

## 4 Stolen City: Racial Capitalism and the Making of Winnipeg

A review of: Owen Toews, *Stolen City: Racial Capitalism and the Making of Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: ARP Press, 2018).

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In 2015, *Maclean's* magazine called Winnipeg the “most racist city in Canada.”<sup>1</sup> A city founded on Indigenous land in a province joined to Canada through colonial violence, it is no surprise that racism continues to play a significant role in the shaping of Winnipeg today. Through a comprehensive historical analysis from the 1800s to the present day, Owen Toews’ *Stolen City: Racial Capitalism and the Making of Winnipeg* examines the intertwined processes of colonialism, capitalism, and city-building in Winnipeg’s emergence and growth.

*Stolen City* draws on archival research, media and document analysis, observation, and interviews, and includes dozens of photos and maps of Winnipeg. The book is divided into two halves. The first half explores the history of Winnipeg to the end of the twentieth century, a history of several stages of dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands for the benefit of white settler Canadians, punctuated by specific moments of violence against Métis communities and First Nations. Toews identifies four key settler-colonial visions that shaped the city: the export-agrarian vision, the urban industrial vision, the suburban vision, and the urban post-industrial vision. He also identifies counter-plans in each period that contest the dominant vision.

The first vision reshaped Winnipeg from its origins as Red River, a Métis and First Nation city. Its rapid growth in the late nineteenth century was driven by a bloc of “financiers, speculators, rentiers and manufacturers” —the city’s wealthy and powerful.<sup>2</sup> The bloc developed a vision of agrarian capitalism that “would establish a radically new cultural geography in the North-West, where people who depended on and supported Indigenous dispossession, Canadian law and order, private property, markets, white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalist modes of relating to both the human and non-human world, and a range of other

colonial institutions and power structures would outnumber [...] those who did not.”<sup>3</sup>

This dominant group of agrarian capitalists used municipal powers to benefit wealthy white Canadians at the expense of Indigenous people, a process that was strongly challenged by the Métis and Anishinaabe, who evicted surveyors, established their own government and territory, and eventually took up arms against the Canadian army. Despite the resistance, Toews argues, the use of municipal powers for colonial ends is a process that continues to shape Winnipeg today.

The second vision, of an industrialized Winnipeg that relied on the exploitation of eastern European labourers, emerged as Winnipeg grew. These workers brought radical traditions of organizing to the city, which culminated in the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. They built strong labour movements that offered an explicit critique of capitalism but, Toews notes, much of their rhetoric reinforced strikers’ identities as Canadians within the dominant settler-colonial framework.

The mid-twentieth century suburban vision directed state attention and investment to the suburbs. This process recreated the inner city as a “place of state and capitalist neglect [...] populated more and more by people [...] who had been similarly abandoned.”<sup>4</sup> New and growing industry in northern Canada made life on reserves more difficult and pushed Indigenous people to move to southern cities. Suburbanization also evicted hundreds, if not thousands, of Métis and other Indigenous people living on the edges of the city.

Later, in the second half of the twentieth century, a post-industrial vision for Winnipeg emerged, which blamed Indigenous people for their poverty and relied on imprisonment, police, and enforced participation in capitalism. Through grassroots organizing, Indigenous Winnipeggers created Indian and Métis Friendship Centres, community supports, and a vision for the future in *Wahbung: Our Tomorrows*, a 1971 “landmark study of Manitoba’s postwar political economy.”<sup>5</sup> These two visions for the city—Winnipeg for capital versus Winnipeg for people—set the stage for Toews’ discussion of the tensions in contemporary downtown Winnipeg.

In the book’s second half, Toews analyses the displacement of the city’s Indigenous heart by state-supported gentrification. While in recent decades the downtown has become a hub for new immigrants, and there are dozens of service organizations supporting Indigenous and newcomer communities, the area has been aggressively targeted for renewal by urban capitalist investors, who see potential for bringing back wealthy white suburbanites.

Toews identifies two competing contemporary visions for Winnipeg: Neeginan, a grass-roots vision that seeks the restoration of self-determination and land for Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg; and CentreVenture, the City of Winnipeg’s arms-length development corporation, which intends to revitalize

the downtown. Neeginan, meaning “our place” in Cree, was initially created in the late 1960s, and envisioned a village within the city that would support Indigenous people with housing, schools, healthcare, and other resources. Neeginan continues to have resonance today downtown and in the city’s North End.

