



Time Future in Time Past. Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper, delivering a formal apology to Aboriginal peoples in the House of Commons in Ottawa, June 11, 2008. In the twentieth century, an estimated 150,000 Aboriginal children were forced into church-run residential schools in a policy of forced assimilation. Residential schools were sites of cultural oppression -- where children were forced to forget their languages and cultural traditions -- and, in many cases, physical and sexual abuse. Harper poses with then-Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Phil Fontaine. Photographs © Office of the Prime Minister, reproduced under Non-Commercial Reproduction license.

“Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.”
T.S. Elliot, 1935.¹

First. Nation. City.
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From the Beginning

In his magisterial and panoramic book *Cities in Civilization*, Sir Peter Hall begins his analysis of the role of cities in cultural creativity with a chapter titled, “The Fountainhead: Athens, 500-400 BC.” Hall’s very first sentence makes it clear why Athens has been such an obsession for generations of urbanists, historians, archaeologists, and political theorists:

“The crucial point about Athens is that it was first. And first in no small sense: first in so many of the things that have mattered, ever since, to western civilization and its meaning. Athens in the fifth century gave us democracy, in a form as pure as we are likely to see; ... It gave us philosophy. ... It gave us the world’s first systematic written history.”²

¹ Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), *Four Quartets*, ‘Burnt Norton,’ quoted in Una McGovern, ed. (2005). *Webster’s New World Dictionary of Quotations*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, p. 307.

² Peter Hall (1998). *Cities in Civilization*. New York: Pantheon.

Hall's eloquent analysis of the Athenian Fountainhead is valuable indeed. Nevertheless, Athens was not the first to be first, at least not in every aspect of civilization or urbanization. Moreover, it was not the last to be first; in other words, the idea of "being first" took on different meanings in various contexts in a large, complex world.

These meanings underwent profound de-stabilization beginning about five hundred years ago. Europe's colonial expansion put Europeans into contact with a variety of peoples who were clearly "first" in these other lands. The "European imagination was forever changed by the 'discovery' of the Americas," and the subsequent exploitation of resources, slave trading networks, and European settlement "remade the world and our views of it in ways that are still important, not least for the millions of people for whom colonialism is part of their life histories."³ Even today, the idea of "being first" is the subject of considerable negotiation, struggle, and re-definition. Today, we'll consider the idea of being first in the city -- focusing on the circumstances of Aboriginal peoples. First, we'll examine the definition of Aboriginal, as well as several distinct but related terms to describe First Nations, indigenous peoples, North American Indian, Native American, Métis, and Inuit. Then we'll analyze three important aspects of the urban condition for Aboriginal peoples: 1) the steady urbanization of the population, 2) the contradictory, 'in-between' relation between urban and rural areas, and 3) the diversity of urban Aboriginal identities and political claims for autonomy.

Being and Defining Originality

*The word "aboriginal" comes from the Latin phrase *ab origine*, meaning "the original founders," or "from the beginning."*

European colonialism replaced the plurality of civilizations with the idea of a singular, Western civilization defined in opposition to what was being taken or destroyed.

The word "aboriginal" can be traced to the Latin phrase *ab origine*, which refers to "the original founders," or "from the beginning." The term came into widespread usage in the English language in the nineteenth century, and referred to the original inhabitants of the lands the Europeans called "the New World."⁴ The meaning of aboriginality, therefore, was defined in relation to European modernity, with all its contradictions -- exploration, scientific innovation, and progress achieved in part through theft, slavery, slaughter, and violence. Before the 'age of European discovery' that began in the late 1400s, the world had "a great variety of societies, large and small, with varying degrees of urbanization, diverse artisanal industries and

³ Eric Sheppard, Philip W. Porter, David R. Faust, and Richa Nagar (2009). *A World of Difference*. New York: Guilford, quotes from p. 319.

⁴ Eric Pawson (2009). "Aboriginality." In Derek Gregory, Ron Johnston, Geraldine Pratt, Michael J. Watts, and Sarah Whatmore, eds., *The Dictionary of Human Geography, Fifth Edition*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1-2.

types of social hierarchies.”⁵ In other words, there was a diverse world of *civilizations*. The expansion of colonialism -- along with the rise of powerful European nation-states and the flourishing of a rapidly-growing industrialized urbanization -- created the idea of a singular, Western *civilization* defined in opposition to what was being taken, replaced, and destroyed. Plurality and diversity were forced into a new, simplified dichotomy:

“Indigenous peoples often had no single name to describe themselves before there was a colonizing Other to make this necessary. The Maori (meaning ‘ordinary’ or ‘the people’) of New Zealand did not describe themselves as such until they were aware of Pakeha (‘not Maori’ or Europeans). They knew and named themselves as members of kin-based groups, as is still the case.”⁶

Today, Aboriginal and indigenous knowledge is recognized as a valuable alternative to discredited development doctrines of the colonial project and neo-colonial era.

