

Nápi and the city: Blackfoot creation narratives revisited.

Tim W. Patterson

School Support Services/Curriculum Support; Calgary Board of Education;
Suite 300 - #8 Manning Close NE; Calgary, Alberta, CANADA. T2E 7N5

Martin J.D. Whittles

Canadian Studies; Thompson Rivers University; 900 McGill Road; Kamloops, British
Columbia; CANADA V2C 5N3

Abstract

Typically, Aboriginal people in Canada are excluded from the prosperity of urban life. When introduced to the fabric of city living, non-Native narratives of extreme dislocation and poverty within a hostile physical and social environment often weave Aboriginal people as culturally dead. Nevertheless, Aboriginal people in Canada continue to urbanize in unprecedented numbers.

To better understand this phenomenon, members of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Treaty 7) living in the Alberta cities of Lethbridge and Calgary took part in an ethnographic research project that revealed the veracity of Aboriginal narrative. Indeed, traditional and contemporary stories and story telling remain significant to and for urban Aboriginal people. In this paper, we will discuss how Nápi, or Old Man Creator, stories -- which are typically viewed as foundational and original stories fixed in time, or merely archaic legends -- are, in fact, profoundly dynamic and modern in their approach to explaining the city. In particular, we illustrate how Nápi stories speak to not only geographical and architectural landmarks within the city culturally specific to the Blackfoot, but more importantly how narrative assists in explaining all manner of contemporary urban issues including domestic violence, homelessness, alienation, and poverty.

Newhouse and Peters note that "Aboriginal people live in cities...[yet]...this simple declarative statement hides a complex reality. Life in small towns and large cities is part of Aboriginal reality as is life on reserves"(Newhouse & Peters, 2003:5). To this end, Patterson has described Canadian urban Indian, Métis, and Inuit as a matchless kind of city population -- native people for whom the city is both a place where they are "excluded from much of the prosperity enjoyed by non-aboriginal Canadians," and who comprise a unique part of Canadian life where "simple notions are never as they appear" (Patterson, 2004). Typically, the Canadian city is popularly presented as a dynamic place, a hub attracting talent of all varieties, a centre overflowing with opportunity typically attracting those enthusiastic for the promise of expected affluence. On the other hand, we have argued elsewhere (Patterson & Whittles, 2005), that "the bright lights and glare of potential can be overshadowed: cities can also be artificial, restrictive, and exploitative places, polarized by class and ethnicity, as alien to people freshly arrived from rural communities and recent immigrants, as they are to an often permanent under-class of long-time residents -- most specifically, Aboriginal city-dwellers". Yet, we argue

here that it is through Aboriginal narrative, and following Peters (1996), that being urban and being Aboriginal need not pose an impossible contradiction.

Historically, the members of Piikani, Kainaiwa, and Siksika bands of the Blackfoot Confederacy are thought to have once numbered almost 12,000, and whose traditional territory ranged from the "North Saskatchewan River to the Missouri and from the Rocky Mountains to the present Alberta-Saskatchewan boundary (Dempsey, 2004:275).

Historically, the Blackfoot were nomadic buffalo hunters and warriors, who following European-contact, suffered near-total decimation by successive waves of smallpox, measles, and influenza. Later settled under Treaty Seven in 1877, the Blackfoot were relocated to reserves in the expectation that they would assimilate towards a sedentary, Christian, and agricultural lifestyle in present-day Alberta.

Today, the members of the three bands live throughout traditional Blackfoot territory including in the cities of Lethbridge and Calgary where the Aboriginal populations are 3.5% and 2.3% respectively. In fact, Aboriginal urbanization is as old as the city in Canada (cf. The Rosedale Flats Aboriginal Oral Histories Project Research Team, 2004: 4), but the trend has hastened to the point that currently nearly one-half of all Aboriginal people reside in urban areas. In the half-century following the 1951 census, the proportion of urban Aboriginal increased from 6.7% to 49%. Yet, large-scale urbanization only began in the 1960s when migration began not as "a sign of growing readiness to join the majority society, but rather a desperate response, on the part of a people most unready to leave the security of the reserve, to the shrinking demand in rural job markets" (Buckley, 1992:6).