In contrast, CentreVenture, which was established in 1999, seeks to make the downtown welcoming to developers, business, and suburban visitors. CentreVenture’s premise is that financial investment will benefit all, but in practice it results in exclusion. CentreVenture has reduced Indigenous spaces downtown by buying up and closing hotels and bars, and redeveloping parks and other spaces for the benefit of higher-income, non-Indigenous populations. The tension between the community-oriented, Indigenous-led grassroots vision of Neeginan, and the settler-colonial capitalist vision of CentreVenture is clearly articulated in *Stolen City*, as are the stakes: the future of downtown Winnipeg hangs in the balance.

*Stolen City* makes three important contributions to urban history and theory. First, it locates the practices of settler-colonialism and Indigenous resistance in urban space. The city is integral to the Indigenous vision for Winnipeg as a space in which community can thrive and grow, and to the settler-capitalist vision as a space of profit-making for non-Indigenous capitalists. Too often, urban history employs what Julie Tomiak calls “methodological settler colonialism” to elide or erase Indigenous presence and agency from urban spaces by “treating the city as an innocent container of social relations.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Toews uses the spaces of Winnipeg to “[reposition] the colonial frame as our overarching lens of analysis”<sup>7</sup> and articulate the city as both a colonial space and a space of Indigenous action.

Second, *Stolen City* lifts up the visions and activism of the Indigenous and inner-city communities. From the beginning, these communities have organized themselves to create supportive structures that challenge the dominant bloc’s attempts to appropriate space and wealth. By describing the visions and activism of the Indigenous and inner-city communities in parallel with those of the dominant bloc, Toews shows that power is never uncontested, and that there is significant strength at the grassroots level.

Third, *Stolen City* grounds its analysis in distinctly local patterns of capitalist and colonial relations. It is an excellent illustration of Logan and Molotch’s urban growth machine, nuanced with the complexity of racial and settler-colonial dynamics.<sup>8</sup> Logan and Molotch argue that “although they may differ on which particular strategy will best succeed, elites use their growth consensus to eliminate any alternative vision of the purpose of local government or the meaning of community.”<sup>9</sup> Toews’ analysis identifies the growth-focused normative assumptions of settler colonialism and capitalism present in everyday decision-making about the lands of Winnipeg. Although based in one city, the patterns that emerge are familiar as they reflect policies and processes common across settler-colonial countries.

One question that remains at the end of *Stolen City* is that of the changing racial and spatial dynamics in Winnipeg. Manitoba has seen a significant surge in immigration over the past decade or so, and the majority of newcomers live outside the downtown core, as do the majority of Indigenous people.<sup>10</sup> Toews focuses primarily on the racial dynamics of the inner city, but there is a more complicated relationship between Black people and people of colour (whether newcomers or long-term residents), white people, and Indigenous people that is both emerging and in need of scrutiny. Moving beyond the dualism of the white-dominant bloc and the Indigenous low-income communities of the downtown would enable a deeper analysis of both race and class, nuanced by ongoing settler-colonial processes through the lens of white supremacist capitalism. In considering the future of Winnipeg (and of Canada), a more comprehensive conversation is necessary: one that acknowledges and addresses colonialism, capitalism, and evolving racialized and classed relations of power.

*Stolen City* is an essential read for anyone interested in reconciliation, decolonization, capitalism, and urban space. It asks whether it is possible to create a city that does not require participation in capitalist wealth-extraction, and highlights persistent and powerful Indigenous demands for self-determination in pursuit of such a goal. As conversations about reconciliation continue, it is essential to recognize that remediation of the impacts of colonialism is not enough. The fundamental injustices of settler-colonialism and capitalism must be grappled with; acknowledging and addressing their ongoing imprint in our cities is one place to start.

#### Endnotes

1 Nancy Macdonald, “Welcome to Winnipeg: Where Canada’s Racism Problem Is at Its Worst,” *Maclean’s*, January 2015, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/welcome-to-winnipeg-where-canadas-racism-problem-is-at-its-worst>.

2 Owen Toews, *Stolen City: Racial Capitalism and the Making of Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2018).

3 *Ibid.*, 54.

4 *Ibid.*, 125.

5 *Ibid.*, 138.

6 Julie Tomiak, “Unsettling Ottawa: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Resistance, and the Politics of Scale,” *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 25, no. 1 (2016): 9–10.

7 Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 11.

8 John R. Logan and Harvey L. Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

9 *Ibid.*, 51.

10 *City of Winnipeg, 2016 Census Data: Non-Inner City, Community Social Data Strategy, Custom Tabulation*, Statistics Canada, Census of Population–2016, 2019, <https://winnipeg.ca/census/2016/City%20of%20Winnipeg>.