Colonialism created new systems of knowledge. Over half a millennium, the explorations, wars, and slave trade of colonialism shaped Europeans’ views of themselves, while enabling a devaluation of the knowledge and civilizations of colonized peoples. In 1492, Europe’s technological and economic development was nothing exceptional. The leading economies of East Asia (China and Japan)

dwarfed Europe’s leading economic power (the United Kingdom).⁷ But colonialism yielded extraordinary wealth for the successive waves of European colonial powers competing with one another for new territorial possessions. Spanish conquistadors plundered the wealth of the Aztec and Inca peoples, and then used forced labor to mine precious metals in the Americas. In the century and a half after 1503, the mining of silver in Latin America and shipped back to Spain had tripled the total quantity of this precious metal in Europe. In the two centuries after 1600, 22,000 tons of silver and 185 tons of gold had been extracted from Peru and shipped to Spain, while Brazil’s mines yielded 800 tons of gold for Portugal between 1750 and 1810.⁸

All of this wealth, and the development and control it enabled among the colonizers and in Europe, built Europeans’ self-image of modernity in opposition to the “primitivism” and “lack of culture” among Aboriginal peoples.⁹ Only in the past generation has a revolution spread across the humanities and social sciences to challenge these stereotypical views. The “abundant and exceedingly complex cluster of civilizations” of pre-Columbian North America, for example, has been recognized for “highly advanced conceptualizations of architecture and engineering, spiritual traditions embodying equivalents to modern ecoscience, refined knowledge of pharmacology and holistic medicine, and highly sophisticated systems of governance, trade, and

⁵ Sheppard et al., *Difference*, p. 320.

⁶ Pawson, “Aboriginality,” p. 1.

⁷ See Giovanni Arrighi (2007). *Adam Smith in Beijing*. London: Verso, pp. 37-39.

⁸ Sheppard et al., *Difference*, p. 323.

⁹ Pawson, “Aboriginality,” p. 1.

diplomacy.”¹⁰ In recent years, around the world the concept of development itself is being remade:

“...the idea of indigenous knowledge as an alternative to increasingly discredited scientific social management and developmentalism has gained significant credibility as a way out of the ‘development impasse.’ The valorization of indigenous knowledge represents a shift away from privileging the knowledge of ‘development experts’ towards the voices and experiences of the inhabitants of the Global South, at whom development is usually projected....”¹¹

More than 1.17 million Canadians identified themselves as Aboriginal in 2006. The Aboriginal share of the population in Canada (4 percent) is second behind New Zealand (15 percent).

This reconsideration is of special importance in Canada. By 2006, the number of those identifying as Aboriginal surpassed one million, comprising 4 percent of Canada’s total population. This share is second among the Anglo colonial settler societies with comparable data -- behind New Zealand’s 15 percent for the Maori. Indigenous peoples comprise about 2

percent of the population of the United States and Australia.¹²

Canada’s *Constitution Act* of 1982 defines Aboriginal peoples as “Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada.” The term “Indian” has a problematic history of colonial connotations, and thus most popular discussion and social science research uses the term First Nations instead. Even so, the terms “Indian” or “North American Indian” are still used in a wide range of official government documents and programs. The terms “Registered Indian” or “Status Indian,” for example, refer to people who are entitled to be registered with particular bands or tribes recognized under Canada’s legislation called *The Indian Act*.¹³

The original founders of the lands that became Canada were diverse in geography, history, culture, and language. Today, public policy and public discussion identify three main groups of Aboriginal peoples, each of which has considerable internal heterogeneity.

¹⁰ Ward Churchill (1996). “Since Predator Came: A Survey of Native North America Since 1492.” In *From a Native Son*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 21-36, quote from p. 21.

¹¹ Jo Sharp (2009). “Indigenous knowlege.” In Derek Gregory, Ron Johnston, Geraldine Pratt, Michael J. Watts, and Sarah Whatmore, eds., *The Dictionary of Human Geography, Fifth Edition*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1-2.

¹¹ Pawson, “Aboriginality,” 374-375, quote from p. 374.

¹² Statistics Canada (2008). *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Métis, and First Nations, 2006 Census*. Catalogue No. 97-558-XIE. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

¹³ See Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples*, p. 39.

First Nations peoples are those who identify themselves as “North American Indian” on the Census of Canada and related government surveys. First Nations constitute three-fifths of all

First Nations refers to people who identify themselves as “North American Indian” in the Census of Canada.

Métis refers to the descendants of relations between Aboriginal women and European male fur traders; sometimes the term refers more narrowly to the Métis Nation around the Red River Settlement in Manitoba.

Inuit are those aboriginal peoples who traditionally inhabited Canada’s far north -- Inuit Nunaat, or the “Inuit homeland.” Inuit Nunaat includes four distinct regions, the largest of which is Nunavut, which gained territorial/provincial status in 1999. Nunavut is the largest negotiated land settlement between a nation-state and an Aboriginal population in the world.

territorial/provincial recognition in 1999. The Nunavut Land Claims Agreement constitutes the largest negotiated land settlement between a nation-state and Aboriginal peoples anywhere in the world.

Aboriginals in Canada -- almost 700 thousand people in 615 distinct First Nations, with ten distinct language families.¹⁴ Four-fifths of all First Nations people are “Status” or “Registered” Indians under the provisions of *The Indian Act*.

Métis peoples are the descendants of relations between Aboriginals and European traders or colonists -- usually, relations between Aboriginal women and European male fur traders. The term Métis sometimes refers to the descendants of Aboriginal-European partners anywhere in Canada, but it is also used in reference to a specific Métis Nation that emerged around the Red River Settlement (Winnipeg) in Manitoba in the nineteenth century.¹⁵

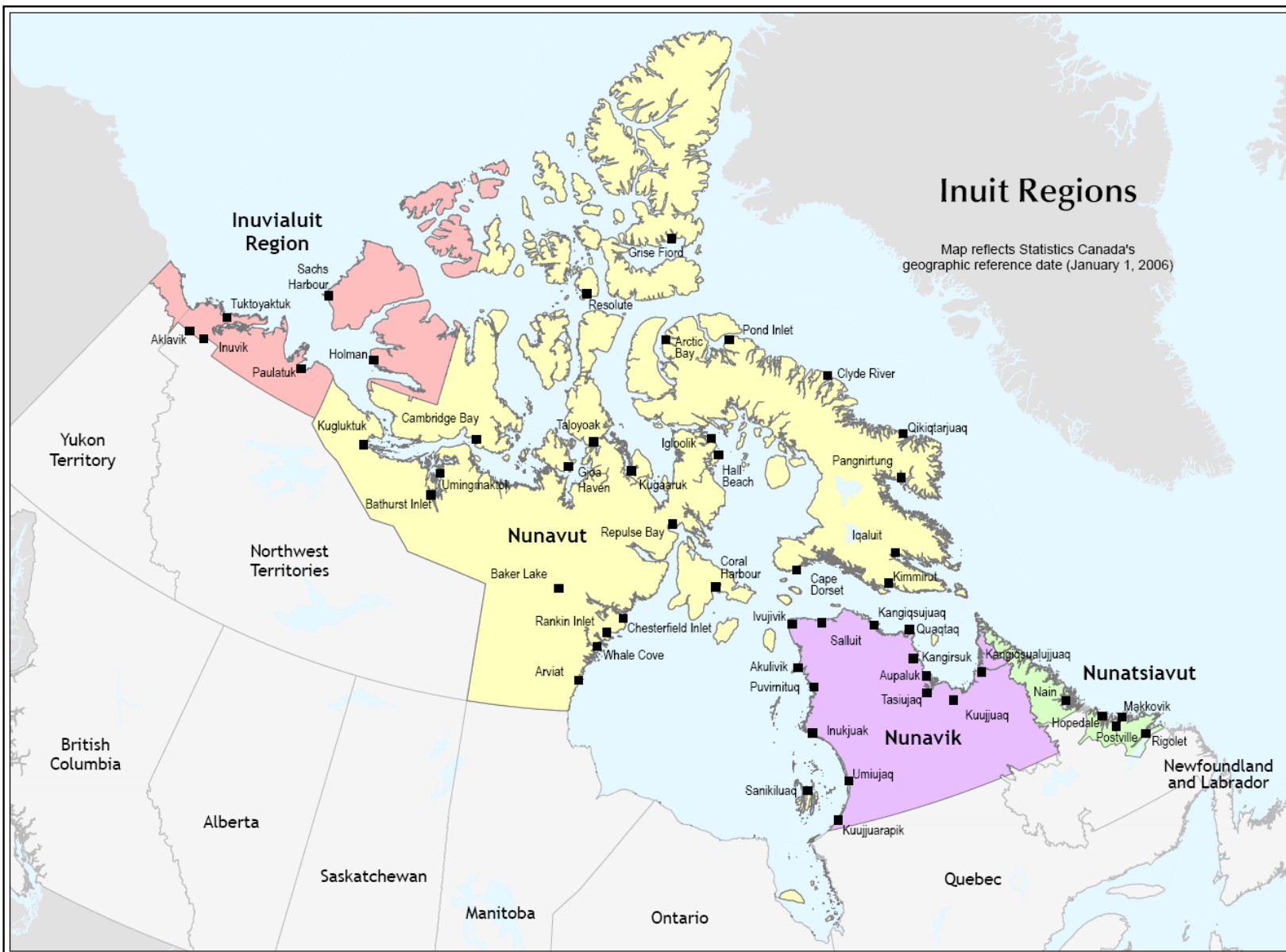
People who identify themselves as Métis constitute 34 percent of all Aboriginal-identity peoples in Canada -- a total of 389 thousand people.

Inuit peoples are the original inhabitants of Canada’s far North. In the Inuit language, “Inuit Nunaat” is the phrase for the Inuit “homeland.” The Inuit Fountainhead never had quite the same degree of centralization or urbanization of Athens, but it encompassed a much broader territory across the northern expanse of an entire continent. The Inuit civilization dates to at least 5,000 years ago. Inuit Nunaat includes four broad regions. The largest, Nunavut, includes 2 million square kilometers, and achieved

¹⁴ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples*, p. 38.

¹⁵ Evelyn J. Peters (2010). “Aboriginal People in Canadian Cities.” In Trudi Bunting, Pierre Filion, and Ryan Walker, eds., *Canadian Cities in Transition, Fourth Edition*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press Canada, 375-390, cite to p. 376.

In 2006, just over 50 thousand Canadians identified themselves as Inuit. This constitutes 4 percent of Canada's total Aboriginal population. Four-fifths of all Inuit live in one of the four regions of Inuit Nunaat.¹⁶



The Four Regions of Inuit Nunaat. Source: Statistics Canada (2007). "Inuit Regions." Ottawa: Geography Division, Statistics Canada. Reproduced here under Statistics Canada Non-commercial Reproduction license.

¹⁶ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples*, p. 23.

Viewed from a global perspective, Canada's Aboriginal population seems at first glance to be a rural story. Inuit Nunaat, after all, is a cold, forbidding expanse of rural Arctic territory that spans more than a third of Canada's entire landmass. And yet just as all of Canadian society has

In Canada, more than half of Aboriginal people now live in urban areas.

become more urbanized over the past century, so has Canada's Aboriginal population. In 2006, a majority of all Aboriginal Canadians lived in urban areas.

Three aspects of Canada's urban Aboriginal peoples are most important: the increasing urbanization of Aboriginal peoples, the development of a liminal, "in-between" experience between urban communities and rural reserves, and the growing diversity and partial autonomy of urban Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal Urbanization

The first key issue involves the pace and interpretation of the urbanization of Aboriginal peoples. In 2006, 1.17 million Canadians identified themselves as First Nations/North American Indians,

Canada's largest urban Aboriginal communities: Winnipeg (68 thousand, 10 percent of the metropolitan population), Edmonton (52 thousand, 5.1 percent), and Vancouver (40 thousand, 1.9 percent).

Métis, Inuit, or with multiple Aboriginal identities. Almost 54 percent lived in urban areas, an increase from 50 percent in 1996.

In some ways, this trend was anticipated in a colonial history that portrayed reserve and rural communities as gradually disappearing, as Aboriginals assimilated into the "mainstream."

The urbanization of Canada's Aboriginal population does not mean that reserves are being depopulated. Rural reserves and urban, non-reserve communities are now part of an integrated, mobile settlement system.

"Until the mid-twentieth century, 'Indian' policy assumed that reserve lands would be abandoned as First Nations people assimilated Urbanization was seen as a partial solution for reserve and rural poverty, and the Department of Indian Affairs organized a relocation program in 1956 designed to assist First Nations to move to urban areas."¹⁷

continued, however, in every decade since then -- even as assimilation policies were set aside in favor of multiculturalism and greater recognition of Aboriginal rights and cultural identity.

The urbanization rate of the Aboriginal population did increase in the 1950s with these assimilation programs. Urbanization

¹⁷ Peters, "Aboriginal People," p. 376.

Just over a quarter of all Aboriginal Canadians live in eleven Census Metropolitan Areas, each of which has at least 10 thousand Aboriginal residents. The largest urban Aboriginal populations are in Winnipeg (68 thousand, 10 percent of the entire metropolitan population), Edmonton (52 thousand, 5.1 percent), and Vancouver (40 thousand, 1.9 percent). Communities of more than 20 thousand urban Aboriginals are in Toronto, Calgary, Ottawa-Gatineau, and Saskatoon; communities of more than 10 thousand are found in Montreal, Regina, Thunder Bay, and Victoria.

The urbanization of the Aboriginal population does not mean that reserves are being depopulated, or that there is a one-way “reserve-to-cities” migration stream. It is more accurate to think of Aboriginal urbanization as a mobile settlement pattern that weaves together certain parts of Canada’s cities and rural areas. This urban system of mobility is not entirely new: keep in mind who was first.

“Many Canadian cities emerged in places traditionally used by Aboriginal people as gathering spots or settlement areas. For many Aboriginal people, to be in what are now urban areas is to be in what have been their traditional territories.”¹⁸

Even as the proportion of Aboriginals living in urban areas increased over the last decade, the number of Aboriginals in rural areas and reserves also increased. Some of this increase reflects legislative changes and other circumstances that have led more people to self-identify as Aboriginal, while some of the increase results from demographic factors. But it is clear that “reserves and rural areas are not being depopulated as urban Aboriginal populations grow.”¹⁹ There is also growing evidence of periodic movements back and forth between rural reserves and urban, non-reserve residence:

“While some migrants may return to reserve and rural communities because of problems with urban life, researchers found that these communities of origin remain important for individuals Many Aboriginal people emphasize ties to the land as a continuing element of their cultural identity and migration may be one reflection of these ties Migration ... may also represent an attempt to maintain vital and purposeful community relationships.”²⁰

¹⁸ J. Rick Ponting (2005). “Urban Aboriginal People.” In Harry H. Hiller, ed. *Urban Canada: Sociological Perspectives*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press Canada, 139-165, quote from p. 139.

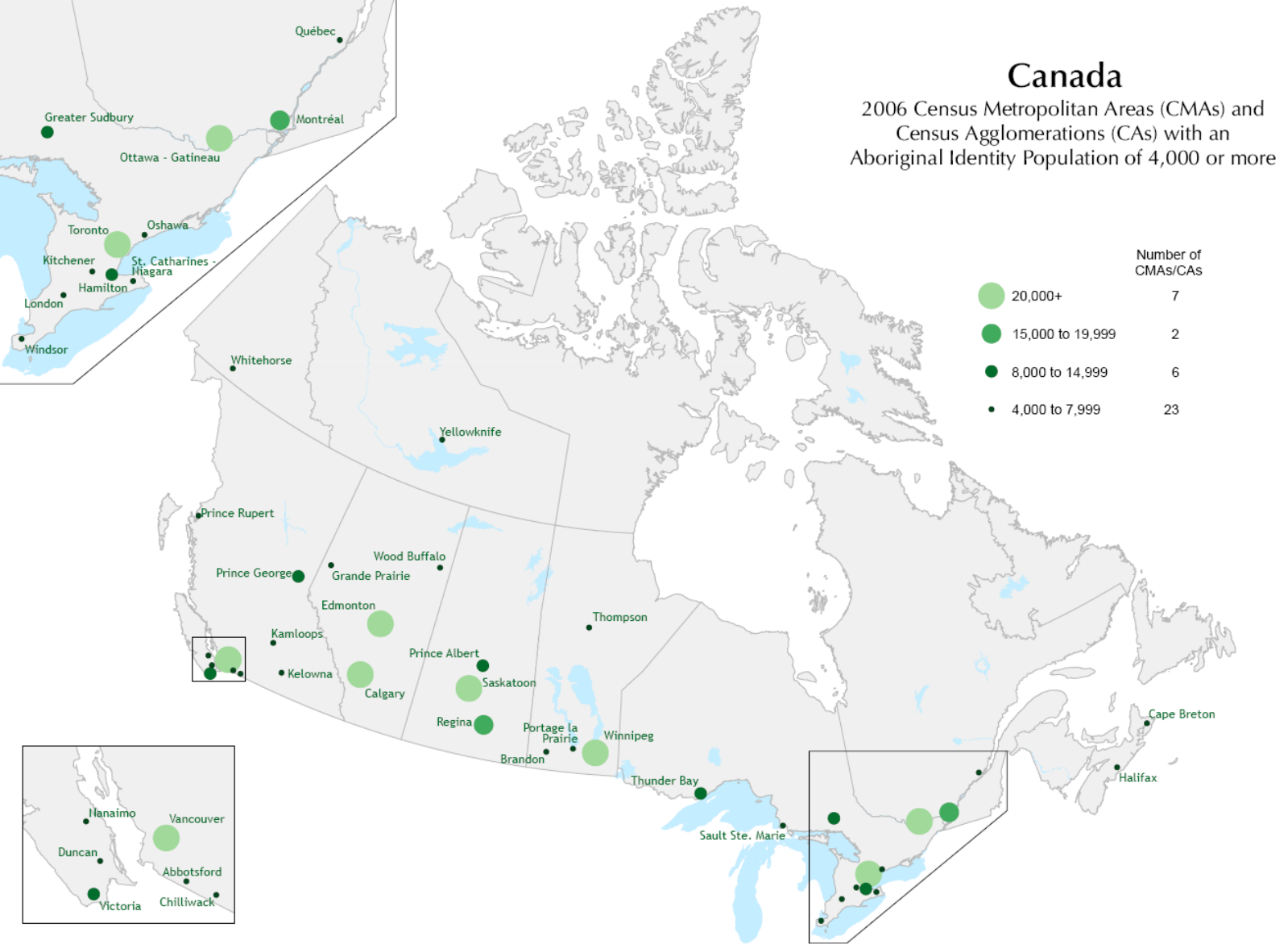
¹⁹ Peters, “Aboriginal People,” p. 377.

²⁰ Peters, “Aboriginal People,” p. 378.

Canada

2006 Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) and
Census Agglomerations (CAs) with an
Aboriginal Identity Population of 4,000 or more

Aboriginal Identity Population Range	Number of CMAs/CAs
20,000+	7
15,000 to 19,999	2
8,000 to 14,999	6
4,000 to 7,999	23



Canada’s Urban Aboriginal Communities. *Source:* Statistics Canada (2007). “CMAs and Census Agglomerations with Aboriginal Identity Populations of 4,000 or More.” Ottawa: Geography Division, Statistics Canada. Reproduced here under Statistics Canada Non-commercial Reproduction license.

Liminal Cities

The second key issue is the contradictory, “in-between” relation between urban and rural areas expressed for Aboriginal peoples. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning “the furthest extent.” In psychology, the *limen* refers to the threshold of consciousness -- the limit below which someone will not perceive an external stimulus. The urban/rural divide has allowed many Canadians to remain unconscious of the circumstances of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. And yet we are now seeing a very slow, partial, and belated response to the stimulus, an awakening consciousness of a new urban reality in Canada.

As the product of a history of advancing Westward European settlement and dispossession, Aboriginal reserves tended to be located in the most isolated and environmentally undesirable areas. Most reserves remained economically marginalized while the rest of Canada enjoyed rapid growth, industrialization, and urbanization in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, federal and provincial attempts to alleviate Aboriginal poverty and marginalization created a

problematic, contradictory space. Until recently, policy encouraged migration to the cities and assimilation -- even while federal jurisdiction and support for social welfare and economic development needs was directed primarily to Inuit and Registered/Status Indians on reserve lands. Only a few services were provided in urban, non-reserve areas, and the federal

Canada's government structure and "Indian policy" has created contradictory, in-between spaces of rural reserves and urban communities. Aboriginals lose supports and social services when they leave rural reserves, but are often excluded from services when they move to the city.

