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Unearthing Resistance: Aboriginal Women in the Lord Selkirk Park Housing Developments

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Table of Contents

2	Executive Summary
4	Part 1: Introduction
6	Part 2: Method
8	Part 3: The Results of the Interviews
8	<i>Children and Grandchildren</i>
10	<i>Strong Women; Hard Lives</i>
11	<i>Drugs, Gangs and Violence</i>
12	<i>The Developments As a Good Place to Live</i>
13	<i>The Politics of Contested Space</i>
14	<i>Taking Resistance to the Collective Level</i>
16	<i>Women-Centred Organizing</i>
17	<i>A Struggle Over Space</i>
18	<i>The Contradictory Role of the Police in This Struggle</i>
21	<i>The Transformative Possibilities of Adult Education</i>
25	Conclusions
26	References

Unearthing Resistance:

Aboriginal Women in the Lord Selkirk Park Housing Developments

Executive Summary

Women who are marginalized often resist the dominant culture in ways not immediately visible to most. This paper argues that at least some Aboriginal women in the Lord Selkirk Park Housing Developments in Winnipeg's North End are doing just this, in ways that can best be understood as a politics of resistance. In a variety of ways in their day-to-day lives they resist the ongoing, destructive impact of colonization and racism and poverty on Aboriginal families, and promote the values not of individualism, but of sharing and community. The paper argues that this resistance constitutes the basis of an effective community development strategy for the Developments.

Twenty Aboriginal women in Lord Selkirk Park (the Developments) were interviewed. Those selected were women who were known to have thought about community development in Lord Selkirk Park. The voices of women, and Aboriginal women in particular, are often ignored in planning community development. Yet it is often the women, and especially Aboriginal women, who best understand the needs and capacities of their communities.

These are strong and resilient women. They struggle to create safe spaces for themselves and the children in their care in a public housing project that is a low-income, marginalized and

racialized space. The Developments is also a contested space: the gangs control certain spaces, especially at night; women push back to reclaim those spaces for their children's and families' use by day. The women both accommodate, and resist, in an ongoing struggle over space. They do so in ways that, although largely invisible, are similar to those engaged in by poor and racialized women around the world.

Much of the women's day-to-day resistance is confined to their households and immediate surroundings, but to at least some extent they network with each other, usually in ways related directly or indirectly to their children and grandchildren. Most say that they would like to create more frequent connections with other women in the neighbourhood, in a variety of ways not traditionally seen as political. Some such attempts have been made. These include the establishment in early 2006 of the Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre—which creates a safe space that is much appreciated and valued by the women interviewed—where they can meet to talk, to develop relationships and ultimately networks, and to promote collective activities.

The women see safety and security as the primary problem in the Developments, and are clear and emphatic in expressing the need for a different and more community-based kind of policing strategy.

They are equally clear in calling for more opportunities, particularly educational opportunities for adults with associated childcare and other supports, as the means for improving their circumstances.

In this embattled space the Aboriginal women interviewed for this study live with dignity and courage. Their strengths, largely hidden from the view

of outsiders, constitute the basis upon which the women themselves, with appropriate supports from governments, could take the lead in rebuilding Lord Selkirk Park. These are the strengths and the hopes—unearthed by inviting these women to talk about their experiences in the community—upon which a strategy of renewal could be built.

Unearthing Resistance:

Aboriginal Women in the Lord Selkirk Park Housing Developments

Part 1: Introduction

This paper examines the politics of resistance engaged in by a selected number of Aboriginal women in Lord Selkirk Park, a public housing development in Winnipeg's North End. Marginalized and stigmatized because of who they are and where they live, at least some of the Aboriginal women in Lord Selkirk Park engage in a constant struggle aimed primarily at defending and promoting the interests of their children and grandchildren. This paper examines some aspects of their day-to-day lives, and argues that Lord Selkirk Park is a contested space in which some Aboriginal women engage in a largely invisible politics of resistance.

Much of the daily work undertaken by women is largely invisible (Luxton 1980), as is the role played by women in the process of 'development' (Boserup, 1970; Moser and Peake, 1994; Williams, 2004). This is especially so if the women are Aboriginal (Krause, 2003, p. 533; Lobo, 2003, p. 505). Aboriginal women in North End Winnipeg's Lord Selkirk Park public housing developments are particularly invisible. They are women; they are Aboriginal; and they occupy a stigmatized space—a large, low-income, inner-city public housing project—in an historically stigmatized part of a large urban centre—Winnipeg's North End (Artibise 1977). Aboriginal women in Lord Selkirk Park are constructed by the dominant culture as the 'other'—those seen to be outside of, or marginalized from, the mainstream, and depicted as different in a negative way (Said 1978; Spivak 1988).

It has been observed, nevertheless, that women have played a central—albeit often invisible—role in the process of development, both globally (Duggan et al, 1997; Jelin, 1990) and in North America (Belleai et al, 2004; Gittell et al, 2000). This has also been the case in Winnipeg's inner city (Silver 2006a). They have done so, at least in part, by carrying out what can be seen to be 'traditional', home-based women's roles (Leavitt, 2003; Stall and Stoecker, 1996), but doing so in a way that, when examined closely, can more accurately be seen as a 'politics of resistance'. Home and the immediate neighbourhood become sites of resistance, where women struggle—negotiating compromises where necessary; fighting back in often subtle ways where possible—to create a safe space in a harsh and often dangerous environment, for themselves and especially for their children and grandchildren. Aboriginal women are playing that role in Winnipeg's Lord Selkirk Park public housing developments.

Lord Selkirk Park is a public housing development built in Winnipeg's North End in the mid-1960s. It was Winnipeg's most significant residential 'urban renewal' project. Those who first lived in Lord Selkirk Park found it to be a significant improvement on their previous housing experience. However, as has been the case throughout North America, the quality of life in Winnipeg's largest inner-city public housing project gradually deteriorated. The failure of the private housing market to provide adequate

accommodation for low-income people meant that Lord Selkirk Park became 'housing of last resort' for many who had nowhere else to turn for housing. The concentration of poverty—as opposed to the fact that the housing is public housing—has brought with it a host of related social problems (Silver, 2006b).