However, for most Southern Alberta urban Blackfoot, their traditional culture and history is not far away. In addition to the proximity of Lethbridge and Calgary to three Blackfoot reserves, each city has network of roadways, buildings, landmarks, and public parks with Blackfoot origins. They include the Deerfoot, Peigan, and Crowchild expressways, the Calf Robe Bridge, the Elbow River, and Nosehill Park in Calgary, and

the Napi-tahta (Oldman River), Sik-ooh-kotok (Black Rocks or The Coal Banks), Asinaawa-iitomottsawa (Were we slaughtered the Crees, or Indian Battle Park), and Aksiisahko (Clay Banks, or Steep Banks) in Lethbridge. For the Blackfoot, these places are profoundly significant as cultural representations long fixed in traditional story telling. Additionally, they are the basis of the numerous narratives that often describe a foundation connecting Canadian Aboriginal people directly to the land while maintaining a sense of place. As cultural anchors, such narratives enrich life with the “language, stories and experiences of everyday life” and thereby expand Blackfoot life beyond the ‘traditional’ into the ‘modern’ (Knowlton, 2005). In this way, Blackfoot stories are neither chronologically static, nor extemporaneous, nor entirely ancient -- rather, they are malleable and transforming, as they continue to inform daily life as events require. In particular, Blackfoot ties with the land through storytelling actually superimpose Blackfoot culture and meaning over more recent developments like that of the expanding urban stretch of Calgary or Lethbridge. As such, Blackfoot narratives therefore reclaim the city as an Aboriginal place and consequently recreate urban spaces as Blackfoot spaces -- as they were originally.

As a principal point of departure, this paper acknowledges the magnitude of Blackfoot Nápi stories in redeveloping the urban landscape in order to create an atmosphere of home in the cities of Southern Alberta for the people of the Blackfoot confederacy. If, as Thomas King observes in *The Truth About Stories*, citing Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor, "You can't understand the world without telling a story...there isn't any centre to the world but a story, (King, 2003:32), then to the Siksikaitsitapi (all Blackfoot speaking tribes), Nápi stories are more than stories. “...Nápi, or Old Man, is the maker of the land, animals, and people. He is responsible for the placement of all the plants, rivers, lakes, and mountains” (Knowlton, 2005). Over a century ago, anthropologist George Grinnell was told that,

In the beginning there was water everywhere; nothing else was to be seen. There was something floating on the water, and on this raft were Old Man and all the animals. Old Man wished to make the land, and he told the beaver to dive down to the bottom of the water and try to bring up a little mud. The beaver dived and was under the

water for a long time, but he could not reach the bottom. Then the loon tried, and after him the otter, but the water was too deep for them. At last, the muskrat was sent down, and he was gone for a long time; so long that they thought that he must have drowned, but at last he came and floated almost dead on the water, and when they pulled him up and looked at his paws, they found a little mud in them. When Old man had dried this mud, he scattered it over the water and land was formed (Dempsey, 2004: 285).

However, conventional wisdom represents Nápi as merely traditional – fixed to labels of mythology and oral history – although such stereotypical markers are directly challenged when Nápi emerges in the modern city. To non-Aboriginal Canadians Nápi stories are often and simply characterized as little more than trickster tales (Maud, 1982:9; Deloria, 1969:13). To define these narratives in this way not only limits their significance but also reduces them to archaic relics of time. To some Blackfoot, Old Man stories have been inaccurately portrayed:

I see our stories - stories of Nápi - not in time like it is understood when isolated to categories of oral history or mythology but as stories that speak of distance. When we speak of Nápi, the stories do not move you back in time, but they transport you to the places where the stories occur. See... Nápi stories are still alive; they still are part of us, so to speak of them as they were of another time... makes these stories and [Blackfoot peoples] an artifact like those in the museum. [Placing] stories in terms of distance, you recognize the land and the stories and the places that are real and already there (Knowlton, 2005).

