No Home in a Homeland

Indigenous Peoples and Homelessness in the Canadian North

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Preface

It may go without saying, but this book has not been an easy one to write. Listening to the stories of the men and women interviewed over the course of this research was often a very emotional experience. They had endured significant strife in their lives, such as heartbreak, disappointment, violence, fear, and struggle. Many had also experienced immeasurable joy, like the birth of a child, falling in love, spending the summer on the land. Their lives, like everyone's, had been complicated, but unlike the majority of northern residents, Indigenous and not, they had moved in and out of housing, in and out of shelter, and in and out of a sense of a home or place. Some even confided in me that they had never known the latter – not once. After chatting over cups of tea or coffee, or a sandwich at Subway, I often walked away feeling a heavy weight on my heart. I was being trusted with a lot in these stories, yet in the face of what had been shared with me, and the pain of it all, I often felt overwhelmed by the task of writing it all down, of sharing these stories – *their* stories – with a world that extended well beyond our face-to-face encounters. If it felt this difficult to organize my thoughts after an interview, what was it like to live with these experiences every day?

Yet people still wanted to talk. They wanted to share their stories with me. They sought me out. Many, many times, I had barely opened my mouth to ask a question when the person sitting across from me would start talking, and kept talking, until an hour or two had passed. Many were eager to share their experiences. They wanted people to know about their lives – and to know about what needed to change. Through the course of

the research, I kept an ongoing list of people to whom research participants had instructed me to relay my findings. From the beginning, I was aware that I would need to find ways to communicate this research to as broad an audience as possible; one that included the public as well as politicians and policy makers.

There were many ways that I could do this and many ways that I did. I met with all of the politicians and policy makers that interview participants asked me to. I maintained an open dialogue with representatives from local advocacy groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and government, and I shared research findings through feedback workshops at various stages. I presented the work to nursing, social work, and Indigenous health students at the three Aurora College campuses across the Northwest Territories. I produced journal articles, conference presentations, and policy reports, and I experimented with creative writing and storytelling performance, all with the aim of sharing the research findings with the local community. I continued to participate as an advocate myself.

Along the way, several interview participants suggested I write a book, and in the end it seemed like the best way to tie the work together and put it out into the world so that it could reach an even broader audience, one extending beyond northern Canada to the rest of the country and even, perhaps, the globe. Such an outcome seemed especially important given the relevance of this work to other settler colonial contexts and to some of the broader themes I explore in the geographies of Indigenous home and homelessness.

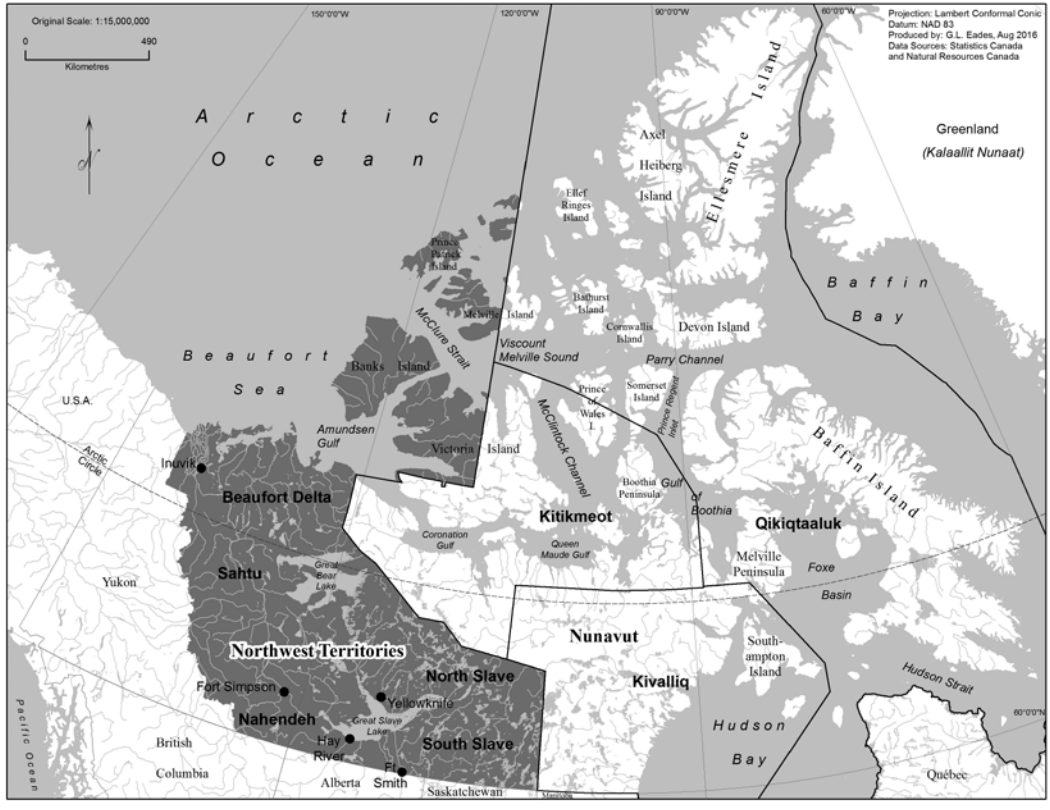
But herein ultimately lay a deep and significant anxiety I have about this work. Although I am a born-and-raised third-generation northerner, with a family that includes members with Indigenous and settler roots, I myself am a non-Indigenous person, the granddaughter of Danish, English, and Irish settlers in this country. Even more than that, I have also never experienced material homelessness. I have experienced privilege that the men and women whose stories fill these pages have not. Whereas these differences seemed somehow surmountable at the outset of my research, the naiveté I possessed then has now in some ways been stripped away. Nonetheless, the original work stemmed from an in-depth community-based research process, and trust and confidence were placed in me by research participants and collaborators, as well as by NGOs and social services agencies. From the beginning, I have been committed to doing research that directly meets community research needs and is conducted in a respectful and relevant manner.