Life in Lord Selkirk Park, or the Developments, or the D, as its residents call it, is harsh. More than one-half of those who live in the Developments are Aboriginal, and most are poor—87.8 percent of households, almost nine of every ten, had incomes below the Statistics Canada Low-Income Cut-Offs (LICO) in 2001 (CCPA-Mb 2005). A high proportion, 47.7 percent, almost one-half, are single parents, mostly single mothers, or grandmothers raising grandchildren. Domestic violence has played a major role in the lives of many—women who are fleeing domestic abuse have priority for available Manitoba Housing units—and many end up in Manitoba Housing's Lord Selkirk Park. Gang- and drug-related violence is pervasive, shaping to a considerable extent the structure and character of daily life in the Developments.

It is useful to think of the Developments as a particular kind of space—a 'contested space'. McDowell (1999, p. 4) describes the notion of contested space by arguing that the commonsense notion of a place as a "defined and bounded piece of territory" that can be represented as a "set of coordinates on a map", has been challenged by those who "argue that places are contested, fluid and un-

certain". They are defined not just by their physical location but also by relations of power and exclusion, and peoples' agency in negotiating and challenging those social relations.

The Developments are not only a contested space, but also a marginalized space. Winnipeg is a city struggling to find a place on the edges of a rapidly changing global economy; Winnipeg's North End has always been stigmatized as the 'foreign quarter', the home of the 'other'; and Lord Selkirk Park is a marginalized space within the North End, seen by outsiders (and at least some of those who live there) as a danger zone, a 'troubled' area. Further, Lord Selkirk Park is primarily an Aboriginal space, and thus a racialized space (Razack 2000; Comack and Balfour 2004), and Aboriginal people have been socially excluded as the consequence not only of poverty and racism, but also of 100 years of colonization (Adams 1999).

This is the context in which at least some Aboriginal women in Lord Selkirk Park struggle to create safe spaces for their children and grandchildren. In various ways, none very visible to outsiders, they resist the forces that would harm their children and grandchildren. This is a form of politics—a 'politics of resistance' (Foucault 1980; Fraser 1989). People resist their oppression in a wide variety of ways, some more immediately identifiable as 'politics' than others. This paper seeks to excavate, to unearth, some of these sites and practices of the politics of resistance.

Part 2: Method

This study has made use of a participatory action research approach (Feldman and Stall, 2004, p. 12). The author has worked closely with key organizations and individuals in the Lord Selkirk Park community, and has sought to conduct research that will accrue to the benefit of the community. The research method has been designed to present the views of a group of women whose voices are rarely if ever heard in the public realm. Their voices are suppressed because they are poor, are women, and are Aboriginal, and because they live in Lord Selkirk Park public housing developments, a stigmatized space. Lynne Phillips (1996, p.17) has argued that it is such women's voices that ought to be at the centre of any 'development' project, and she describes a methodological shift:

"a shift to listening to women's voices, placing their interests at the center, and redefining social change from their perspective. This approach is meant not only to permit women's words to be heard but also to have women's interests provide the basis for undercutting existing paradigms of development. This approach, centering on social change from women's point of view, has been considered a kind of development with women rather than for them" (for a similar analysis see Kabeer, 1994, p. 230).

This study is an attempt, among other things, to lay the basis for thinking about community development in Lord Selkirk Park in this fashion. It seeks to identify these Aboriginal women's "hidden transcripts of resistance in everyday practices"; it is a project in "unearthing their

suppressed voices and perspectives" (Conway, 2004, pp. 48 and 61). There appears to be a need for such work. A recent study of Aboriginal women in Canada (Stout and Kipling, 1998, p. 12) observed that "...it is quite simply unacceptable not to take advantage of the wisdom and experience of Aboriginal women, who often understand the needs and capacities of their communities better than anyone else", and yet, "...in many areas there continues to be a shocking disregard for their views and interests. In turn, this is aggravated by a severe lack of information concerning their day-to-day lives and the impact of their activities on their families and communities". This study attempts to shed some light on the day-to-day lives of a selected group of Aboriginal women in Lord Selkirk Park; on what these women consider to be the problems and the strengths in the Developments; and on what they consider to be the community development strategies most likely to be successful in improving the lives of people in the D. Asking such questions of women who live in the Developments is consistent with a community development approach, which assumes that those who live in a community know best what that community's needs and capacities might be (Silver, 2006a).

Twenty Aboriginal women in the Developments were interviewed. Interviews were conducted by Pam Hotomani and Jennifer Seaton, two Aboriginal women who live in the Developments, and who were identified by Cheyenne Henry of the Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre as women who would be good interviewees. Pam and Jennifer were then trained

in interviewing techniques, with the training including their interviewing each other. Pam, Jennifer and Cheyenne met with the author to identify 20 women to be interviewed. The selection criteria were that they be Aboriginal women who live in the Developments and who are likely to have thought about and to have ideas about community development at Lord Selkirk Park. Not all of the initial list of 20 women could be contacted; additional women were identified by placing a notice in the Resource Centre, and relying upon Cheyenne Henry and Dianne Ross, the Resource Centre coordinators, to assist in determining whether they met the criteria. Table One categorizes the 20 women interviewed by age and number of children.

The interviewers asked those interviewed: how they came to be in the Developments; what their backgrounds were; what they consider to be the most important strengths, and the greatest problems, in the Developments; what they like most about living in the D and what they like least; and what they think should and could be done to improve the lives of those who live in the Developments. Interviews were conducted in an open-ended fashion, with the interviewers being encouraged to allow those being interviewed to take the questions in whatever direction they chose. Interviews were conducted in April, May and June,

2006. They lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, and were tape-recorded. Most were conducted in one of the rooms at the Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre. Upon completion of the interviews, two focus groups were organized, all those interviewed were invited, and 14 of the 20 women participated. The focus groups were held in June, 2006, at the Resource Centre, were conducted by the author, and were intended to generate further discussion about the same questions: what are the main strengths and problems in the D; what do you like most and least about living here; and what do you think should and could be done to improve the lives of those living here. The focus groups generated excellent discussions, and these, like the interviews, were tape-recorded.