To define Blackfoot narratives in this way not only limits their significance but also reduces them to archaic relics of time. It is to continue to theorize Aboriginal people as merely contingent and negotiated (Lawrence, 2004:02), and to continue what Cree scholar Loraine Le Camp as defined "as the 'terranullism' of critical theory -- the habit on the part of academics from all backgrounds to adopt a post-conquest set of assumptions, that the Americas are originally empty lands, devoid of any valid Indigenous presence" (Ibid.). Given this viewpoint, the question is then how to identify the ways in which traditional narratives speak about, or add to, the modern Canadian city? The previous passage contradicts static classifications; through and from them, the Blackfoot not only advance their struggle for recognition, but also link the contemporary and the traditional by continuing to tell Blackfoot narratives, as a recent Blackfoot elder outlined:

...While the land and all that live on it are covered with concrete...and the buffalo hunt is replaced with rush hour traffic... and traditional stories are overshadowed by new casts of endless crime and poverty...[our memory, collective and individually] is limited to what yesterdays headlines were...it is the stories, Nápi and others that speak about those place that were once open prairie...[and] even the grasslands and bush is replaced with office towers and houses...it is our stories that keep us alive...[as] they are not forgotten...[and in this way, we as a people can be] on equal footing in these [city] places...because the stories are still there...(Blood, 2005).

To non-Aboriginal Canadians, historical stories whether urban or otherwise are reduced to significant events, excluding from grand Canadian narrative for the most part, women, ethnic, and oral accounts. Further, notions of cultural preservation and maintenance typically prevent Blackfoot knowledge and narrative from moving beyond folklore; yet Blackfoot knowledge continues to demonstrate it will not be an artifact of the past.

...Many assume Nápi is gone – people say that he moved north after he was done here (Lethbridge). He turned west near what is now Nanton and went into the trees..... some say he is there but he was not done yet. He told the people before he moved north that he would be coming back from this way (pointing east). The Siksika use to have there camps in rows with the entrances facing this way (pointing east). When the Siksika first encountered... [European explores], the Siksika assumed [they were] Nápi, so [the Siksika] put their camp back into a circle... So Nápi is here somewhere [making a circle with his hand] (Knowlton, 2005).

In light of sustained existence, the Old Man defies western categorization and moves Blackfoot narratives from the realm of the categorically invariable to that of a vigorous force. While Nápi continues to live for the Blackfoot, such a dynamic manifestation is often a struggle for non-Aboriginals to comprehend. Nápi is not easily defined, yet to some, the label of trickster is hard to ignore as illustrated here:

See Nápi; he arrives at the time between thought and the physical form. That time just before an action takes place. In this way, Nápi is the city....he is said to live their because of all the many different things happening....the consent change....the consent movement. Nápi is a funny one; he is never happy with what he creates. He continually goes back and changes things...this is why the city changes its form, a road here, houses there, next year, the house gets torn down for a shop, etc. (Knowlton, 2005)

While the dynamic nature of Nápi might appear dubious for many; for the Blackfoot, Nápi stories are not interpreted in the same light, but are seen to be set into motion through the elders that "...know when it is right to release those stories..." (Knowlton, 2005); "...these stories are out there, but many don't believe... Nápi doesn't fit into western notions...(Bastien, 2005). This apprehension is illustrated with a description of a contemporary aboriginal performance:

Nápi also changes the people in the city – there was a play... [I recently saw] that used Nápi...it begins with a Nápi story - he has many wives the play then moves to depict a man and a woman who have a child - the man and woman fight, he leaves the woman and child for another women; they drink and ends with the man leaving that woman to live on the street for awhile. The play ends with the last part of the Nápi story. As uncomfortable as it was for many of the people present, the play illustrates that Nápi is here today. He interacts, moves and attempts to assist [in his creation], sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. The point is that Nápi is said to be the city (Knowlton, 2005).

Beyond the cynicism, the recent adventures of Nápi do more than exemplify a progression of Blackfoot culture, the Old Man also assists Blackfoot peoples in understanding modern-day topics. For the most part, the physical world appears to be the most contentious issue because of its significance to Blackfoot peoples; although, Nápi also helps in deciphering the foreign architecture:

The city is seen by more Blackfoot to be the centre, [not only because of the cities great potential, resources and lifestyle] but the centre is where Nápi brings things together. Take a building for example - a tree is chosen and then cut down, it then goes to the sawmill and becomes a board which is brought to the city to build a house, the wood is joined with other materials, metal in nails which comes from rocks, oil in plastic which come from the ground, concrete which is made of stone and sand -- and on it goes (Knowlton, 2005).