However, the heart of the matter now, for me, is that an overwhelming degree of racism persists in this country, not just interpersonally but also structurally and institutionally. I do not wish to contribute to the deficit-oriented lens that frames much of the social and health research on Indigenous peoples, which has guided far too many Western academic-oriented inquiries into Indigenous lives. I do not wish to reproduce the uneven ground upon which the research relationships of non-Indigenous scholars studying Indigenous peoples have so often been based. Although the relationships and the research presented here were conducted in the spirit of this intention, it would be blind of me to assume that I have been fully successful.

In the end, what pushed me forward in pursuit of this book were four things. First, I have ultimately been entrusted with the stories of many men and women, all of whom understood and expected that I would do something with those stories, that I would share them in the hope of motivating change. Second, I believe that within each of their stories lie important accounts of home seeking that have thus far been lost in the literature on Indigenous experiences of homelessness and that paint an important picture of agency, Indigenous home, and the ways that many Indigenous lives are unrecognized and unsupported through dominant social policy approaches. Third, the high rates of Indigenous homelessness are representative of ongoing colonialities, whose relations continue to negatively affect the lives of many Indigenous individuals, families, and communities. The vast majority of Indigenous people in Canada are not homeless, yet many have family members or friends who are, which is symptomatic of the overrepresentation of Indigenous people among the general homeless population. This is a subject that is very personal for many.

Finally, during my studies, I was privileged to be mentored by Maria Campbell, the Métis playwright, author, elder, great-grandmother, and teacher to so many. She encouraged me at many points throughout my research to face the discomfort of my positionality in relation to this work, and she taught me to accept that anxiety and doubts may not mean that a project should be abandoned but may instead open important spaces for critical self-reflection, learning, and understanding. The day that I no longer feel discomfort or self-doubt in relation to my work, she said, is the day I need to stop doing what I am doing.

Through this combination of factors and guidance, I have found the spirit and the purpose to write this book and put it out into the world.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Cornwallis Island
Devon Island
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Viscount Melville Sound
Parry Channel
Beaufort Sea
Banks Island
Prince of Wales I.
Somerset Island
Prince Regent Inlet
U.S.A.
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Victoria Island
McClintock Channel
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Inuvik
Boothia Peninsula
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Kitikmeot
Qikiqtaaluk
Coronation Gulf
Queen Maude Gulf
Melville Peninsula
Foxe Basin
Yukon
Sahtu
Great Bear Lake
Nunavut
Northwest Territories
South-ampton Island
Kivalliq
North Slave
Fort Simpson
Yellowknife
Hudson Strait
Nahendeh
Great Slave Lake
Hudson Bay
Hay River
South Slave
British Columbia
Alberta
Fort Smith
Saskatchewan
Québec
Pacific Ocean

Introduction

Not many children were born on the land anymore in those days. There were nursing stations in some of the communities and a small hospital in Yellowknife. Leonard was born there, at the hospital, because the nursing station at home was not equipped to deliver babies. Unless of course things didn't happen according to schedule, in which case the nurse had no choice but to roll up her sleeves and do her best. But Leonard did stick to schedule, and so a month before his due date, the nurse put his mother on a plane. From the tiny body of the Cessna, Leonard's mother, Myrna, looked out at the open expanse of boreal forest, weathered rock, and lake after lake after lake. At one point, the plane dipped down low enough to see a pack of wolves running through a clearing, weaving in and out of the trees, chasing the shadow of the plane. In that moment, she couldn't tell whether it was the beat of her heart that set their pace or the other way around.

This book begins with a fictionalized account of one man's story – that of Leonard, on the day of his birth many years ago. Excerpts of Leonard's story at the outset of each chapter illustrate the full scope and significance of ontological security – that is, of Indigenous home and homelessness in their broadest sense – within a fictionalized individual pathway to homelessness. Leonard's life begins unremarkably, but his story illustrates a complicated and often painful journey through home and homelessness that is similar to those of the men and women whose life experiences fill these pages. Leonard is just one example of a growing

number of men and women, young and old, who find themselves on the margins in the Canadian North – crashing on the couches of friends or family; staying weeks, months, or even years in emergency shelters; camping out in tents on the edge of town; knocking at the door of the local detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to sleep for eight-hour stretches in the "drunk tank"; or, worse still, finding warmth inside the pried-open maintenance hatch of a utilidor.[1] In the pages that follow, I explore the experiences and perspectives of these men and women, as well as those of the many professionals who work in social services, housing provision, and northern social policy, to understand what it means to be homeless in Canada's Northwest Territories, why people are homeless, and what their experiences tell us about the geographies of homelessness in northern Canada.[2] Moreover, I set out to examine the marked overrepresentation of Indigenous northerners among the growing number of people experiencing homelessness in the Canadian North.

Rates of homelessness in the so-called developed world continue to rise.[3] Economic restructuring, the erosion of the welfare state, the neoliberalization of health and social services, decreasing state involvement in social or public housing, and varying degrees of revanchist urban social policy have not only contributed to a rise in the number of people on the streets but may also be indicative of more punitive social attitudes toward the homeless. The diversity of the homeless population also continues to grow, with an increasing number of women, children, youth, and elderly included among the homeless.

However, in settler colonial nations like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, the rates of homelessness among Indigenous peoples have long been disproportionate.[4] And there has not, until just recently, been any special attention to why exactly there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous people among the homeless in these diverse geographical contexts. This omission is the result, in part, of a pervasive social and institutional racism that, to varying degrees, conflates Indigenous peoples with the kinds of factors typically associated with homelessness, such as addiction, unemployment, and social deviancy. It is also due to a convenient imagination of Indigenous homelessness as a sort of cultural preference for mobility or fringe living.

Rather than locating homelessness within the larger meshwork of socio-structural factors that frame the inequalities experienced by many Indigenous peoples, the dominant narrative of Indigenous homelessness adopts a deficiency-oriented lens. As a result, the roles of colonialism and

policy paternalism are ignored, not to mention the specific challenges many Indigenous communities continually face in accessing the housing, health, and social welfare supports promised to them through treaties, constitutions, and other politico-legal frameworks established between the settler state and Indigenous peoples. Indeed, settler colonial states appear reticent to acknowledge the links between contemporary Indigenous homelessness and the material and infrastructural inequalities experienced by Indigenous communities as a result of the colonially rooted settlement process.[5] This is the case in spite of the fact that settler countries have repeatedly come under criticism for the vast disparities in quality of life between many Indigenous peoples and settlers.[6] Although there is incredible diversity across settler colonial states, similar inequalities exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in terms of housing and infrastructure, economic opportunities, child welfare, health, and education. Indigenous peoples across settler colonial contexts also rarely see their cultural values reflected in the social policies that frame their lives.

Thus *No Home in a Homeland* is situated within a geography of Indigenous home and homelessness that extends and shifts across settler states. Although the experiences of homelessness and the various ways that individual lives and socio-structural processes intersect differ across these contexts, there are meaningful commonalities that join them across time and space. Speaking not just to the context of the Canadian North and not just to Canada but also to settler states more generally, this book pins Indigenous homelessness firmly upon an extensive temporal and spatial colonial trajectory.

The overrepresentation of Indigenous people among the homeless in the Northwest Territories mirrors the demographics of Indigenous homelessness across Canada,[7] not to mention other settler societies such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.[8] Through the chapters of this book, I seek to understand how homelessness among Indigenous northerners takes root and how colonialism and its contemporary legacies shape Indigenous homeless experiences. The result is a landscape of racialized social and spatial exclusion that necessitates the active decolonization of discourse and policy in order to alleviate the socio-structural causes of Indigenous homelessness. In this sense, the exploration of homelessness in the Northwest Territories has much to offer an even broader understanding of Indigenous exclusion in settler societies, how colonial continuities are enacted through social policy, and how rebuilding home might be achieved.

The Emergence of Homelessness

Before the 1990s, visible signs of homelessness in Northwest Territories communities were largely uncommon. Today, a walk down the main street of the territorial capital, Yellowknife, or of the town of Inuvik indicates that something has significantly changed. Since the late 1990s, emergency shelters in both communities have reported a steady increase in demand, representing a rise in absolute, or "visible,"[9] homelessness.[10] Significantly, the vast majority of men and women living homeless in the territory are Indigenous.[11] Although actual statistics do not exist, support providers estimate that 90–95 percent of the men and women experiencing homelessness in both Inuvik and Yellowknife are Indigenous.[12] Despite living in their ancestral homelands, these men and women find themselves homeless due to a confluence of many factors. My intention with this book is to identify these factors in order to develop a deeper understanding of how policy and other socio-structural elements frame specific vulnerabilities and conspire to actualize individual pathways to homelessness in the Canadian North. In untangling the role of context in homeless geographies, we see the ways that the individual and the structural intersect and interact across time and space. But as I illustrate across the proceeding chapters, the intergenerational impacts of colonialism, and the effects of colonial history on the spatialization of northern communities and economic opportunity, complicate and blur these individual-structural intersections. The pathways to homelessness traced in this book illustrate these intersections, taking us beyond the city to rural areas and back again in order to demonstrate the tensions that often exist between rural and urban places for northern people experiencing homelessness.

