, because if you do not fit some demographics, maybe living in a low-income neighbourhood means you end up shopping for food in smaller outlets, thus usually more expensive.

Your local network is unemployed. Transportation on a city bus with heavy groceries sucks, and cabs are expensive, so if you do live downtown you find yourself depending too often upon take-out food and junk food. Banks do not want to offer loans to buy houses in certain parts of the city. Arson leads to unaffordable insurance, so if the home buyer has no insurance, the loan is rejected, and the end result often is an abandoned house that attracts sniffers, and the homeless, and the crackheads and, likely, many runaways. Bane branches, especially in the hood, so Money Mart becomes a viable option.

Employment can be obtained through industrial overload sites where the only qualification is steel-toed boots and the willingness to tackle the slave jobs that nobody else will accept. These jobs, without any benefits whatsoever, often flout the labour laws, and pay the minimum wage, but you can go to work and make some money. Getting employment beyond the dead-end job is perhaps the greatest challenge for the Urban Native. I look at labour, and the lifestyle that accompanies the physical, blue-collar environment in my poem, "the gant prairie."

the gant prairie

that day they made us fence through the water our hunger drove those posts deep four
days till payday we made dark lean jokes

gaunt bodies became the gant prairie what for lunch never spoken word mustard
sandwiches lukewarm water offered with a smile hunger lash cruel barbs wire

three days before payday joke becomes true sleep thru lunch hot hamburger dreams boss
places water end of the line hot sun bleeds hunger

two days before payday we catch a crow better dark chicken three crow one gant
sandwich good thing we brought pepper salt (treaty) for the tail fore man fore skin crow
under tin fried on a shovel

one day till payday we find the right moss tea for coffee break passed all around green
and strong and free gant prairie boys boil tomorrow dreams

then the big day sparkles arrange fateful ride to town speak neon cash share a smoke gant
promise pay back that loan long faced boss loses control pride in roughing it then dark
cloud emergency we hold two weeks back don't you know WHY SO GANT barb wire
nails him deep post sets a fire the job is over on this gant prairie.

The urban Aboriginal experience is dependent upon the circumstances of the individual, and speaking in general terms is always dangerous, but I think it is a fair statement that, for the average Native who comes from the Rez, the city contains a spectrum that ranges from new possibilities to that social monster, crack. I hope that the increasingly educated Aboriginal will lead the way to a more prosperous Urban Rez, where some Aboriginal input is appreciated. The Native landscape includes the city, and both the Native communities and society in general must find a way to use the best that the city has to offer to form a site that is beneficial to all.

Marvin Francis is a poet/playwright/artist/theatre director. He has written radio drama for CBC Radio and for the stage, and has published poetry in journals, magazines and anthologies. His most recent published work is city treaty, a long poem (Turnstone Press). Marvin is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in English at the University of Manitoba.