A small cash payment was made to all those interviewed, as a token of appreciation for their participation in the project, and as an acknowledgment of the value of their contribution. Each of the 20 women was paid \$25 for participating in the interviews. A further \$25 was paid to those who participated in the focus groups, and pizza and soft drinks were available at the focus group meetings. The entire project, including the interview questions, was reviewed and approved by the University of Winnipeg Senate Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of interviewing.

Table One: Women Interviewed, by Age and Number of Children

Age			Number of Children		
19–25	7	35%	no children	3 (two are pregnant)	15%
26–35	4	20	one child	4	20
36–50	5	25	two children	3	15
51+	4	20	3-4 children	5	25
<i>totals</i>	20	100%	5+ children	5	25
			<i>totals</i>	20	100%

Part 3: The Results of the Interviews

Children and Grandchildren

Any analysis of women and community development, at least in Lord Selkirk Park public housing developments, must start with the commitment of those Aboriginal women who were interviewed to their children and grandchildren. Not all women in the D are committed in this way. But for those interviewed, children and grandchildren are the centre, the core, of their lives. This finding is consistent with the argument that for Aboriginal people generally, the family has provided a form of protection against the racism that they experience in the dominant culture (Castle, 2003, p. 844; Janovicek, 2003, p. 558; Krause, 2003, p.535).

Some of the women interviewed said explicitly that the best thing in their lives was their children. One woman with an adult child said that the best thing in her life was “having my daughter. She was the best thing that ever happened to me”. A 19 year old woman who moved in with her sister in the D specifically to help her sister with raising her two boys said that the best thing in her life was the birth of her two nephews. Several of the women are raising their grandchildren. Others have taken in other women’s children. The same appears to have been the case among low-income African-American women in a large public housing project in Chicago, who Feldman and Stall (2004, p. 96) argue have played the role of “community othermothers”, defined as community members “who feel and take the responsibility for the care of all children in the community”. In Lord Selkirk Park, women do this seemingly without complaint. It appears simply to be taken as a part of life’s obligations.

Indeed, in the case of several of those interviewed, grandmothers quit paid jobs in order to look after grandchildren. They have done this even though it has required that they go on social assistance in order to survive, and even though it has meant that, despite their age, they have become lone heads of young households, with all the endless work and responsibility that this entails. Children and grandchildren, not a career or a paid job, are the focal points of their lives. This is a cultural notion that may be largely invisible to many in the dominant culture, for many of whom the concept of ‘career’, or at least the importance of paid employment, looms much larger in shaping the patterns of their lives. In the case of these Aboriginal women, children and grandchildren trump career, and even paid employment. The poverty-level payments of social assistance are simply taken as a price that has to be paid to give priority to the children in their care.

The care of children and the desire to be close to other female family members is the reason that many of those we interviewed originally chose to live in the Developments. An auntie lives with a mother of nine children in order to help out with childcare, and one of the nine children lives nearby in the Developments, leading the mother to say, “that’s the reason I like living there too”. A 39 year old mother of five told us that “my mom used to live in the Developments here, so that’s how I ended up here”, while a 26 year old single mom told us that she came to the D “because my mother and my sister stay around here and most people are friendly here”. A mother of three who returned to Winni-

peg after 13 years on the west coast said she “ended up in Lord Selkirk Park because it was a good place, cheap rent, and I have family members that have lived here in past years”. Close ties between mothers and daughters have been identified in earlier studies as characteristic of inner-city life (McDowell, 1999, p. 99). The attraction of children and grandchildren, and the commitment to an extended family that is mutually supportive, characterizes the lives of most of the Aboriginal women who were interviewed.

Many households in the Developments, however, are in difficult circumstances. Although we did not speak directly with women in any such households, many of those we did speak with referred to them. One grandmother of seven, now raising an adopted six year old boy, told us that: “the worst thing in this community is you see, like, a lot of these young women doing crystal meth and coke and they lose their children over it and you see them pawning their stuff”. Others expressed concern about young children running around in the Developments, even late at night, unsupervised by parents. Still others, many in fact, referred to late-night parties and the relatively open buying and selling of drugs. Some households have been ravaged by the drug culture, which is so prevalent in the Developments. These are the young people and their families whose lives have been damaged by the lasting effects of colonization, and racism, and poverty, and the culture of despair that grips many of them when they face the hardships of being an urban Aboriginal person in a city, like Winnipeg, where, as one young woman told us, it’s “not very easy being Aboriginal”.

More deeply these problems are the consequence of colonization, and its deliber-

ate attempts over many decades to destroy the Aboriginal family. The residential schools were specifically designed to separate Aboriginal children from their families in order to break the natural process by which a way of life is passed on from generation to generation, and by so doing to “take the Indian out of the child” (Milloy, 1999, p.42). The impact upon Aboriginal families has been devastating. Yet in the midst of this hardship, many Aboriginal women work selflessly to hold households together, and to raise children and grandchildren and other peoples’ children. They are engaged in what can best be seen as a ‘politics of resistance’. This commitment to children and grandchildren—a commitment undertaken primarily by women—is an essential task in the distinctly political project of Aboriginal survival.

A common stereotype is that such women are doing nothing, just sitting around taking advantage of welfare. Such an interpretation is very wide of the mark. A different and more reasonable interpretation is that, if as a culture we were to place the value on children that they deserve, and were to recognize the work of raising them as productive work, and were to pay their care-givers accordingly, these women would be among our most well-paid citizens (Gibson-Graham, 2005, p. 139; Waring, 1989; Castells, 1978, pp. 177-78). They are not. They live in poverty, in an often harsh environment, in the midst of which they struggle to create a safe space for their children and grandchildren. This is a politics of resistance—of resistance to the many forces that conspire to tear apart Aboriginal families, and to damage Aboriginal children and youth.

Like many forms of women’s politics, it is largely invisible. It does not even look

like politics. But it is best understood as a politics of resistance: resisting the ongoing, destructive impact of colonization on the Aboriginal family; resisting the forces of violence all around them that threaten to destroy the family; promoting the values not of individualism, but of sharing and community. Home is a safe place, a place of healing. As bell hooks (1990, p. 42) has put it, with reference to the similar experience of African-American women:

“This task of making a homeplace, of making home a community of resistance, has been shared by black women globally.... For those who dominate and oppress us benefit most when we have nothing to give our own, when they have so taken from us our dignity, our humanness that we have nothing left, no ‘homeplace’ where we can recover ourselves” (see also Radford-Hill, 2000, chapter 3).

This is an essential but difficult political project, requiring on the part of these women a remarkable selflessness and great strength of will.

Strong Women; Hard Lives

These are strong and resilient women. Their lives have made them so. Many have worked in difficult jobs at various times when family responsibilities made that possible, most commonly as family or home support workers of various kinds, or with children with disabilities, or as housekeepers or chambermaids. These are jobs at the lower end of the income and social status scales, and are typical of the jobs that Aboriginal women have historically been confined to—jobs in the ‘secondary labour market’ (Hull, 1983, p. 35). Many have overcome great difficulties in their personal lives. A

young single mom told us that “I was kind of raised in the CFS [Child and Family Services] system, from age six ‘til I was 18, lived in various foster homes.... I had parents who had addictions, specifically alcoholism”. A 25 year old woman with four children, recently arrived in the Developments, told us that before getting a place in the D:

“I moved, like, six times with my kids and the last place I was, I was at my ex-mother-in-law’s, and my ex came there and threw us out at 10:30 in the night in St. Boniface and we had to walk all the way this way with my kids... and now he’s started to threaten me”.

She is still struggling. A mother of a large family, who came to the Developments directly from a women’s shelter, described years of abuse at the hands of an ex-husband:

“I had a rough life, ‘til this day too. That’s the thing that keeps me going, is my children... when they’re not around, that’s when I think about the things I went through all these years, like abuse and that, with my ex-husband.... At first when I got away from there, like from him, it was pretty hard for me to go around places, like, looking behind my back or something, scared for my kids too because they got abused by my ex-husband which wasn’t his children, so they were pretty scared.... But now I’ve been divorced for seven years now, so everything’s starting to be okay, I feel safe, I don’t have that fear any more, like even when I see him, I don’t have that fear anymore”.

One relatively young grandmother told us that she was abused as a child, and that now, “Sometimes I feel really old, because of the way things have been for me, but I would never change a thing,

never, ever, would I change a thing". What characterizes the lives of many of these women is not only their commitment to children, but also the often harsh lives that they have endured, and the fact that they have emerged as strong and resilient women, despite the remarkable prevalence of domestic violence in their lives.

Drugs, Gangs and Violence

When asked what the worst thing is about living in the Developments, almost every one of the women interviewed mentioned the drugs and gangs and the fear that they feel, especially for their children. Some told us that they do not go out at night; most told us that they keep their children in at night. A grandmother said: "And the worst thing about staying in the Developments, like I said earlier, it's the gangs, you need to get the children away from the gangs". A mother of six said: "I don't really let my kids out that much". A young woman added: "There are a lot of drug dealers that are throughout the Developments, and maybe if there's a way to get rid of the drugs around and kind of just keep it away from the eyes of the children". Another young woman added: "You see drugs being dealt right outside your window.... Look in the parking lot you see people come and pull up and someone goes to the car and walks away... kind of disgusts me because so many people around here have kids". A grandmother said: "I do see parents also going to buy their drugs from certain units or whatever and then leaving and they do it so openly that you're able to see it, and that's not healthy for the children seeing their parents do that". A young woman at a focus group said: "The prostitution and johns as well. Growing up, when I was like eight years old, there were johns rid-

ing around the neighbourhood trying to pick us little guys up". Another woman who also grew up in the D said: "I can't even walk around in my neighbourhood without a john thinking I'm a prostitute or something". A 25 year-old woman who lives in the six-story Tower building in the Developments said "I wouldn't go in the elevator alone" at night, and described a friend being beaten up in the elevator. A grandmother said: "I don't feel secure in my home.... our windows get broken...", and she described an incident in the summer of 2005 when her then 14 year old granddaughter, who she is raising, was accosted by gang members and "they took a knife to her because she wouldn't do coke [cocaine]". A woman at the focus group said: "There was a family that was in here, they had to move because two of her sons got beat up... and when she called the police they [the gang members] went after her daughter and she just snuck away in the night. And my daughter moved away too because they were just dealing drugs right in front of her window". Another woman added: "Especially when you have a teenage boy, and you can't sleep until he walks in the house, because it's dangerous for the teenagers... being harassed to be in a gang". A 35 year old mother with five children referred to a boy named Albert [not his real name]: "...he's like six, seven. I said 'What are you going to be Albert, when you grow up?' 'I'm going to be a gangster'", he replied.

The presence of the gangs, and the fear and insecurity that they create, are all-pervasive at the D. So are the drugs, and especially crack. One woman said that a lot of people at the D are "very heavy users on crack", and added that "two of my family members are addicted to it, really bad, to a point that they don't care

any more.... They lost weight, they look sick... the problem is they're starving their kids" because what money they have goes first to crack—and the addiction makes them not care. Then grandmothers step in to raise the children. When asked if things are better or worse in the Developments now, compared to previous years, a grandmother said: "It's gotten worse... I've been here off and on for 30 years.... 30 years ago it was never like this. I mean, yeah, you had alcohol, but there was not that much". The Developments is an embattled space, characterized by a disproportionately high level of gang and drug activity and related violence, that in turn creates fear and insecurity for many.

The Developments As a Good Place to Live

Yet despite this fear, and the dangers to the children, many like living in the Developments. A grandmother and long-time resident told us: "The best thing in my life? Bringing up my kids here. I like it in the Lord Selkirk area because of the school and there's no traffic around, there's a lot of places for the kids to play". Another grandmother and long-time resident said: "I really enjoy Lord Selkirk Park. I like it here. I know a lot of people".

Most importantly, the housing is sufficiently large for children, and available at an affordable rent. One young single mom who works and goes to school told us that she was happy to find a place at the Developments "because places [elsewhere] are quite expensive... so yeah, for me it would work out financially and it was a nice big three-bedroom and I have two boys so that was really, really good, better than, I had a one-bedroom before and I was sharing with them [her sons]".