Unprecedented economic growth in the Northwest Territories sets an important backdrop for the emergence of visible homelessness. Since the late 1990s, the territory has enjoyed an overall economic upswing[13] due in large part to the development of a diamond mining industry, as well as increased oil and gas activity.[14] Yet although the territorial gross domestic product has more than doubled, the number of people living in shelters in the territory has risen sharply.[15] This increase has occurred alongside federal government efforts to restructure spending on the provision of housing and on health and social services. Notably, the federal government's support for public housing in the territory has been slowly phased out in favour of programs that emphasize household autonomy and home ownership. The implications of these changes are tremendous

in the Northwest Territories, where, as in the other northern territories, residents are largely dependent on government-subsidized housing, especially those who live outside the regional centres. Inside regional centres, greater private housing options exist, but the already limited supply is under growing demand. Declining federal and territorial government support for public housing comes at a time when competition for private housing has grown, largely due to the economic upswing and the resulting influx of new workers.

Nonetheless, the contemporary landscape only partly explains the story of homelessness in the territory. Although social restructuring has indeed widened tears in the northern social fabric, further entrenching the marginalization of vulnerable members of northern society, little is really known about what makes certain individuals vulnerable to homelessness and why they seem to be struggling so much more *now* in the twenty-first century. Visible homelessness may be regarded as a relatively recent development in the territory, but hidden forms of homelessness, resulting from chronic housing need and compounded by health, social, and economic inequalities, have been a reality in northern communities for decades. Understanding contemporary homelessness requires us to look back at the history of the Northwest Territories, which is relatively recent but has brought about profound, sweeping change for northern Indigenous people. The territory emerged through colonial aspirations for resource riches and sovereignty and became a "project" of paternalistic government social policy throughout much of the twentieth century.[16] The legacies of these relations are intrinsic to the geographies that shape the contemporary Northwest Territories. Any attempt to understand the roots of northern homelessness, as well as the factors that continue to worsen this phenomenon, necessitates an understanding of the colonial project in the territory, its sustained effects on northern Indigenous peoples, and the ways that these relations and their outcomes are entrenched in contemporary northern life through social policy. At the same time, a concerted effort to understand this geography also requires unearthing stories of resistance through homemaking – the culturally embedded routines, practices, and ideologies that are enacted in the pursuit of creating home, whether material, spiritual, relational, or emotional. From within these stories, we uncover a larger narrative of conflict between the social policies that intervene in the lives of people living homeless, the infrastructural shortcomings that frame them, the health and social welfare institutional frameworks that seek to manage them, and the ways that these men and women themselves are seeking family, place, identity – *home*.

In 2006 I began six years of ethnographic fieldwork on visible homelessness in Inuvik and Yellowknife, two small, but urbanizing,[17] regional centres in the Northwest Territories. The project was designed through a long and extensive consultation process with people living homeless in Inuvik and Yellowknife, as well as with a range of community groups and Indigenous governments, including the Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition, the Inuvik Interagency Committee, the Nihtat Gwich'in Band, the Gwich'in Tribal Council, the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, the North Slave Métis Alliance, and the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. Collectively, these groups identified the need for a place-based understanding of homelessness to inform effective policy and program development.

Homelessness is, after all, contextual – rooted in specific places and times, deeply enmeshed in local history, economies, culture, politics, and social life, yet linked to similar processes that play out at regional, national, and even global scales. It follows, then, that homelessness emerges differently in different places. There are distinctions not only between the factors that contribute to homelessness but also in the ways that homelessness is expressed across social and spatial landscapes. As geographer Eugene McCann notes, there is an inherent movement associated with homelessness, as people experiencing homelessness often move in a cyclical fashion between the streets, the shelter, insecure housing, and the homes of family or friends.[18] The accounts of men and women living homeless in Yellowknife and Inuvik indicate that the shapes taken by these movements are indelibly tied to local context, which not only includes the intergenerational effects of colonialism, chronic housing need, northern social policy, rural-urban disparities, and social determinants of health but equally also includes the cultural geographies of home. Yet the dominant discourse surrounding the condition of homelessness and how it emerges across the Canadian North neglects the unique northern geographical and cultural context, as well as the experiences, both historical and contemporary, of Indigenous peoples with regard to colonialism, government paternalism, socio-cultural change, and economic transition.

A distinct geography reveals itself through an approach to understanding homelessness that emphasizes the significance of place in the meaning and scale of homelessness in the Canadian North. Geography, as a disciplinary approach, permits an examination of the situated, place-dependent nature of homeless experiences. The rich disciplinary interest in unevenness, inequality, and exclusion has made geography a useful lens through which to examine the processes that converge in homelessness

across rural and urban contexts in the Global North and Global South. Geography accounts for the fundamental role of place in the manifestation of homelessness primarily through its abiding emphasis on structural explanations.[19] Attempts to situate Indigenous geographies of homelessness, however, betray the absence of significant socio-structural elements like colonialism from conventional geographical explorations of homelessness, which tend to focus on the interconnections between structural factors such as poverty, housing policy, and the deinstitutionalization of mental health services.[20]

My intention here is also to address what geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling identify as a weakness in geographers' past examinations of home, namely, that the culturally rooted meanings of home remain only thinly explored, something that, I argue in this book, has deep significance for the ways we conceptualize homeless geographies.[21] Although geographers have advanced our collective understanding of homelessness in both urban and rural areas, they have largely sidestepped explorations of cultural geographies of homelessness. Their omissions include Indigenous geographies of homelessness, as well as northern Indigenous homeless geographies, which are the subject of this book. The reality that homelessness exists in northern communities also conflicts with popular imaginations of the North, which tend to portray the region as a vast, resource-rich landscape where Indigenous people live in harmony with the land. There is an equally dominant narrative that believes homelessness to be distinctly urban. Taking cues from geographers who have exposed homelessness in rural areas,[22] I want to challenge the common conceptualization, driven by these narratives, of homelessness as "out of place" in northern Canada.

The dearth of literature on homelessness in the Canadian North is also due, in part, to the relatively recent history of settlement and "modern" housing in the region, where Indigenous people lived largely nomadic, subsistence-based existences until the mid-twentieth century. The resulting dynamics of social, cultural, economic, and political change have obscured a clear understanding of the nature of northern homelessness. The cultural and climatic implications of the Canadian North add to this challenge. For example, overcrowding has at times been misunderstood as a cultural preference for having multiple generations live under one roof.[23] In northern communities where there is no emergency shelter, households often provide accommodation to otherwise homeless community members due to an unwillingness to leave people outside. Similarly, situations that might otherwise result in street sleeping

are often prevented in Yellowknife and Inuvik due to a reluctance on the part of shelters to enforce restrictions on lengths of stay or maximum capacity guidelines if it means an individual will be forced to stay outside overnight in temperatures as cold as minus forty degrees Celsius. For this same reason, RCMP officers in both communities are known to drive around, often in their off hours, in search of community members known to be sleeping outside in order to take them to a shelter or to the RCMP detachment, where they can stay warm.[24] These important local coping strategies complicate a full appreciation for the gravity and scope of northern homelessness.

Rural-urban dynamics also complicate our understanding of the manifestation of visible homelessness in territorial urban centres. Although migration from rural and isolated regions to urban centres in the territory is not a new phenomenon, these intraterritorial migration patterns have not been well understood and add complexity to northern homeless geographies. During times of economic growth, migration from outside the territory also tends to rise, as migrants from southern Canada or other nations come in pursuit of career opportunities.[25] In addition to geographies of migration, an uneven spatial distribution of resources, opportunities, and infrastructure in the Canadian North contributes to an urbanization trend, evident in the urban growth experienced by all three northern territories but especially prevalent in the Northwest Territories.[26]

Because the unique context of the territory and limited research have made it difficult to fully grasp the scope of northern homelessness, action has become increasingly critical. Unprecedented economic growth, rural-urban migration, and urbanization, combined with dependency on government-subsidized housing and income support, generate mounting insecurity for marginalized northern residents.

My own northern history began when my Danish grandfather and English-Canadian grandmother decided to move to the Northwest Territories to work and raise a family in the late 1940s. My father and his brother have since stayed in the North, established their careers there, and had families of their own. As a child in Yellowknife, I grew up with a group of Dene, Métis, and Inuit friends whose diversity reflected that of the small city and whose families, like mine, were relatively recent transplants from elsewhere. My friends and I were, for the most part, a fairly middle-class bunch raised in "the Big City," as it was called by kids from the smaller outlying settlements, who felt Yellowknife kids had unfair opportunities in a place with a movie theatre and a small shopping mall.

It was that shopping mall where, as young kids, we regularly encountered the town's small group of "street people." They were not referred to then as "street people," nor were they regarded as "homeless." They were referred to by name, at least by my parents and the other adults in my life. We knew who they were. Many were old classmates or hockey teammates of my father. Some were the adult children of people with whom my mother worked. Several came to the same church we attended, and if any of the other congregants cared when they pulled a drink from their heavy coats during the service, they said nothing. They hung out on the steps of the YK Centre, a local mall and office building, selling artwork or carvings, or in front of the post office. Many of them lived in shacks in the Old Town or with family, or they were taken in by the Bailey family, and many drank. When a new, bigger mall, Centre Square, was built to much fanfare, they could often be found sitting on the benches around the fountain, reading newspapers in the library, or hanging out in the vestibule between the double doors.

Today, many people in Yellowknife who do advocacy or support work in areas of poverty and housing remember those days nostalgically. Perhaps this is merited, or perhaps it is a naive belief that somehow the conditions for those men and women were any different from the ones faced by those passing their days on the streets of Yellowknife today. We did not call it homelessness then, but we do now. Is it useful to do so? The sheer numbers of people accessing emergency shelters today is far greater, the abused substances more varied and the stakes of their use higher, the housing need more acute, and the social welfare state more punitive.

Despite these memories of an earlier Yellowknife, before I began the research for this book, I believed visible homelessness in the territory to be a fairly recent phenomenon and thus something that might be explained in part through its seeming correlation to an economic boom related to diamond mining and petroleum development. As a volunteer at homelessness resource services in Yellowknife, I could see that the need for emergency shelter was growing. Anecdotal reports from friends and colleagues in Inuvik indicated that something similar was taking place in that town. As the research progressed, however, I began to see how there was a past to this present-day phenomenon. My journey to understand contemporary northern homelessness meant going back in time to trace the historical colonial formations that in many ways form the foundation upon which contemporary northern homelessness manifests itself today. In other words, understanding northern homelessness today

meant understanding the linkages between the colonial displacements of northern Indigenous peoples in the past and present.