Yet, to one young man, this connection to nature is always present:

...the earth is never far; in fact, it is at our feet as I speak to you... We do lose some connection to our mother [earth] because every place we go in the city appears to be covered with concrete, covering our mother's power. But, look over there [pointing

to the sidewalk], see those weeds, they are able to break the sidewalk and live. So, if a weed can grow, so can I. My father says that I will lose my nativeness; others tell me that I am becoming white. To me, I am like that weed: I still belong to the earth, even if I am an annoyance to those that only see me as altered (Tailfeathers, 2005)

In a recent keynote address, Blackfoot tribal member Betty Bastien outlined the importance of language in transmitting Indigenous Knowledge, specifically, the consequence of removing personal interactions from the context of everyday life. A final narrative brings the self and the environment into a place shared through interactions and the stories that are created:

The house is further joined with thought which humans bring [and soon this building] becomes a home; a place of stories and the stories are built up and become special but Nápi gets jealous and tries to destroy those places and build new ones that he wants. In the end, the city and Nápi are one (Knowlton, 2005).

While creation of the physical landscape began with Nápi's movement through what is now recognized as southern Alberta, Nápi remains in the stories and the lessons imprinted on the land remembered and lived by the Blackfoot individuals, families and communities.

Through Nápi stories, the city becomes a gathering place for some Blackfoot, and the urban landscape becomes not only a collection of individuals, but also a collective of Aboriginal communities and institutions. Consequently, the city becomes a different kind of public space for Aboriginal people, a place not headed to, but to be from; a place where one can be a citizen, not a transient. In this way, and in the words of Fred Wheatley, an Ojibway Elder, in response to a question about tradition and modernity at Trent University, Nápi offers urban Blackfoot the opportunity to "live in the world you find yourself in" (Newhouse and Peters, 2003:5).

References

Bastien, B. (2005) *Transcending Trauma among First Nations*. Presented at the First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Conference, Learning Together for Success. March 8, 2005 Calgary, Alberta.

Blood, N. (2005) *Indigenous Knowledge*. Presented at the First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Conference, Learning Together for Success. March 8, 2005 Calgary, Alberta.

Buckley, H. (1992) *From Wooden Ploughs to Welfare: Why Indian Policy failed in the Prairie Provinces*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Deloria, Jr. V. (1969) *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. Norman: Red River Books.

Dempsey, H. (2004) The Blackfoot Nation in R Morrison and C. Wilson (eds.), *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

King, T. (2003) *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: Anansi Press.

Knowlton, S. (2005) *Urban Aboriginals and Language*, recorded by T.W. Patterson,

Knowlton, S. (2005) *Nápi in the City*, recorded by T.W. Patterson.

Lawrence, B. (2004) *"Real Indians and Others" Mix-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Maud, R. (1982) *A Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend*. Vancouver: Talonbooks.

Newhouse, D., and E. Peters (2003) Introduction, in D. Newhouse and E. Peters (eds.), *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, pp. 5-13.

Patterson, T. W. (2004) "The 'Other' Aboriginal: Reconsidering the Urban Aboriginal Image". *Opinion Canada*, 6(3): 1-2.

Patterson, T W., and M.J. Whittles. (2004) "Reclaiming cities: Canadian Aboriginal urban stories in context". *Opinion Canada*, 6 (38) 1-3.

Peters, E. (1996) 'Urban' and 'Aboriginal': An Impossible Contradiction? In: J. Caulfield and L. Peake (eds.). *City Lives & City Forms: Critical Research & Canadian Urbanism*. pg. 47-62. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Tailfeathers, G. (2005) *Being Native in the City*. recorded by T.W. Patterson.

The Rossdale Flats Aboriginal Oral Histories Project Research Team. (2004) *Rossdale Flats Aboriginal Oral Histories Project*. Edmonton: Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee.