

*Str8 Up and Gangs: Narratives of Health and Sickness, Crime and Punishment, and
Canada's Colonial Legacy*

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Abstract

“*Str8 Up and Gangs: Narratives of Health and Sickness, Crime and Punishment, and Canada’s Colonial Legacy*” hosts an interdisciplinary approach to the stories shared by ex-gang Indigenous gang members and recovering addicts. These are the stories found between the front and back cover of *Str8 Up and Gangs: The Untold Stories*, and heard by many people at Str8 Up presentations. Drawing on Indigenous Studies knowledge and analytical approaches common to the study of English Literature, this project seeks to identify a connection between Canada’s colonial legacy and the current existence of Indigenous street gangs. In so doing, this project addresses the trauma caused by residential schools and the 60’s Scoop. Further still, this project analyses the critiques *Str8 Up and Gangs* presents of medical paradigms which are not holistic, and the critique this text offers of the ineffectiveness of incarceration to deal with Indigenous street gangs in Canada. Generally speaking, this project seeks to showcase how Canada’s colonial history results in intergenerational trauma which informs the social, political, and economic inequality instrumental in the formation of Indigenous street gangs in Canada. Finally, this paper relies on an analysis of interviews conducted with Str8 Up members to facilitate a discussion of the ways in which Str8 Up has made use of narrative—written autobiographies and public testimony—to aid those courageous individuals who wish to begin their healing journey, leaving whichever gang they are affiliated with and achieving and maintaining sobriety.

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*Str8 Up and Gangs: Narratives of Health and Sickness, Crime and Punishment, and
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The Power of Stories

Stories have the power to challenge, solidify, or change understanding, and have even been described as having therapeutic applications (Malchiodi 2005; Burns 2001; Carey 2006; Lieblich, McAdams, and Josselson 2004; Episkenew 2009; Krippner, Bova, and Gray 2007; Felman and Laub 1992). Interesting examples of such stories are those which are told about the crimes people commit. Stories about crime and addictions are powerful because they can influence public perceptions and individual experiences. Commonly, a short newsreel tells only the story of a person's criminal action and its effects, often resulting in labels like 'guilty' and 'bad.' Unfortunately this normative narrative example reflects a broader issue surrounding criminal actions; once tried and convicted, incarcerated individuals are labeled negatively, making change in their lives even harder. These labels, and the narratives which perpetuate them, also exacerbate prejudices which connect to a hierarchical social structure framed by poverty and bias. *Str8 Up and Gangs: The Untold Stories* is an example of a narrative which challenges punitive models of crime and punishment, labels of good and bad, and resultant experiences of social exclusion. This work showcases the lived experiences, from earliest to most recent memories, of male Indigenous (ex-) gang members in Canada, and disputes the notion that gang members are 'bad' people who can only be dealt with through incarceration. The emergent narrative counters common assumptions about gangs and allows silenced inmates and ex-gang members the chance to voice their individual and varying truths about living in gangs. Instead of presenting gangs as only a criminal force, *Str8 Up and Gangs* presents the life-stories and

creative works of (ex-)gang members in order to suggest that the root causes of growing Indigenous gang involvement in Canada is symptomatic of ill health created by experiences of poverty, social exclusion, violence, and food insecurity. I believe this approach challenges dominant social perceptions of gangs. Moreover, the stories Str8 Up members tell also describe a connection between Indigenous street gangs and Canada's colonial legacy. In so doing, this work suggests that incarceration may not be the best way to combat the rise of Indigenous street gangs in Canada; rather, this book adopts a clear stance that Indigenous street gangs members are an example of one group of people living in a colonial system who are 'sick' or 'hurting.' By mobilizing the discourse of health and sickness and applying it to a portion of the population usually spoken of in criminal terms, as well as by providing ex-gang members and recovering addicts with a platform from which to tell their stories, *Str8 Up and Gangs: The Untold Stories* has challenged the dominant paradigms that define health and sickness, as well as crime and punishment, and rehabilitation, and connected the formation of Indigenous street gangs to Canada's colonial legacy.

Introduction to the Author and Str8 Up

At this point I will introduce myself to the reader, and the reader to Str8 Up, both the organization and some of the members, in order to contextualize the ideas about stories, health, and incarceration which will be shared in this paper. As a student at the University of Saskatchewan, I was provided with an opportunity to be involved in a community-based teaching and research project where I worked in close connection with a local organization, Str8 Up, helping members structure the autobiographical narratives they present to a wide variety of audiences—youth, adolescents, and adults from different backgrounds. Because Str8 Up members share their stories to a wide variety of audiences, the organization's founder, Father

Andre Poiliévre, and social worker Stan Tu’Inukuafe, decided that some basic information about how to present publicly would be beneficial. Although I was teaching the class, I also felt as though I learned a great deal. Teaching this class introduced me to the idea that sharing one’s story is intimately connected to making sense of, coping with, and accepting traumatic events experienced during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood¹. Moreover, as a witness to the telling of such stories—some of which were never spoken aloud by Str8 Up members before the creation of this class—I was provided with greater insight into what might motivate someone to become a gang member. My experiences with Str8 Up members’ stories, both written and spoken, have helped me, as an outsider, to gain a better understanding of gangs, addictions, violence, and poverty. The stories these men and women courageously tell have the power to reach audiences of at-risk youth, and those who know little-to-nothing about Indigenous gangs in Canada, warning and educating them about the dangerous realities of gangs and addiction.

Str8 Up is an organization which operates from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Its main focus is to help current, often incarcerated gang members leave gangs and realize a legal, safer, healthier pathway forward. Not only does Str8 Up help current gang members become ex-gang members, they also help individuals commit to sobriety, placing an emphasis on the connection between health and preventing the growth of street gangs. Substance abuse issues are common among Indigenous gang members in Canada. For example, a Str8 Up member I interviewed recalled that when she was in gang “all of us were addicted to something.” As such, Str8 Up is an organization which simultaneously helps men and women cut affiliations with

¹ While teaching this class, there was always a member of Str8 Up staff and social worker, Stan Tu’Inukuafe, present. If members uncovered any traumatic memories, support was readily available for them.

gangs and maintain sobriety². Because substance abuse and gangs are so closely linked, Str8 Up members also make use of the supports offered by counselling, narcotics anonymous, and alcoholics anonymous (*Str8 Up* 86-87). This is also why Str8 Up's first two conditions for membership are leaving the gang and maintaining sobriety (85). Generally speaking, it seems that one, substance abuse or gang-life, engenders the other (Totten 12).