Colonial and paternalistic threats to the social and cultural capital of Indigenous peoples are a key dimension of Indigenous homelessness. Although the shifting dynamics of the housing and job markets, as well as those of Canadian social policy, can be linked to homelessness both among the Indigenous and among other demographic groups in Canada, little work has explored the reasons *why* Indigenous people in Canada are so highly overrepresented in the general homeless population. Nor is there much appreciation for what homelessness means or how it is experienced across Indigenous cultures.

Moreover, while conducting eighty-seven in-depth biographical interviews[27] and six focus groups with northern Indigenous men and women experiencing homelessness, as well as fifty-five in-depth interviews with support providers and policy makers, I began to hear, time and again, that homelessness needed to be approached as a much more complex phenomenon than an immediate, individual experience. With this understanding, the multiple scales of homelessness began to reveal themselves in relation to northern Indigenous peoples and communities, where the scope of socio-cultural change has been so wide-reaching and the pace so accelerated. In the context of the Canadian North, time and space have collided, for the real implications of colonialism have been most intimately felt only within the past two or three generations. What I thought was a "recent" phenomenon was in fact symptomatic of several decades of profound change and upheaval.

Yellowknife and Inuvik

This book is set in Inuvik and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. The Northwest Territories is a vast territory, rich in natural resources and diverse in Indigenous and settler cultures. It is also home to bitter winter temperatures and relative geographic isolation, creating a landscape and climate that present potentially life-threatening challenges to the growing number of people living without shelter in the territory.

The territorial population is 41,062, spread across thirty-three communities, and of the total inhabitants in the territory, approximately one-half are Indigenous.[28] The three main Indigenous groups in the Northwest Territories are the Dene, Métis, and Inuvialuit, although cultural traditions, histories, knowledge, and linguistic dialects are diverse

within each group. The non-Indigenous population comprises long-time northerners, like my family, and even more recent newcomers from other parts of Canada and the world. Both non-Indigenous and Indigenous northerners reside in greatest numbers in the largest communities, whereas the populations of the rural settlement communities are largely of Indigenous descent.

The town of Inuvik is located north of the Arctic Circle on the east channel of the Mackenzie Delta. The town's main thoroughfare – Mackenzie Road – runs almost parallel to the great river of the same name (Deh Cho in the Dene language). The town is known for its igloo-shaped Catholic church, the Great Northern Arts Festival, and its brightly painted row houses, which locals affectionately call "Smartie houses," nicknamed after the colourful, sugar-coated candy popular in Canada. Because of the permafrost so close to the ground's surface, buildings in the small town are set up on stilts to prevent them from shifting with the yearly freezing and thawing. The apartment buildings clustered in the centre of town stand almost terrifyingly high above the ground. Likewise, water and sewage pipes run in an above-ground maze of utilidors that extend across the town. Over the years, a series of shortcuts that duck underneath the utilidors have been carved into the ground through repeated use.

Inuvik's economy has long been propelled by its role as both an administrative and a military centre, as well as a base for petroleum exploration in the region. However, the town's central role in northern oil and gas development has meant significant volatility in the local economy, bringing many setbacks over the years as the community has geared up in anticipation of the jobs and wealth that might be brought with a Mackenzie Valley gas pipeline, only to be disappointed when, once again, the project stalls.[29] Speculation and excitement returned over the first decade of the 2000s, as the town began to enjoy an economic upswing brought about by renewed petroleum development in the Beaufort Sea and by the "green light" given to the Mackenzie Gas Project, although plans for that project have since waned.[30]

Inuvik was created in 1953 as a model town, intended to be the administrative and educational centre for the western Arctic, as well as a replacement community for nearby Aklavik, a small hamlet on the Mackenzie Delta that is prone to flooding. The town was specifically designed to have as many elements of "modern urban civilization" as possible.[31] Yet a notable divide emerged in the community in those early days, a divide that remains an important element in Inuvik's collective memory. The housing built in the eastern part of the community in the mid-1950s,

initially intended for families moving from Aklavik, was instead given to the families of military and administrators, who were largely from southern Canada. This area, together with the town core, became known as the "serviced area," or to locals as "Snob Hill," where water, sewage, and heating lines were connected to buildings through an elaborate utilidor network. Meanwhile, the western side of town – the "unserviced area" – was where local Indigenous people were given homes or, in many cases, simply where they set up tents or homemade shacks. In contrast to "Snob Hill," water and sewage services were provided by trucks, and residents had to sort out their own heating. The entire town's sewage was delivered to the sewage lagoon located in among these homes.

Despite this early division, Inuvik quickly grew to also become the administrative, economic, and political centre for Inuvialuit, Gwich'in, and local Métis. The Inuvialuit and Gwich'in were the first two Indigenous groups to settle land claims in the territory. Both the Inuvialuit and Gwich'in governance bodies are located in Inuvik: the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation and the Gwich'in Tribal Council. Gwich'in Council International also has its head office in Inuvik.