A grandmother raising an adopted six year old said: "For me the difficulty in Winnipeg is probably the rent", but in the Developments, "this is reasonable rent", and when she is able to return to work she will be able to stay because there is a cap on the rent. A grandmother looking after a teen and an adult with disabilities told us that: "Actually, I really don't have any complaints about living in the Developments", adding that "I like this space I'm living in. I feel like I'm living in a mansion coming in from a tiny two-bedroom apartment from downtown". A young single Mom said she used to live nearby, on a street just outside the Developments, "and it cost me like \$750 on the upper level... couldn't even afford it, and then I moved here, it's cheaper". Many told us that living in the Developments is convenient because everything that they need is within a short walking distance. As one said: "It's just like one little, small little town, village, everything's so close around you". And many want to improve their living space by making it look better. One said: "When they gave free soil there and flowers [in the Spring of 2006], it helps because people can't afford things, I mean, we're poor in this neighbourhood, right, and when they did that it gives them a boost to make their place look better".

What can be deduced—the gangs and violence and associated fears notwithstanding—from the fact that many of the women that we interviewed like living in the Developments? First, the Developments represent good quality housing at affordable rents at a time when that is in short supply. The private housing market does not meet the needs of low-income people seeking rental accommodations; this is the case in Winnipeg and other Canadian urban centres (see Silver, 2006c). So some women are prepared to

move into the Developments because it provides them with affordable, good quality housing that they would otherwise have great difficulty finding. The combination of good quality housing at reasonable rents, together with the regularity provided by social assistance payments, however appallingly low they may be, are the basis of a survival strategy for these women. Many are happy to be there because it also enables them to be close to extended family, and the mutual supports that this makes possible. This too becomes an important element of a survival strategy.

The fears of gang and drug activities are dealt with, in part at least, by an accommodation with space and time. The Developments is contested space: strong women with children and grandchildren in their care appreciate the wide-open spaces where kids can play, under their close supervision, during the day; some of those same spaces are taken over by gangs at night. Women know where they can safely go, and where they cannot, and at what times, and they make this accommodation. They have little choice. In some cases, in fact, it is a trade-off: the Developments provides them with a safe haven from domestic abuse; in return for which they learn to live with the dangers posed by gang—and drug-related violence. This is the basis of a survival strategy used by other, low-income racialized tenants of public housing projects. A Black woman in public housing in Baltimore, for example, described her situation this way:

“...it’s like public housing and welfare... they have done a lot. It has done a lot of good for the black woman. I’m saying from the black point of view [because] I’m black... When I went on welfare and moved in public housing, I had a place for

me and my children, a nice, decent, clean place for my children and I to call home. And that meant I didn’t have to take no beatings and no type of abuse from no man out here in order to have a place... for me and my kids (Williams, 2004, p. 128).

Reaching an accommodation with the violence that surrounds them is part of a survival strategy. But accommodation is not the only response to the contested character of space at the Developments. There is also resistance. It is important to try to identify “...the multiple patterns of accommodations and resistance to dominant power relations” (Conway, 2004, p. 51).

The Politics of Contested Space

The Developments is a space that is racialized, and is characterized by poverty and by violence that is both domestic, and drug- and gang-related. While it inspires fear and insecurity, it also inspires resistance. It is a space that is contested. Strong women in the Developments fight back against the forces that would harm their children and grandchildren. This politics of resistance takes place primarily within, but occasionally beyond, the home, in an ongoing struggle to secure and expand safe space.

Daily life in this marginalized, racialized and branded space appears to be lived very close to home. Most women rarely go far beyond the boundaries of the D; few have cars; few ever leave the North End, save for occasional visits to extended family who may live in other parts of the city. Some women expressed fear of traveling far from the Developments. “I wouldn’t even venture past Selkirk [Ave]”, one told us. Another said about her children: “they don’t go out of the Developments”. Yet another told us that:

“We can’t go anywhere. Can’t leave the kids. I can’t go out. I have to stay home, because you never know who’s going to come along and try and take over your house. They’ll even pay your rent, if you’ll let them, so they can use your house for drugs”.

Thus the spatial character of daily life for these strong women is significant: it is confined, hemmed in. One woman at a focus group told us that “I’m paranoid to walk down King [Street, which runs along the eastern edge of the D] because I see White people in a car, they’re all, ‘she might be a hooker’”. This is a typical example of the sense of stigma attached to the Developments, and to those who live there. Daily life is lived almost wholly within the ‘borders’ of the Developments, or very nearby, with short walking excursions for shopping or medical or other appointments, all of which are in the immediate vicinity of the D.

These women’s movements are structured not only by concerns about safety and security within the D, but also by fears and insecurities created by the dominant culture—another legacy of the impact of colonization—beyond the Developments. This is consistent with the observation, made in the context of a discussion of African-American women in public housing in New York, that: “Racial minorities and some ethnic groups experience the dual pressure of positive attachment to the neighbourhood, and barriers of prejudice and discrimination that bar them from other areas” (Saegert, 1989, p.307). Our interviews suggest that many Aboriginal women in the Developments feel that there are ‘barriers of prejudice and discrimination that bar them from other areas’, and confine them largely to the Developments.

Yet there is resistance. The D is contested space. The establishment early in 2006—in a vacant unit—of the Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre, and before that the Lord Selkirk Family Resource Centre, can be seen as a means of creating a safe space, a space from which much-needed services can be delivered, but also resistance can be organized. A woman and her daughter at one of the focus groups told us that the previous week they had started an evening drumming circle in one of the parking lots in the Developments, explicitly as a means of taking back that space from the drug dealers and gang members. Others have since joined. Two of the women we interviewed described cases of their confronting gang members and drug dealers in front of their homes, and angrily (and successfully) demanding that they leave. And of course, women’s homes are sites of resistance, as they struggle to make them safe spaces in the midst of the chaos that often prevails at the Developments, and where they practice a ‘politics of resistance’ by working to protect their children and grandchildren.