Str8 Up's Philosophy of Healing

The close connection between addictions, gang-life, and health and sickness first became apparent to me through attending Str8 Up presentations, part of my efforts to learn which areas Str8 Up members struggled with most while presenting their lived experiences to audiences. In these presentations, Stan Tu'Inukuafe and/or Father Andre Poiliévre first share Str8 Up's philosophy of healing and explain its significance for pre, current, and ex-gang members. Based on the medicine wheel, Str8 Up illustrates a healthy human using a circle which consists of four major aspects of human life—mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional. For Str8 Up, factors, such as an expectant mother who drinks and/or does drugs, a father who abuses his pregnant partner, an unwanted pregnancy or an unloved child, are instrumental in later experiences of incarceration. In other words, according to Str8 Up, the health challenges faced by members started at conception (*Str8 Up* 85). In Str8 Up's presentations, malformed circles with depressions in the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional aspects of being illustrate that men and women in Indigenous gangs have too often lived lives where violence is normalized, substance abuse is common, and love and affection are routinely not available. This philosophy of harm and healing elucidates a connection between gangs, crime, and social ills such as

² For more information about Str8 Up's program see <http://str8-up.ca/what-we-do/>.

violence, substance abuse, and poverty, suggesting that gangs are the social manifestation of health deprivations, rather than any perceived lack of morals (*Str8 Up* 92).

In Saskatoon, street gangs are comprised primarily of Indigenous people³. As such, the stories which Str8 Up members tell need to be heard in a respectful context where the impacts of social exclusion, such as those created by the racism and stigmatization of poverty, are clearly understood. Moreover, it is important to consider the lasting, cumulative, and traumatic effects of Canada's colonial legacies when reading or listening to the stories Str8 Up members share. In this way, *Str8 Up and Gangs* presents a relational view of gangs which suggests the use of narrative to re-educate not only those most directly affected by gang life, but those who self-insulate with a parochial understanding that merely criminalizes individuals and labels them 'bad' people.

This paper now turns to look more closely at the conceptualization of health in Canada and to analyze *Str8 Up and Gangs: The Untold Stories*, linking Canada's colonial legacy and resultant social and health issues, i.e. substance abuse, poverty, and violence created by residential schools, the 60's scoop, and violence in prison, with the formation of Indigenous gangs in Canada. Finally, this paper discusses the ways in which Str8 Up has used narrative to help members leave gangs and live sober, reach at-risk youth, and educate the unknowing about gangs and addictions.

³ "The majority of gangs in Saskatchewan are Aboriginal" (Youth Alliance Against Gang Violence). <http://site.ebrary.com.cyber.usask.ca/lib/usask/reader.action?docID=10585956>

Competing Conceptualizations of Health in Canada

To begin this analysis it is necessary to question how health is conceptualized in Canada. Clearly health and sickness are terms used to define and describe a variety of different experiences. However, health and sickness are most commonly used to help us understand those with a pathological illness, wound, or visible sign of ailment. More holistic conceptions account for other aspects of being where people can experience health and sickness. Indigenous understanding breaks down aspects of our being into four categories, each of which are sites where we can experience both health and sickness—mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional (*Str8 Up* 84-85). This conceptualization differentiates Indigenous understandings of health and sickness from Euro-Canadian conceptualizations. To help illustrate that there are multiple paradigms of health and sickness at work throughout the world, consider the following culturally informed, region-specific understandings of medicine. Euro-North American *medicine* is defined as “A substance or preparation used in the treatment of illness; a drug; *esp.* one taken by mouth” (OED online). However, when the term “medicine” is searched for in a region-specific way, other definitions begin to emerge. In Africa, the term *medicine* leads one to results such as *mganga*: “In East Africa: a doctor whose traditional functions include exorcism, prophecy, and the removal of spells” (OED online). This definition elucidates an understanding of medicinal practice which is clearly different from the first. Moreover, these two definitions acknowledge that understandings of health and sickness are informed by culture and worldview. As was shown by the East African definition of *mganga*, medicine can, and for many does, include illness even in the spiritual sense, hence exorcisms, prophecies, and removal of spells. Unfortunately, the *Oxford English Dictionary* does not illuminate North American Indigenous understandings of medicine, an omission common for reference materials informed by colonial

worldviews. However, Terry Tafoya (2000), a Native American storyteller and clinical psychologist, explains that traditional Indigenous stories are themselves medicine that “can be used to educate people about contemporary issues such as HIV/AIDS, gang violence, and addictions” (Archibald 10)⁴. Clearly, definitions of health and sickness vary according to worldview and culture, affecting the types of treatments one can receive. These definitions also affect what can be understood as sickness, and what can be recognized, for example, as criminal. Indigenous stories have the ability to heal by educating audiences on topics such as gangs and addictions, but also by educating, as I argue, the story-teller about the self. Narratives and narrative constructions are among the most important practices and products of *Str8 Up*, as demonstrated by *Str8 Up and Gangs*.

The differences among the varying definitions of the term “medicine” are actually the product of differing medical paradigms and practices. In “Challenging the Way We Think About Health,” Rosemary Proctor describes the Western conception of health as part of the “causation paradigm” (51; See also Linklater 45). Although the causation paradigm has contributed to the advancement of medical science and understanding, it also has its limitations. One example is its failure to provide soul healing: “a culturally appropriate way to healing mental health and addictions by addressing historical trauma” (Hyatt 45). In response to the limitations of the causation paradigm, since at least the 1993 publication of Proctor’s work, there has been a consistent call for a broader and deeper understanding of health, sickness, and associated treatments. Proctor refers to this emerging model as the environmental paradigm:

⁴ “Stories, as so many of the First Nations have said, are a form of medicine” (Tafoya 57).

The environmental framework sees human beings as adapting to their environment in effective and ineffective ways and simultaneously altering their environment in beneficial and harmful ways. The environmental framework includes the psychology of human beings and society, the vulnerability of individuals to specific diseases, the interaction of people and their environment. Health has become a goal statement: the presence of physical, social and mental well-being. The question has become not what is the cause of disease, but what are the determinants of health. (52)

This description of an environmental framework for understanding health, or a lack thereof, aims at being more holistic, helping to avoid deficit understandings of sickness, and promoting "ways to understand experiences and transform them into something that can be understood, mastered, and transcended" (Hyatt 45). Another example of a holistic medical paradigm which predates Proctor's environmental framework is the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel is a useful tool for imagining the multiple facets of a living being. It challenges dominant medical paradigms by suggesting that people can experience health and sickness in a spiritual sense, and it provides a basis for more holistic understandings of the determinants of health and sickness, as well as a wider array of remedies. In general, concepts like Proctor's environmental paradigm and the traditional medicine wheel suggest that the term *health* should include serious consideration of social, environmental, mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual determinants of health and sickness. Finally, an Indigenous paradigm of health and sickness is useful for determining how to understand the actions one carries out, the choices one makes, and how to respond, or, if necessary, how to provide aid.

Str8 Up and Gangs mobilizes a discourse of health and sickness in a manner closely linked to the Indigenous paradigm described above, calling for a different approach to dealing

with gangs. For example, when the text describes Str8 Up's history, it also makes mention of healthy and sick relationships:

It's about understanding people's feelings. It is about respect for others, allowing others to grow and develop as they are able. This pursuit of individual goals (sobriety, abandoning illegal activity to earn honest money, developing positive lifestyles) enabled them to discover that to help themselves, they had to help others. Over time they discovered the need to abandon unhealthy relationships, even with unhealthy family members, and to search out healthy relationships. (80)

This passage showcases Str8 Up's treatment of self-harming lifestyles as the manifestation of ill health. Str8 Up utilizes specialized vocabulary to explain the major changes in lifestyle that members go through. Members describe the lived experience of leaving a gang and realizing commitments to live a sober, legal lifestyle as a *healing journey*: "Str8 Up is a non-profit group of young men and women, both free and incarcerated, who in cooperation with John Howard Society and other youth groups, provide support to one another in their *healing journey*" (84; emphasis added). Clearly, *Str8 Up and Gangs* provides a different view of criminalized street gangs in Canada; Str8 Up avoids the labels 'good' and 'bad,' because 'bad' people are judged and punished, whereas hurting and sick people can be healed. As such, Str8 Up understands members as being on a healing journey (*Str8 Up* 92). In particular, the view of Indigenous gang members as sick and hurting challenges approaches which only address gang members' deviant behavior, recognizing the significant underlying health factors—Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, abandonment, violence, racism and abuse (85)⁵. It is through the use of narrative that *Str8 Up*

⁵ See also Mark Totten's *Investigating the Linkages between FASD, Gangs, Sexual Exploitation and Woman Abuse in the Canadian Aboriginal Population a Preliminary Study*

and Gangs makes a culturally relevant addition to current understandings of gangs⁶, encouraging members to tell their previously untold and unheard stories.

Residential Schools

Str8 Up and Gangs presents autobiographical works written by Str8 Up members who describe their lived experiences thus far. The first piece in the collection, written by Phillip Charles Bear Morin, connects members' affiliation or membership in gangs to Canada's violent colonial legacy. It is as if Morin begins a history of chronological events which are instrumental in the formations of Indigenous gangs in Canada. "Hear Us Too: My Voice My Nation" links the criminal acts which Str8 Up members have been tried and convicted for, to a colonial legacy which was perpetuated by residential schools: "Hear us too! / It doesn't matter who you are / we're all affected from the residential schools / open up your eyes and you will see the truth / that we're all affected from the residential schools" (9). Firstly, the reference to residential schools makes readers consider Indigenous gangs and incarceration, and what to do about this issue, in conjunction with the legacy of colonialism in Canada. The notion that Indigenous gangs in Canada are a produced effect of colonial violence is not indefensible or unwarranted. In particular, Indigenous Studies scholars have identified and described a process by which the negative effects of trauma, such as those which were part of many residential school experiences, are transmitted from one generation to another, creating cycles of violence which are difficult to break (Cole 115; see also Linklater 23). Finally, Morin's assertion that we are all affected by residential schools suggests that non-Indigenous people have also been impacted by the legacy of

⁶See also these sources from the Canadian National Crime Prevention Centre, and from Native Counselling Services of Canada: *An Investigation into the Formation and Recruitment Processes of Aboriginal Gangs in Western Canada*, *Youth Alliance Against Gang Violence*, and *Regina Anti-Gang Services*.

residential schools; that is, issues of crime, violence, and substance abuse, which are traceable to residential schools, impact the entire community, creating new victims and perpetuating an on-going cycle of violence.

Other texts that deal with the legacy of residential schools help to bolster Morin's claim that we are all affected by residential schools, describing the intergenerational effects of the physical abuse, sexual abuse, and shaming suffered in residential schools. Two such texts, *Breaking The Silence* and *Reconciling Canada*, describe the trauma suffered at residential schools and endured by Indigenous peoples in Canada--physical abuse, sexual abuse, shaming, and severe censorship (ASF 69; see also Emberly 146). *Str8 Up and Gangs*, *Breaking the Silence*, and *Reconciling Canada* collectively describe a connection between the violence which characterised most residential school experiences and the long-lasting effects of said experiences, i.e., cycles of violence, struggles with poverty, and substance abuse issues. Each text helps to connect this violent past to contemporary social issues faced by many Indigenous peoples in Canada and the manifestation of Indigenous gangs. Perhaps most importantly, the Truth and Reconciliation conferences referenced in *Reconciling Canada* help to bring closure for those who were mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically harmed during their time at residential schools, demonstrating the usefulness of narrative practices such as public mourning and testimony when healing from colonial trauma: "A victim's repressed memories of the experience need to be expressed or released in order for there to be resolution" (Million 166).

In "I Walk Alone," Morin describes the rivalry between gangs as lateral violence: "When you look at some of the [gang] names like Indian Posse, Native Syndicate, and Saskatchewan Warriors, it is Native people fighting and killing each other over their own land" (*Str8 Up* 5). Lateral violence has been traced by Indigenous Studies experts to residential schools (Bombay et

al. 2)⁷. Linklater reads lateral violence as a process whereby "people who have been oppressed, generation after generation, learn how to adapt to the lifestyle and become their own oppressors" (44). One of the outcomes associated with colonial violence, lateral violence arises from a process by which members of an oppressed group are made to feel powerless, resulting in a violent response which is targeted at other community members (Linklater 44). In particular, gang activities—i.e. fighting other Indigenous men and women over territory (*Str8 Up* 5)—reflect a connection between gangs, residential schools, and their effects. Finally, the description of lateral violence in Morin's work also helps to sew together colonial atrocities from the past with the current existence of Indigenous gangs in Canada.

The 60's Scoop

Other stories shared in *Str8 Up and Gangs* describe experiences of abuse while in foster care, connecting the legacies of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. Many of the *Str8 Up* members' autobiographies include experiences of violence in foster care: "Lost to the grip of child welfare, many troublesome years of abuse at the hands of different foster parents sowed a profound seed of dysfunction amongst me and my siblings," writes Cory Cardinal (12). Other members describe such "troublesome years" in detail, expressing through story how their experiences fostered a deep need for protection, a desire for loyalty and trustworthiness, and even a direct link between abuse and incarceration. Lazar Journey recounts the following effort to protect his sister who was being abused while in foster care:

⁷ "Lateral Violence: residential schools have been suggested as the primary cause of a cluster of behaviors known as lateral violence thought to be prevalent within Aboriginal communities. Lateral violence can occur within oppressed societies and include bullying, gossiping, feuding, shaming, and blaming other members of one's own social group as well as having a lack of trust toward other group members" (Bombay, Matheson, Anisman 2).

She tells me that my older brother, our adoptive parent's oldest son, was hurting her. I don't remember all of what happened, but the courts say that I walked to my dad's gun case, pulled out his shotgun, loaded it, walked down to my oldest brother's room, opened the door and fired one shot, instantly killing him . . . I'm gonna rewind to the beginning now, to the stuff I didn't want to remember. My brother and I have been in a lot of foster homes and have been through a lot of abuse . . . Wherever they went, they always hurt him. I had to grow up fast and take care of him. (49-51)

This passage demonstrates that a reading focused on criminal acts committed by Indigenous gang members later in life does not account for what has transpired in their personal histories to motivate the crimes they have committed. That is, these stories show that the men and women who have been defined by society and our judicial system as hardened criminals, i.e. 'bad,' were once innocent children placed, through no choice of their own, in dysfunctional environments where violence was routine, and protection had to be sought by any means necessary.

When the stories in *Str8 Up and Gangs* are read in a manner informed by the history of colonization—residential schools and the 60's Scoop—the cycle of violence and subsequent social effects which colonial systems have put in motion against Indigenous people in Canada become visible. In *Stolen From Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities*, Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey describe the history of adopting First Nations children out of their families, and simultaneously separating them from their cultures, as a process which began in the 1950's (82) and allowed for “abductions sanctioned by provincial child welfare laws” (81). In the 1970's, the effects of the child welfare system became more visible: “drinking and despair intensified rather than dissipated. People were feeling completely helpless, useless and totally defeated . . . They felt as though they had

no control over themselves and that someone else, whites, were in charge” (87). Although the 60's Scoop began generations ago, the intergenerational and cumulative effects of trauma have resulted in long-lasting negative impacts for those who were in residential schools, for those taken from families by the 60's Scoop, as well as for those subsequent generations of children of residential school and 60's Scoop survivors.

When Str8 Up members tell the stories of their childhoods, either in foster care or at home with biological parents, the recurring theme of violence foregrounds a barrage of intoxication-fueled beatings. Often these experiences begin within Str8 Up members' childhood homes, routinely involving alcoholism. Brendan Jimmy's first memory, for example, is described as “watching [his] parents and grandparents drinking and fighting” (*Str8 Up* 36). However, violence is not experienced with singular interpretations for Str8 Up members. Some describe violence as conferring a certain degree of respect, albeit through fear and intimidation. At age eleven John Siwak was officially jumped into Native Syndicate, choosing to be an enforcer “which means being one of the 'beaters' or the 'killers'” (59). On the level of diction, ranks such as *beater* or *killer* call explicit attention to the prevalence and naturalization of violence within gang life. Also, John Siwak's and Brendan Jimmy's stories show that violence and gang affiliation span multiple generations for Indigenous peoples in Canada, and range from being born into violent living situations to being born gang-affiliated. Other members describe their introductions to violence in a manner informed by their socio-economic positions. Shawn Bellrose Wilton, for example, describes emulating his older brother while living in North Central Regina, the roughest neighborhood in the city: “I moved to North Central Regina. This is where my life as a future gang member started. I went to a school in the hood where I instantly got into fights, started bullying, stealing, even going as far as starting my own playground 'gang'” (68).

Although these stories describe violence in different ways, there is a common theme between them. Each story expresses an introduction to violence from a young age, experiences or situations whereby violent behavior becomes naturalized and even praised, and the interconnectedness of experiences of state violence, from colonialist contact to the present, of dysfunctional home lives, whether in foster care or family, of living in impoverished neighbourhoods, and of drugs and alcohol.

The scholarship on gangs also cites experiences of violence—an issue which is connected to histories of colonization, disruption of community values and family dynamics, and impoverished, core neighbourhoods—as a key factor which often inspires affiliation with or direct involvement in gang life and activity. In *Indians Wear Red: Colonialism, Resistance, and Aboriginal Street Gangs*, Elizabeth Comack, Lawrence Deane, Larry Morrissette, and Jim Silver describe the violence in Winnipeg's North end, an area known for crime and gang activity, in conjunction with experiences of poverty and ill health. Citing several studies (Fitzgerald, Wisener, and Savoie 2004; CCPA-MB 2005; Comack and Silver 2006 and 2008; Dobchuk-Land, Towes, and Silver 2010), Comack and her colleagues show a connection between neighbourhoods notorious for violence, such as Winnipeg's North end, and anxiety and stress regarding that threat of violence, which results in poor health outcomes (57). The linkage between violent crimes, concerns for safety, and the anxiety and stress created by such violence, helps to substantiate the main argument made by *Str8 Up and Gangs*—gang members, those affected most by gang violence, experience ill health and are in need of multiple forms of treatment, not incarceration. Generally speaking, violence has been shown to accompany threat and the associated anxiety. Each of these, both violence and threat, result in the perceived

necessity for protection, making gang membership seem more attractive, and resulting in ill health for those living as gang members, and those impacted by gang activities.

Still further, violence and gangs can be understood intergenerationally. It has been suggested that violence has lasting effects which can span generations. For example, Renee Linklater puts forth the notion of collective and cumulative trauma, as well as the notions of ‘blood memory’ and the ‘soul wound’ in *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies*. Citing Brave Heart-Jordan, Linklater puts forth a definition of cumulative and historical trauma that describes “‘collective and compounding emotional and psychic wounding over time, both over the life span and across generations’” (34). The lasting effects of traumatic experiences—epidemics, massacres, cultural genocides, displacement, and the breaking down of the family dynamic (Comack et. al. 37)—are particularly important to consider when trying to understand Indigenous gangs in Canada. It is argued that these experiences tend to result in violent behavior and substance abuse (38). In general, “when physical, structural or psychological violence is used to achieve the objective of domination, the outcomes may not only produce acute trauma, but may set in place chronic conditions of ongoing victimization and traumatisation at different levels, compounding the traumatisation across generations” (Atkinson 92). Gangs and violence need to be understood in connection with other factors such as abusive home lives, poverty, and substance abuse. Also, gangs and violence need to be understood in a manner which accounts for the unique ways in which gang members may have been oppressed. For example, Indigenous gangs in Canada need to be understood in conjunction with the history of the colonization of Canada. This is why this analysis of violence has sought to demonstrate a link between experiences of trauma—historical, intergenerational, cumulative, and contemporary forms—and high degrees of stress and anxiety, as well as resultant experiences of illness. This

connection ultimately serves as persuasive evidence that a solution to the growing problem of Indigenous gangs in Canada is one which places gangs within the area of health and sickness, not crime and punishment. The stories and creative works which members share in *Str8 Up and Gangs* explain that the criminal acts which members have committed have been motivated by factors beyond their control—intergenerational trauma, socio-economic status, and colonialism. In general, the stories which members tell of their lives connect the issues they have faced at home and in society—violence, poverty, and substance abuse—with their criminal actions, explaining that Indigenous gang members and the lifestyles they lead are not the result of immorality, but the result of a need for protection, power, respect, and family⁸--everything that colonialism has sought to take from Indigenous peoples.

Substance Abuse

Another major issue exposed by *Str8 Up and Gangs* is made visible in both the autobiographical and the artistic contributions members have made to the book—substance abuse. While sharing their life stories, many of the Str8 Up members describe experiences with alcohol and drug abuse from early childhood and throughout their lives. They further describe substance abuse that affects entire communities: “I am an Aboriginal man from a small northern community, a community that is infected with alcoholism and drug abuse,” writes Curis Eklund (*Str8 Up* 21); “My mom was an alcoholic who drank a lot, but seemed to always make time to have fun with us, and talk to us and make sure we had what we needed to get by,” another

⁸ This paper also acknowledges the trauma which gang members cause through violent crimes, and recognizes that further research is needed in relation to healing the relationship between perpetrators and victims. Healing ex-gang members and diminishing gang violence, the focus of this paper, provides one step toward healing the relationship between perpetrators and victims of crime.

member explains (*Str8 Up* 30). The stories which the members share also elucidate a linkage between alcoholism, violence, and youth crime, as well as a cycle whereby children of alcoholics deal with substance abuse issues later in life. Brendan Jimmy's story emphasizes this point in particular. First, Jimmy's story describes his first break-and-enter as a choice he was forced to make because of poverty, food insecurity, and the catalyst, alcoholism: "I did my first break and enter at eight years old, just to feed my siblings 'cause my parents spent all the money on alcohol" (36). Jimmy's story continues on to reveal a link between alcoholism and violence: "I had to look after my younger siblings because my parents were alcoholics. And when there was alcohol, there was sure to be violence. The two went hand in hand" (37). These descriptions suggest alcoholism in epidemic proportions, and help to make clear the ripple effect that children who grow up in homes where substance abuse is prevalent can face—experiences of poverty, food insecurity, and violence. It comes as no surprise then, that individuals faced with such experiences sometimes seek protection, money, and power. Still further, the stories in *Str8 Up and Gangs* describe multiple traumatic experiences, where children of substance abusing parents turn to drugs and alcohol to cope with that to which they have been subjected: "I began drinking with my parents on the weekends. I started going to parties and developing a reputation for being a rank drunk. By rank, I mean I started a lot of fights and people were already starting to fear me. At 16, I was charged for my first assault and uttering death threats" (*Str8 Up* 37). This passage from Brendan Jimmy's autobiographical contribution clearly identifies a cycle of violence that is connected to experiences of familial dysfunction and trauma. The stories which *Str8 Up* members tell show that experiences like these span the lives of *Str8 Up* members, inform the perpetuation of cycles of violence and substance abuse from one generation to another, and can result in incarceration. Ultimately, these stories teach readers the following about the

interconnected nature of the motivating factors for joining gangs: first, substance abuse is linked to violence or poverty; second, such experiences incentivise children brought up in challenging environments to commit crime and join gangs; third, self-medicating can have serious consequences; and fourth, gangs are not the result of “bad” choices made by “bad” people; rather, they are an issue faced by those who are sick or hurting, often at the hands of others.

Many critics substantiate the messages about substance abuse made accessible by *Str8 Up and Gangs*. Work on substance abuse, cultural loss, and the social determinants of health states that: “Drug and alcohol abuse, and ill-health too, are said by many indigenous people to have arisen from, or been exacerbated by, deprivation and the erosion of their cultural integrity (acculturation) as a result of colonization” (Brady 1489). Other experts suggest that alcoholism and substance abuse are made worse by experiences of social and economic exclusion, each of which are also inseparable from the impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples in Canada. A *Healthy Society: How a Focus on Health can Revive Canadian Democracy*, written by a member of the local Saskatoon community, Dr. Ryan Meili, describes drug and alcohol in these exact terms: “Violence, racism, sexual exploitation, and substance abuse are only a few of the many symptoms of ongoing poverty and social exclusion. The list goes on, and the result is ill health” (24). Meili and Brady substantiate the central tenet presented by *Str8 Up and Gangs*—those who have been involved in gangs but wish to leave are often in need of therapeutic forms of healing, so they can come to terms with the traumatic experiences that typically characterize their lives before becoming gang members, while active in a gang, and while incarcerated. Most of all, *Str8 Up and Gangs* uses first-hand accounts from ex-gang members to help explain that gangs are the manifestation of social issues which cause ill health and pain, and which are best addressed through therapeutic means.

Incarceration

Although *Str8 Up and Gangs* presents the works of authors in a manner that makes a compelling argument for the treatment rather than the incarceration of Indigenous gang members, the most standard method of dealing with gangs appears to be suppression (*Str8 Up* 81). As the collective narrative offered in *Str8 Up and Gangs* progresses, the issues elucidated by the members are shown to be problems which society currently seeks to rectify through incarceration. However, members' written works show that prison is an environment which makes individuals more threatening and violent, promotes gang membership, and worsens existing substance abuse issues. Dale Isaac's life story, for example, describes his experience of being incarcerated in the following way:

I was only 17 years old when I got moved to the Correctional Centre in Regina . . . if there's a fight, you turn a blind eye and walk away and mind your own business . . . Well, it was not long after I got out of jail (two months), when I was picked up for assault and assault with a weapon . . . I was scared out of my mind, but I did not show any fear 'cause that's what the other members look for, to see if you are scared. (30-31)

Isaac here describes the normalization of violence that takes place in Canada's so-called 'correctional' facilities, as well as the effect this had on him—showing no fear, bottling up emotions, and establishing and maintaining an intimidating persona. Further still, Isaac describes prison as a place which heightens the need for protection, resulting in the creation of new gang members: "I was about a month and a half into my six month bit and that's when I got into my first fight . . . little did I know it was a set up. It was a test to see if I would fight or just check in and take it dry. So not long after, I got asked to join, to which I said yes" (31). Joining a gang in

prison is not the least bit uncommon. Rather, *Str8 Up and Gangs* makes clear that “young inmates are preyed upon from their first entry into prison and forced into identifying with a particular gang in order to survive the jailhouse culture of gang rivalry. It is quite true that it is better to be a member of a gang than to be a ‘range b***h’ (*Str8 Up* 82). This notion is substantiated by Deena Rymhs, author of “In this Inverted Garden: Masculinity in Canadian Prison Writing”: “Fighting, Caron points out, is a way of establishing one’s place in the social hierarchy. Such physical aggression may take more extreme forms like prison rape” (Rymhs 82). The rape referred to by Rymhs is precisely what Dale Isaac means when he uses the phrase “check in and take it dry” (31). That prison environments perpetuate violence and help to grow gang membership is just the beginning of the issues which the stories from *Str8 Up and Gangs* make visible to readers. I argue that prisons enact types of violence similar to those seen in the histories of residential schools and the child welfare system, placing males and females in dangerous environments where they are forced to adopt violent behaviors in an effort to protect themselves. *Str8 Up and Gangs* demonstrates that incarceration continues a form of systematic colonial oppression.

The above section makes clear that practices of dominance are routine among male Indigenous gang members. However, a gendered analysis of *Str8 Up and Gangs* immediately underscores the absence of female experiences of gangs. The stories in this text are written by men and therefore only give voice to the male experience of gangs and incarceration.⁹ This lack of a female perspective is a matter that *Str8 Up* is currently addressing by working on a collection similar to *Str8 Up and Gangs*, but with the stories of female gang members.

⁹ The collection was a project undertaken at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre, a facility for men, which explains why no women were involved.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that experiences within gangs are highly gendered. For example, gendered analysis of gangs has resulted in two categories for female gang members—tomboy or sex object (Miller 423). In particular, the category of sex object suggests that the female experience of gangs is one of limited power and authority, and of a high degree of sexual violence. Ultimately, a gendered analysis of gangs demonstrates that power and authority are concentrated within the realm of domineering, intimidating men, and that one cannot assume that male and female experiences as gang members are the same.

Another major issue described by *Str8 Up* members is becoming addicted to narcotics while incarcerated. Lazar Journey, for example, cites his time incarcerated in the Saskatchewan federal Penitentiary as the point in his life when he became addicted to pills, and started to use needles to inject morphine (49). This portion of Journey's story aligns itself with other insights about prison expressed in Kevin Marron's periodical "High times doing hard time: packed with dealers and substance abusers": "It is also likely that prisons are increasing the number of drug users on the streets. Many prisoners told me that they acquired drug habits in jail or moved from soft to hard drugs during the course of their sentences" (Marron).¹⁰ The environment to which the Canadian justice system confines incarcerated men and women, an inordinate number of whom are Indigenous, is intensely violent and even fails to limit the use of illegal substances that are highly addictive. Generally speaking, prisons are set as stages of dehumanizing cruelty, which diminishes hope for change: "prisons may vary in their measure of violence and brutality, they are reducible to their basic function of depriving their captives of the dignity and freedom of rights-bearing individuals (Rymhs 79). Speaking broadly, *Str8 Up and Gangs* demonstrates the

¹⁰ "Drug Testing in Canadian Jails: To What End?" also calls attention to the dangerous issue of drug use in prison, and the threat of spreading HIV (Kendall and Pearce 26).