The town of Inuvik has a population of 3,463, although its population tends to fluctuate wildly depending on economic conditions.[32] Between 2001 and 2006, during the height of Mackenzie Gas Project speculation, the population grew from 2,894 to 3,484. The population includes 2,170 Indigenous (63.3 percent) and 1,260 non-Indigenous (36.7 percent) residents.[33]

The city of Yellowknife is located on the north shore of Great Slave Lake.[34] It is the capital city of the Northwest Territories, as well as its administrative, commercial, industrial, and distributive centre. Yellowknife is a cosmopolitan, rapidly growing community built on rocky Precambrian outcrops and surrounded by an endless smattering of freshwater lakes. Highrises dot the skyline, and visitors are often surprised to find big box stores lining the road from the airport into town.

Yellowknife sits on the traditional territory of the Yellowknives Dene and is directly adjacent to the traditional territory of the Tli Cho Dene people. Named for the Dene who traditionally made implements from copper, Yellowknife was established as a gold mining town in the mid-1930s, when people flooded to the area hoping to make their fortune in gold. Although the settlement grew over the long term, the boom and bust fluctuations of extractive resource development were present in the community from those early days.[35] Nevertheless, the city became known to local Dene as Somba K'e, which in the Dogrib language translates as

"where the money is." Whereas newcomers to the town set up shacks and tents along the banks of Great Slave Lake, the gold mines that opened in the area (by the mid-1950s these included the Discovery, Con, and Giant mines) built their own residential areas for their personnel.

Following the Second World War, the postwar boom in Yellowknife brought about the construction of a "new town" up the hill from the initial settlement. By 1947 fifty residences, a hospital, several government buildings, a school, stores, and a hotel made up the new town.[36] Soon thereafter, Yellowknife emerged as the administrative base for the federal government in the North, a promising development that would guarantee continuing viability for the community once the gold mines eventually closed.[37] In 1960 the completion of an all-season highway to Alberta connected Yellowknife more reliably to the Canadian South.

The late 1960s saw Yellowknife's unprecedented expansion. First, in 1967, it was named the territory's capital, making it the seat of the newly formed Government of the Northwest Territories. Second, oil and gas exploration in the Mackenzie Delta and Beaufort Sea also had beneficial consequences for Yellowknife, as various secondary services located their offices in the city. Third, ever-growing interest in the natural resource potential of the territory led to the creation of several new regional offices for various departments of the federal government. Consequently, the city grew steadily in size and population, firmly establishing itself as the territorial administrative and economic centre. Gold mining continued to support the city until the late 1980s, when gold prices began to wane, eventually leading to mine closures in the 1990s. These closures, however, overlapped with the discovery of diamonds north of Great Slave Lake, launching Yellowknife into its new, self-proclaimed position as "Diamond Capital of the World."[38] Economic growth in the city, and the territory overall, has been on an unprecedented upswing since the first diamond mine opened in 1999. According to the 2011 census, the population of Yellowknife is 19,234, of whom roughly 78 percent are non-Indigenous and 22 percent Indigenous (Dene, Métis, and Inuit).[39] As the largest community in the territory, Yellowknife also has the largest Indigenous population.

Not only are Inuvik and Yellowknife the two key administrative, transportation, and economic development centres of the territory, but they are also primary centres for health and social services, postsecondary education, and various functions of the criminal justice system, as well as for support resources specifically geared toward people experiencing homelessness, such as emergency shelters. Emergency shelters in both

communities began to report a sudden jump in demand starting in the late 1990s.[40] The rise in visible homelessness fuelled public concern over the potential negative social impacts of increasing nonrenewable resource development.[41] In 2008 the Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition estimated that 936 people had experienced homelessness at one point or another that year.[42] This figure equates to roughly 5 percent of the city's population. Compare this to Vancouver's homeless population, which comprises less than 1 percent of that city's total population.[43] Meanwhile, in Inuvik, there has been no official homeless "count." However, estimates from support providers suggest that visible homelessness affects forty to sixty people annually, a range of roughly 1–2 percent of the town's population.

Inuvik and Yellowknife are the only two communities in the Northwest Territories with fully operational emergency shelters. The first shelter for the homeless in Yellowknife was operated out of the home of Pastor Gordon Bailey and his wife, Ruth Bailey. The couple moved with their children to Yellowknife in the early 1960s to start the Pentecostal Mission Church in the Old Town area. Soon thereafter, they began opening their home to locals, mostly men, without a place to stay. At times, there were upward of eighteen people sleeping on their living room floor. A former member of the church told me that Mrs. Bailey used to call the men staying with them "her boys." By the 1970s, the couple was close to retirement, and discussion began as to who would replace the service they had been offering to the community. The territorial Department of Health and Social Services reached out to the Salvation Army to see whether it would take on the provision of shelter services in Yellowknife. The Salvation Army had not previously had activity in the city but decided to open a small mission in 1982. In the late 1990s, a new, larger facility was built to house the growing shelter needs in the community. Today, the Salvation Army operates as a church, shelter, and halfway house, as well as offering withdrawal management services. The shelter houses forty men over the age of nineteen, not including those staying in the halfway house. The shelter is not a sober facility, so men under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol are admissible. However, their sleeping arrangements are mats in a very crowded room. Men who are attempting sobriety can be "graduated" to sober rooms with mats on the floor and then, finally, to sober rooms equipped with bunkbeds. Shelter clients must be out the door at 8:30 a.m. and are allowed back only to have lunch and dinner, before finally being permitted to come back to sleep at 9:00 p.m. In 2009 a day shelter opened in downtown Yellowknife to

provide a place for men and women living homeless in the community to spend time during the day and receive additional resources and support.