Taking Resistance to the Collective Level

Women living in difficult circumstances such as those experienced in the Developments typically do their best to develop networks with other women, and to act collectively in whatever ways may be possible. It has been said that “Women’s survival strategies often depend on building up networks of women within the community” (Momsen, 2004, p. 235). A recent study argues that “networks among neighbours, as well as those formed around common interests related to home and its environment, often become the starting point for collective ac-

tion" (Viaou and Lykogianni, 2006, p. 739; see also Moser, 1993, pp. 34-35). These networks have a broader political potential. In Ecuador and Peru, for example, women migrating to urban areas have relied on neighbours for mutual aid in the domestic sphere—babysitting, fetching water, for example—and as a result social networks developed, consciousness regarding mutual struggles grew, and the women began to organize collectively around shared concerns (Jelin, 1990).

We know too that in large, inner-city public housing projects in North America, it is typically the women who act collectively to improve quality of life and promote social justice, and that such work is an extension of the work that they do in the home (Venkatesh, 2000; Brietbart and Pader, 1995; O'Brien, 1993; Leavitt, 1993; Saegert, 1989). Feldman and Stall (2004, p.11), in their study of African-American women in a Chicago public housing project, found that "women of color and low-income women" have pushed their role of caring for families "beyond the boundaries of the household to include the neighbourhood". In her recent study of a large, inner city public housing project in Baltimore, Rhonda Williams (2004, p. 85) observes that:

"Women have a historical record of politicizing their roles as mothers and wives and acting on behalf of their homes, their families, and the community.... [In Murphy Homes in Baltimore] they used their domestic roles to carve out space as civic activists and entered the public and political realm on behalf of families and communities" (see also Venkatesh, 2000, pp. 62 and 64).

This work is typically ignored, as if it were invisible, as is the case with so

much of women's involvement with community development. For women in public housing this is even more the case because they are so often the victims of negative and racialized stereotyping. Brietbart and Pader (1995, p. 14) argue that:

"Women's involvement in struggles for housing and urban organizing is often ignored or its significance minimized, both because their work is viewed as an extension of their invisible work as home-makers and caretakers of the larger community, and because it contradicts popular expectations of low-income women".

And there is, in the literature on 'development', an argument that it is the establishment by women of their own organizations, women's organizations, that enables significant progress toward lasting social change.

"Women's organizations offer the possibility of personal empowerment and change, and also provide a context for this personal transformation to lead into direct political action" (Mosse, 1993, p. 162).

The women of Lord Selkirk Park are not quite at that point, but they are close. Some networking takes place, and some women openly expressed the desire to act collectively, and the belief that women should work together and support each other more than is now the case. This is the foundation on which community development can build.

Many of these women know each other. "We get to know each other... because we protect the children", said one. She added: "the best thing is just getting to know your neighbour, I suppose, and getting to know what's around you and

who's around you and kind of like family-oriented". Another described the pleasure that she gets from helping her neighbours, and added, "I love having kids around". She described sitting outside on hot summer evenings talking with neighbours, and said: "I feel safe in the Developments because everybody watches for you, even my neighbours, like we watch for each other. We watch each others' kids too". A woman at one of the focus groups said that she always watches her kids when they are outside playing: "I sit outside most of the time, that's why I'm so brown", a comment to which the other women responded with uproarious laughter—itsself an important and common element in their survival strategy.

Others that we interviewed saw this—ie., women getting together, watching each other's kids, getting to know their neighbours—as the basis of a community development strategy, although they did not use the term community development. They advocated more conscious and deliberate efforts to pull neighbours together to get to know each other, and to work collectively to build a safer and better community. For example, a 19 year old told us that she thought what should happen in the D is:

"...get neighbours to come together... and the families can talk about what they see should be done and put their own two cents worth in about what their concerns are, they can have different gatherings where they can get the kids to get to know one another. I think it would make them feel a lot safer and everybody would be a lot closer and just feel like a more safe and better place to live".

A 27 year old single mother of four said she thinks what is needed is: "More ac-

tivities for families, like barbecues and all that, where everybody'll get together, that'll be good... everybody meet each other".

A 55 year old grandmother with long experience in the Developments said much the same, and in doing so issued a 'call to arms' to other women in the D.

"I think it would be good if we could just all get together, you know. People have to wake up, women have to wake up, if we don't wake up our children are going to face the same problems we face today. You have to consider your children, your grandchildren.... That vicious circle's gotta stop—the drugs, the booze, everything—in order for us to go ahead with our lives".

She said that women need to get together, and talk with each other. The problem, she offered, is that women have:

"spent a long time being abused, generation after generation. As women we're just afraid to talk out because we're always told what to do. But I think we have to really work hard for our children, our grandchildren. We shouldn't be afraid to talk".

Women-Centred Organizing

This is completely consistent with what has been called "women-centred organizing" (Feldman and Stall, 2004; Stall and Stoecker, 1996). According to this model the political system has historically excluded people based on race, class and gender. To combat their exclusion "women have politicized the private sphere by organizing around issues that affect their daily lives and experiences". By doing so "women-centred organizing dissolves the boundaries between public and private life, between household and civil society and extends the boundaries of the house-

hold to include the neighbourhood” (Stall and Stoecker, 1996, p. 7). Some women in Lord Selkirk Park are already doing this; others tell us that this is what they believe should be done.

In still other cases this is not being done at all, but it is clear that it is needed. For example, many of the young moms in the Developments are isolated. A young mother of four who arrived at the Developments in flight from an abusive partner told us that: “Sometimes when I get really depressed I just go in a room and I just cry, just lonely sometimes... single Mom at home, stressed, just got to have patience, a lot of patience”. There is a very great need for women in the Developments to get together more than is now the case and act collectively in support of each other, in order to break down the isolation and reduce the hardships that they face.

Any successful form of community development has to start from where people are in their lives, and what they consider to be important in their lives, and it has to build on the strengths that already exist in a community (Kretzman and McKnight 1993). In Lord Selkirk Park our interviews make it clear that there is a core of Aboriginal women living in the Developments who are fully committed to their children and grandchildren and to the idea of a better life for them, and who believe that their strength is in their acting together, collectively, as women.

They have acted collectively before. Women at the first focus group described with pride, and nostalgia, the Family Resource Centre they had run and that had been closed a few years earlier. One said, referring to her previous involvement with the Family Resource Centre:

“I really miss the old times.... We used to have really good times in here, laughing, you could sit down and have a coffee.... Sometimes we’d sit for hours. Cooking at night—the community, for some of the community members”. But Child and Family Services pulled the funds, and when the women said they would run it themselves and fund-raise for operating expenses, the unit in which the Family Resource Centre was located was taken from them. The Family Resource Centre collapsed without a space in which to operate, and the women withdrew from collective action, their defeat made the worse by the simultaneous death of one of their friends, a woman considered by many to be their elder and leader. The pain caused by the choking off of funding for, and resulting closure of, their Family Resource Centre was still palpable when we conducted interviews in 2006.

A Struggle Over Space

Yet this is evidence that collective action, as an extension of the kind of ‘politics of resistance’ that takes place in the home, has in the recent past been done and done well in the Developments. It has taken the form of a struggle over space—the creation of safe space, not only in but beyond the home. As Feldman and Stall (2004, p.9) argue:

“The foundation of grassroots activism in low-income communities not only is substantially locally-based, but often is intimately connected to ongoing struggles for rights to and control over spatial resources to sustain these communities. At Wentworth Gardens [a large, inner-city public housing project in Chicago] the struggles for spatial resources that house and support

everyday life—from the spaces to house needed services and programs in their community, and more generally to the buildings and grounds of their development—have been central to the residents’ community activism”.

This is a foundation upon which to build community development. As one woman said, referring to the elder who had died and who was her best friend: “It was one of the last things she told me. One of the things we were to do was to get our Resource Centre back. It was called the Lord Selkirk Family Resource Centre”. And it represented a politics of resistance that was collective. Indeed, it was intended not to be just Aboriginal women, but White woman too. “Yes, they’re just as poor as we are”, explained one woman at the focus group, to the general agreement of the others.

Four of the 20 women, 20 percent of those interviewed, mentioned the recently-established (January, 2006) Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre. All made positive comments. They said things like: “the best things are probably this Resource Centre”; “that’s the best thing I seen around here since I came back this way”; and “the best things would be stuff like the Resource Centre, the things happening here, you get yourself involved and you get to meet people, you get to have organized things with people”. The Resource Centre is clearly a central part of a neighbourhood revitalization strategy in the Developments. It represents one of the successful “struggles for spatial resources that house and support everyday life”, and is a safe space where women in the Developments can build networks, and work toward organizing collective actions.

The Contradictory Role of the Police in This Struggle

As strong as these women are, they need supports to build a healthy community, a community in which their and others’ children and grandchildren can thrive. An essential part of this process is more effective policing. Women told us emphatically and repeatedly that a greater police presence is needed in the Developments, but that it has to be of a particular kind, much different from the style of policing that most women now see being practiced in the Developments.

When asked what is needed in order to improve life in the Developments, the majority of women said two apparently contradictory things. They told us that: “we need more cops here”; and then they quickly added, often in the next sentence, “we hate the cops”, or some close variant of this statement. Upon further discussion it became clear that this means that they want community policing, as described below (for a similar finding, see Comack and Silver, 2006); they emphatically do not want the kind of policing that they see currently being practiced. It is their belief that the current form of policing most commonly practiced in the Developments worsens, rather than improves, their safety.

Many examples were offered of the police humiliating and demeaning Aboriginal people, and treating Aboriginal people, especially youth, excessively roughly. One said: “I’ve lived in this area and, like the police, well I’ve been brutalized and I guess, well... they call you down, they’re really rough... they ridicule you”. Despite their fear of gang activity in the Developments, the women said they rarely report anything to the police. They do not trust the police, they see them as an alien force. And if they inform the police, the

police will come to their unit to take a statement and they will thereby be identified and will immediately suffer retaliation. One woman told us that: "I know where the drug houses are, but I'm scared to phone the police, because if they see the police coming to my house, like, I'm looking after my four grandchildren and what if they come to shoot up my house? Because that's what they do". A 27 year old woman, referring to her perception of how police treat Aboriginal women who live in the D, said: "They judge everyone, they judge every Native girl, they think that we're just coming back from the Northern [Hotel, on north Main near the D] or trying to pick up anybody". Another said: "It's hard to trust the police. Especially for young girls. You must have experienced this [she says to others at the focus group]. Walking home these guys [police] come up to you...". Others nodded their agreement. The distrust is deep; the divide is wide. Thus the absurd situation is created in which the women know exactly who is doing what and when and where in the D, and the police do not.

The police, the women argue, believe that every group of young men constitute a gang, because they are unable to distinguish between those who are and those who are not gang members. The result is a deepening of the resentment and distrust directed at the police. One grandmother, for example, described how her grandsons and their friends hang out at her place. They are not gang-involved. "They just hang out there because I don't want them to go anywhere else". But the police, seeing a group of male Aboriginal teens regularly together, and not having a real knowledge of the D, assume that they are a gang. This might seem a reasonable presumption, given the prevalence of gangs, but it is in fact

a form of 'racial profiling' that is in defiance of the well-established legal standard of presumption of innocence. And it widens the divide between the police and the community. At one of the focus groups a mother said: "You know what? They're rough with our kids. That's why I think the young kids won't go to a cop for help".

Despite this, at the first focus group, when the women were asked, 'what are the first two things that should happen here?', they collectively shouted: "more cops". They then described what they mean. They want more cops on the beat, talking to people, assigned to the Developments for a long time so that they get to know the neighbourhood and the people, so that they call people and children by their names, develop trust, and eventually mutual respect. This is what the women mean when they say they want more cops in the neighbourhood. They refer fondly to "Officer Dan", who was in years past a cop who walked the beat in the D and who developed the respect of people. One woman said:

"I think we need more policing. We had police in here before, Officer Dan, and he was pretty visible... the kids knew him and if there was any trouble with the kids, like, he would talk to them, and that is what we need again".