Canada's prison system's inability to rehabilitate. Rather than help incarcerated men and women with the issues they struggle with, leading to their incarceration, the Canadian justice system sentences men and women to environments that are intensely dangerous, deny dignity and rights, and perpetuate the problems our legal system is supposed to seek to correct. As such, the effect of criminalization is the reproduction of violence among colonized peoples, and the protection of privileges granted to those who benefit from colonialism.

The Use of Narrative to Heal

There are multiple approaches to coping with gangs and the violence they perpetuate. For example, many of the Str8 Up members I interviewed noted the importance of cultural ceremonies. When I asked, "Has sharing your story helped you come across ways to confront pain?", one respondent answered, "Yes, all the time," but also added the following: "I've done a lot of personal healing—a lot of sweats, a lot of ceremonies, fasts." This response acknowledges the efficacy of narrative for healing, but also shows that there are other useful, culturally informed forms of healing as well. Interestingly, Str8 Up is different in the emphasis it places on narrative. *Str8 Up and Gangs*, for example, places explicit emphasis on the use of narrative to help members leave gangs and live sober lifestyles. Moreover, Str8 Up is currently in the process of producing a healing workbook, as well a sequel to *Str8 Up and Gangs: The Untold Stories* which will provide space for female members to give voice to their experiences as gang members¹¹. The specific manner in which Str8 Up utilizes the stories of members is described in the following passage:

¹¹ See also Robert Henry's *Brighter Days Ahead*.

These are the true life stories of thirteen men who have chosen to share their hearts, their pain, and their grief to reach at-risk youth before they become involved in gang life. This is their way to give back to their communities. In doing so, they not only reach the youth they seek to help, but they educate the general public and empower themselves as well. (*Str8 Up* 4)

This acknowledgment clearly states what Str8 Up members hope to achieve by sharing their stories—the prevention of at-risk youth joining gangs, giving back to the community, and educating the general public, while simultaneously empowering themselves. The emphasis Str8 Up places on narrative transcends the front and back cover of *Str8 Up and Gangs*, but is acknowledged by the book when it discusses weekly Str8 Up sharing circles and public speaking events. At Str8 Up presentations, members facilitate workshops and share their stories with a wide variety of audiences—school-age children, recovering addicts, officials of the law, and social workers—teaching about the dangerous realities of gang life and addictions (*Str8 Up* 87). In addition to the public speaking presentations which members host, they also utilize narrative while conducting weekly addiction sharing circles, where members give Oskayak high school students the opportunity to share and listen about struggles associated with addiction (87). Finally, Str8 Up also hosts traditional sharing circles for its members, giving them a chance to express their personal thoughts, feelings, and ideas about long-standing issues in their lives, recent struggles, or addiction in general to an audience of peers who understand both gang-life and addictions, and how these two lived experiences are intertwined (87). Str8 Up's programming and productions use narrative practices and techniques to help members. Ultimately, narrative is one of the best ways for Str8 Up, both the organization and its members, to accomplish their personal and community goals.

Other organizations use public speaking as a method for preventing the growth of gang membership, suggesting that Str8 Up is not alone in their use of story-telling to reduce the growth of gangs, and to educate the public about the dangerous realities of gang life. The Youth Alliance Against Gang Violence is just one program where ex-gang members are asked to speak with youth to help prevent the increase of gang membership, and hopefully to spare them from violence, addiction, and incarceration: “Under staff supervision and support, selected program participants disengaging from gangs made presentations to other young people about the dangers of youth violence, bullying and gang involvement. The primary goal for the presenters was to develop employment and life skills” (YAAGV Web). Other experts on gangs note the efficacy of having ex-gang members speak to current gang members or to at-risk youth either about stopping their involvement with a particular gang, or about not becoming involved with a gang in the first place. *An Investigation into the Formation and Recruitment Processes of Aboriginal Gangs in Western Canada: "When You Have Nothing to Live For, You Have Nothing to Die For"* states that because of their lived experiences, ex-gang members’ messages resonate more powerfully with current street gang members (Grekul 45). Str8 Up utilizes narrative in most aspects of its program, allowing for ex-gang members to have their voices and expertise on the subject of gangs, gang violence, and addictions heard—educating, contributing, and preventing.

One of the reasons why narrative is an important means by which Str8 Up members transition from a gang lifestyle to a legal, sober lifestyle is that the use of story is culturally relevant for Indigenous people. In “Storytelling as a Healing Tool for American Indians,” Dolores Subia Bigfoot and Megan Dunlap describe stories as an important part of traditional Indigenous cultures:

A story could always be found that would show someone the consequences of his or her behavior. Stories were used to explain how things happen and what can be expected about the present and the future. Storytelling time was a time for filling in the past and helping to make sense of things when challenges seemed overwhelming; it was also a time for learning, listening, interacting, and sharing with one another.

(133)

This passage demonstrates that the stories we tell about our lived experiences inform choices that others make, explain the cause and effect of any given number of scenarios, teach about the past as well as the present, and give us an idea of what the future may hold in store. Narrative is therefore an excellent tool for Str8 Up members to use to teach about the dangerous realities of gang life and addictions, hopefully preventing at-risk youth from suffering consequences such as loss of loved ones, freedom, and personal well-being.

Furthermore, stories have been described as useful teaching tools for children. Again Bigfoot and Dunlap state that “stories can provide children with characters going through circumstances similar to their own. Children can observe, through stories, the problem-solving process, possible actions to take, and the consequences of each action” (138). By contributing their personal experiences of trauma to *Str8 Up and Gangs*, members have made use of narrative in a way that seeks to elucidate the realities of gang-life and addictions, showing the consequences of this lifestyle, and encouraging youth to try to make different choices with their lives.

The stories which Str8 Up members share are not solely beneficial for those who listen or read them. Rather, there is a considerable amount of evidence which supports the notion that the stories are also therapeutic for Str8 Up members themselves. In “Poetry Therapy,” Kenneth

Gorelick describes poetry as helping individuals to foster better understandings of themselves, increase self-esteem and self-expression, strengthen communication skills, aid in expression of powerful emotions, and enhance coping skills and adaptation (118). Other experts in the subject area of trauma and testimony, two lived experiences Str8 Up members are familiar with, describe story-telling as absolutely necessary to the healing of those who have undergone trauma: “The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive” (Laub 78). Interestingly, Dori Laub’s description of the necessity of expressing traumatic experiences suggests that the received benefits extend from the teller of the story to the attentive audience members sitting and listening. The benefits shared between teller and audience are expressed more specifically by John McLeod in “The Significance of Narrative and Storytelling in Postpsychological Counseling and Psychotherapy”: personal stories benefit both the teller and the audience because the teller’s emotions are conveyed, confronted, and experienced by audiences through the telling of the story (17); the public performance or telling of a story also provides a sense of overcoming obstacles (19); and finally, sharing one’s story helps to combat the “emotionally painful and problematic” experience of being silenced (23). To this list, one might add Jo-Ann Episknew’s thoughts from *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*. Episknew states that Indigenous life writing seeks to accomplish the following: to organize and articulate experiences and feelings of trauma to help both writer and audience cope with said experiences; to educate readers about the suffering Indigenous people have endured as a result of colonialism; to encourage readers to analyze their own lives critically; and, in general, to help remedy the issues associated with colonialism through empathy, social justice, and social change (74-75). *Str8 Up and Gangs* is the product of the emphasis which Str8 Up places on the use of narrative to facilitate acceptance of

past events and current lived experiences, education for those who do and do not know about the realities of gang lifestyles and experiences, and intervention in and prevention of gang activity in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and the surrounding areas.

Str8Up members themselves support the notion that sharing experiences of traumatic events is helpful with combating recidivism and relapse. I interviewed Str8 Up members about the benefits of sharing stories about their lives¹², and the results echo the findings of Laub, McLeod, and Episkenew. For example, one Str8 Up member states that “there was lots of times that I wrote down my story. Like over time it helped me identify more areas that I needed to work on myself.” This particular member described how sharing her story has helped her achieve a higher degree of critical self-awareness and accountability. Other members describe a shift from feeling voiceless while in gangs, to openly sharing what was unspeakable before: “Overall, I’ve learned that I have a voice . . . I’m not silent anymore about what had happened. It brings back so much memories from when I was a kid, and so much traumatic stuff.” In regards to the crimes which Str8 Up members have committed, they describe the benefits of sharing their story as restorative, both for themselves and the community. Firstly, a member states, “the more I did the presentations, the more I was more open about my crime, and the shame and guilt was slowly going away.” Aside from demonstrating accountability for their past and present actions, Str8 Up members also describe how this has changed their relationships within the community. When asked what it was like to share their story with people who have no understanding of gang-life, a member responded by stating: “It was good too, because their feedback was just as helpful:

¹² These interviews are part of a larger study on the relationship between narrative and healing for Str8 Up members, conducted by Dr. Van Styvendale, Str8Up founder Stan Tu’Inukuafe, and myself. Ethics approval for this study was given by the University of Saskatchewan’s Research Ethics Board. Str8 Up members’ participation was entirely voluntary, and written and verbal consent to use interview data was received from all respondents.

'wow, you came a long way.' They just treated us good. It made me feel good inside . . . I guess I'm getting love; I'm getting praise." As Str8 Up members share their thoughts on how using narrative has helped them, it becomes clear that the use of narrative could be considered as a beneficial tool for any gang prevention model, and that allowing those who have experienced trauma to speak their truth is part of a program that is more effective at dealing with gangs than solely the criminalization and incarceration of men and women who have already overcome so much.

Str8 Up and Gangs is a text which mobilizes a discourse of health, sickness, and pain in a conversation where discourses of crime, punishment, and condemnation are the norm. From the first pages onward, the effects of colonialism in Canada are made apparent. Pieces about residential schools and child welfare act as a thread which sews the history of contact and colonization together with current issues of social exclusion, poverty, racism, disempowerment, and oppressions survived by Indigenous peoples in Canada. Residential schools, the 60's Scoop, and incarceration—these experiences have resulted in terrible pain for survivors, and major rifts within Indigenous families and communities. The effects of this colonial legacy are described directly by those who have survived—Str8 Up members. Common throughout the book are stories of violence that begins shortly after birth and continues as a central theme. Then, the stories describe experiences of being sentenced as an adult and locked in provincial and federal institutions. Similarly, drugs and alcohol are described as common facets of each stage of members' lives—from conception through incarceration. When traced back to their origin, the types of violence described by Str8 Up members lead to the histories of residential schools, the 60's Scoop, and, more broadly, colonialism. Ultimately, this analysis has built to a single question: given the connection between a violent colonial history, the formation of Canada, and

the gang violence prevalent in Indigenous communities today, what is the best approach to dealing with intergenerational trauma, addictions, and gang violence? Truly, there is no easy answer to this question, and the solution is not singular in nature. However, *Str8 Up and Gangs* does address this question. Currently, Indigenous men and women, regardless of whether or not they are involved in gangs, make up a large portion of the incarcerated population. Also, *Str8 Up and Gangs* teaches readers that, once incarcerated, many people join gangs. Further still, incarceration has been cited as worsening both the issues of gang violence and substance abuse. It seems, therefore, that incarceration alone is not effectively combating recidivism or relapse. What Str8 Up has suggested is the use of narrative to heal ex-gang members from the traumatic experiences they have endured throughout their lives, and to help these men and women realize sober, legal lifestyles. *Str8 Up and Gangs: The Untold Stories* is just one example of the ways Str8 Up has incorporated the use of narrative into its program. By telling these previously untold and unheard stories, Str8 Up members have helped to educate audiences about the dangerous realities of Indigenous gangs in Canada, as well as using experiential knowledge to teach about the motivating factors for membership—Canadian colonialism, intergenerational trauma, cycles of violence, substance abuse, and incarceration.

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