Although in the 1980s the Salvation Army occasionally offered beds to women, the new facility allows only men to stay overnight. Today, the Alison McAteer House provides shelter for women and their children who are victims of family violence. Named for a Yellowknife woman who took it upon herself to house women fleeing abuse in their own home, the YWCA has operated this shelter since 1986. It has six bedrooms with a total of twelve beds, and there is a six-week limit on lengths of stay. Boys over the age of fifteen are ineligible to stay with their mothers in the shelter, and some end up sleeping on friends' couches or at the SideDoor Youth Centre, which offers an overnight drop-in program on an emergency basis. For homeless women who are not fleeing violence, however, there were no services until 1995, when the Yellowknife Women's Society began to shelter women overnight in the house that functioned as their headquarters. In its early years, the shelter was informal and unfunded, and there was no staff supervision during the night. In 2004 the society received funding to move into a larger location and formalize its shelter program. The new facility is called the Centre for Northern Families. It has twenty-three beds and also provides meals, as well as numerous family services and support programs. This shelter is a sober facility, although there is flexibility in this policy given staff's concerns about women's safety.

There are also three transitional housing programs in Yellowknife. Bailey House, which is a housing program for men, has thirty-two beds. Rockhill Transitional and Emergency Housing, a program for women and children run by the YWCA, offers twenty-seven units. Rockhill also has five units available for emergency housing. In 2014, after the completion of research for this book, a new transitional housing program for women was made available through Lynn's Place, which consists of six bedsitting units for single women, ten two-bedroom apartments, and two three-bedroom apartments for women with children.

Meanwhile, in Inuvik, there are two emergency shelters. The first shelter, known simply as the Inuvik Homeless Shelter, is run by the Nihtat Gwich'in Band Council. Although there was an addictions treatment centre in Inuvik until the early 2000s, it closed due to loss of funding. Realizing that many people had nowhere else to go, the Nihtat Gwich'in Band Council volunteered to take over the building and operate it as a shelter. Thus, in a troubling testament to the desperate need for greater mental health and addiction support for northern men and women

struggling with homelessness, the building that housed the Inuvik treatment centre quickly became the Inuvik Homeless Shelter, housing many of the same clients who had been there seeking treatment. Today, the shelter provides emergency housing to men and women over nineteen years of age, with a total of sixteen beds available. The Inuvik Homeless Shelter is a sober facility, so anyone under the influence of drugs or alcohol is ineligible to stay there. Since its opening, the Inuvik Homeless Shelter has been under repeated threat of having to shut down due to a lack of adequate operational funds.

The second shelter, the Inuvik Women's Transitional House, is for women and their children who have been victims of family violence, whether Inuvik residents or from other communities in the region. There are twelve beds in the home, and on average five women and six children are staying there at any given time.[44] Women and their children are allowed to stay in the home for up to six weeks, although there is flexibility depending on circumstances.[45]

In both Yellowknife and Inuvik, the RCMP plays a very significant role in the provision of emergency shelter. Although RCMP admissions for intoxication-related cases are not included in the statistics on emergency shelter admissions, a large number of cases every year pertain to men and women experiencing homelessness. In Inuvik, where the shelter is a sober facility, the RCMP detachment often provides shelter to people who are not admissible to the Inuvik Homeless Shelter and who have otherwise committed no crime. Officers at the detachment indicated to me that, on a daily basis, people come to the detachment asking to be admitted (on an eight-hour basis) so that they can rest in a warm place. Staff at both the Inuvik and Yellowknife detachments, however, questioned how much longer they would be able to provide shelter to men and women in these circumstances, given that the number of homeless was increasing and it was not a sustainable solution.

For some time, Inuvik and Yellowknife have been able to care for socially and economically marginalized members in various ways, including informal supports and social welfare institutions, such as the former addictions treatment centre in Inuvik, which addressed one significant factor at the root of many homeless experiences. Yet since the late 1990s, the number of people affected by homelessness in both communities has increased considerably, placing strain on informal resources at a time when formal, institutionalized supports like public housing and treatment of mental health and addictions have suffered from lack of funding. "We are in a bigger crisis now in this community than we've ever been

before in our lives," a social worker in Yellowknife told me. "The violence, the aggression, the drugs, the number of people without a place to live. We're at a bigger crisis point than ever, and it's at this point that the bottom is really dropping out of the funding bucket."

This book thus coincides with a very critical point in the juncture between the diverse geographies of exclusion that ultimately culminate in visible homelessness on northern streets. My hope is that policy makers will see that the penalization of social welfare dependency and a passive approach to the social impacts of northern economic development will not alleviate Indigenous homelessness. Rather, the alleviation of Indigenous homelessness requires a reorientation of policy and practice toward Indigenous homemaking. In the following chapters, I trace the lived experiences of homeless Indigenous men and women to understand why this reorientation is necessary, and I suggest ways that it can be achieved.