sense that they are not considered to be eligible for services provided by agencies that are not 'status blind.' For instance, an off-reserve registered Indian who has migrated to Halifax might be told by federal service providers to seek the service from the provincial agency, but when she gets to the provincial agency she might be told to go to the federal or municipal agency because she is a registered Indian."²²

government has long insisted that these urban programs are "a matter of policy decision" -- easily taken away "rather than ... a legal or constitutional obligation."²¹ The increasing urbanization of Aboriginal peoples, therefore, is creating an ever more ambiguous, in-between space of experience and policy:

"No order of government is willing to assume primary responsibility for urban Aboriginal policy. One consequence of [this] state of affairs is that Aboriginal people in the cities often 'fall through the cracks' in the

The Indigenization of Urban Modernity

The third key issue is the growing diversity of the urban Aboriginal population, and the rise of civil society and (partial) autonomy. As in other colonial settler societies, Canada's Aboriginal people face significant marginalization. Among all Aboriginal Canadians over age 15 who worked and earned employment income in 2005, median annual employment income was less than 70 percent that for non-Aboriginal Canadians. Aboriginal unemployment rates stood at 2.3 times the rate for all non-Aboriginals.²³ Aboriginals are also disproportionately represented in high-poverty, inner-city neighborhoods. A wide range of other social and economic indicators reveal pervasive inequality and substantial disadvantage among Aboriginal people.

Urbanization and the reinforcement of Aboriginal cultural identities are occurring simultaneously.

Yet it would be a terrible mistake to view the Aboriginal experience solely in terms of poverty and marginalization. There is a growing Aboriginal middle class, and there is also an increasing mobilization

²¹ Ponting, "Urban Aboriginal," p. 140.

²² Ponting, "Urban Aboriginal," p. 140.

²³ Statistics Canada (2007). *2006 Census of Canada, Topic-Based Tabulations, Income and Labour Force Status*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

for policy innovation, cultural preservation, and as much self-determination as Canada's political economy will permit. To be sure, there are still some entrenched stereotypes about the presumed incompatibility between contemporary urban and Aboriginal cultures. Some of the presenters to "the Urban Roundtable of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples" in the 1990s "talked about cities as 'an environment that is usually indifferent and often hostile to Aboriginal cultures.'"²⁴ And yet these assumptions are no longer universal, and they do not stand without challenge. Other presenters at the Urban Roundtable recognized that

"Aboriginal cultures worked against alienation, provided important values for urban residents, and helped to build strong urban Aboriginal communities. Native studies professor David Newhouse ... argues that urbanization and the reinforcement of cultural identities are occurring simultaneously. Recognizing that Aboriginal cultures in urban areas are not simply transplanted non-urban cultures, Newhouse suggests that urban Aboriginal people are reformulating Western institutions and practices to suit Aboriginal cultures and identities, so that Aboriginal people can survive as distinct people in contemporary societies. In this way urban Aboriginal people are participating in, to use Marshall Sahlins's phrase, 'the indigenization of modernity.'"²⁵

Conclusions

Ever so slowly, time past is moving into time future. Aboriginal Canada is pulling the federal and provincial governments into the twenty-first century. In the 1970s, Canada began settling comprehensive land claims in areas where treaties had not been signed, and Aboriginal rights were formally specified in the Constitution Act 1982. In 1995, the Government of Canada formally "recognized the inherent right of Aboriginal people to self-government" within the Canadian federal system.²⁶ In 1998, the federal government introduced the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS), a four-year, \$50 million commitment that responded to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Funding was renewed in 2003, and in 2007 another commitment was made for \$68.5 million over five years. The UAS seeks to involve all levels of government to pursue three goals: 1) to improve youths' life skills and educational outcomes, through mentorship programs and transitional services, 2) to improve Aboriginal representation in the labour force, and 3) to provide support to reduce poverty amongst urban Aboriginal mothers, children, and recent migrants to cities.²⁷

Even after a century that taught us to be very careful about premature declarations of progress -- and perhaps even the idea or possibility of progress itself -- the growing insistence on Aboriginal cultural valorization is an encouraging sign indeed. If anything qualifies as emancipatory progress, it's the indigenization of urban modernity achieved by Aboriginal Canadians.

²⁴ Peters, "Aboriginal People," p. 378.

²⁵ Peters, "Aboriginal People," p. 378.

²⁶ Government of Canada (2000). *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan: A Progress Report*. Ottawa: Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, p. 3.

²⁷ See Evelyn J. Peters (2010). "Aboriginal People in Urban Areas." In Harry Hiller, ed., *Urban Canada, Second Edition*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press Canada, 156-174, cite to p. 164.