Another added:

"That Officer Dan was really good. I wish we could get him back. You could see him always in the community around with the kids. And sometimes he'd have a trail of kids with him, and if your kids did something he'd come and tell you right away, or he'd come and talk with you, or if you asked him to come and talk with the kids he would".

This is what has been described as “community policing” in a recent study (Comack and Silver 2006).

The kind of community policing described in the stories about Officer Dan would make possible a very sophisticated intelligence system, because once that kind of trust is developed, the women will share what they know about what is going on. And they know what is going on. In the focus groups they described in detail which people were dealing drugs, to whom they were selling and out of which units, to which units taxis came and bags were quickly and quietly exchanged, and which tenants had allowed gangs to pay their rent so that dealers could use the unit for drug preparation and distribution. With this kind of detailed intelligence, the police could act quickly to improve safety in the Developments.

Many of the women, although fearful for their children’s safety, expressed sympathy for the young people getting caught up in the gang life. A grandmother said about the gang members that she guessed they were “brought up really poor. They probably didn’t get enough love and attention I guess”, and the reason they hurt people is “to make them feel they have power or something”. They need more things to do, she offered. They need safe places to hang out, programs, dances. A young woman said that it is important to “get them involved in other things, you know, get some programs going, some organized games, different activities where they can see that there’s something else to do”. Lack of such activities was cited by many. A young woman who grew up in the Developments and is now working said: “I had the privilege in school to go to ballet and dance classes with the [Royal] Winnipeg Ballet, well, that was only for a short

period of time but I really enjoyed that, like, that kept me out of trouble. Usually kids are really bored”. A lack of activities and opportunities was cited repeatedly as an explanation for gang behaviour. What these women want, these women engaged in a ‘politics of resistance’ centred on their children and grandchildren, is more opportunities for all young people in the Developments, so that life improves and the stigma attached to their embattled space is removed. One woman, a long-time resident, told us that:

“I could move out of here anytime, but I will not because it is my home... I want to see... a lot of job opportunities, so that the young people can just hold their head up and say, ‘I’m from the Lord Selkirk Park and I’m Native’. That’s what I want”.

These Aboriginal women in Lord Selkirk Park are already engaged in a politics of resistance: in the case of all of those interviewed, in their homes; in the case of some, beyond their homes in the immediate neighbourhood as an extension of the work they do in support of home and children. They are impeded in this community development work, this “women-centred organizing”, by the drug—and gang-related violence that they confront daily in the Developments, in response to which they have developed a complex strategy of accommodation and resistance. They actively resist, in their homes and beyond, and often in the form of a struggle over space, the adverse effects of gang activity. Their efforts are being advanced by the establishment in the Developments of the Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre—itsself both the product of a struggle for safe space, and a safe space from which more such collective organizing can take place. A move toward community policing—a strategy in which the police work closely with the people and

organizations in a community to build a healthier neighbourhood—is one that is advocated by these women, that would be consistent with their form of organizing, and would advance their safety and security, thus making possible still more community organizing.

The Transformative Possibilities of Adult Education

There was considerable support among those interviewed for the idea of adult education in the Developments, particularly if childcare were available. Most of those that we interviewed have relatively low levels of formal education—many have grade 9 or 10—but most told us that they would like to upgrade their education and find a job. But because most are single parents or grandparents, and the care of children is so central to their lives, adequate childcare is the necessary precondition for their improving their formal education and joining the paid labour force.

That Aboriginal women should want to improve their formal education and find jobs is not new, nor is the fact that they are prevented from doing so by a host of barriers. More than 20 years ago Hull (1983, pp. 1-2), in a survey—the Native Women’s Survey—of 182 Aboriginal women in Winnipeg, found that more than three-quarters of those women surveyed wanted to find full-time employment, and a further 20 percent wanted part-time employment. Only 3 percent said they did not want a job at all. Yet few were working. The primary reason as identified by the women themselves was lack of education and training; also cited was lack of access to child care (Hull, 1983, pp. 9-10). Two-thirds of those interviewed indicated that they had considered taking adult education courses—

the most frequently cited reason for not doing so was lack of access to child care (Hull, 1983, pp. 20 and 23).

This is confirmed in our interview results. Many of the women we interviewed want to improve their formal education, but the barriers to doing so are considerable, and primary among these is lack of access to child care. One young woman who is in fact now taking courses and also working said:

“As a single mother it is really hard to find day cares and that’s a big thing.... I had a very hard time finding day cares in my area so I had to look elsewhere... that was difficult.... I know a lot of other mothers have mentioned that they would like to pursue an education and go back to school or get a job but now there is a shortage of daycares so that plays a really, really important role”.

Also important for the women of Lord Selkirk Park is geographic accessibility. With all the barriers they face, the need to travel long distances to school can become overwhelming. A single mother of five children who has a grade 11 education had taken courses at Red River College, but the commute proved too difficult given her parental responsibilities. She said that people in the Developments would attend adult education if it were at the Developments:

“They’d be closer to home and then they could watch their kids from there. Around here it would be good, instead of going all the way back to Red River... it’s so long to take a bus ride over there. That’s why I was having a hard time. I was all the way down to Red River on Notre Dame there. And then I would have to rush back home, just to make it home at 3:30, and it was about an hour, and I got out at 3... but it would be good if they had it around here”.

A grandmother said that her older sister had just turned 50:

“and she went back to school and it’s at the Aboriginal Centre... a lot of people don’t have money [for busfare]... and it’s pretty darned cold in the winter to walk that far... but you know what, the community centre [Turtle Island Neighbourhood Centre, in the Developments] isn’t being used for anything. Put something in there so people can do some upgrading”.

A young single woman with grade 10, now working in the service sector, also suggested that there is a latent demand for adult education if offered in or near the Developments, and added that additional supports, like tutoring, would make the prospect even more attractive:

“There are a lot of young mothers who didn’t get a chance to maybe finish high school, or maybe if they had some kind of programs where they can come in, you know, even like an adult education kind of schooling, you know, maybe just like a small kind of schooling around here, and try and get their education, or even if they can get help with their homework if they’re already going to school”.

When asked what should be done in the Developments to improve the lives of those living there, a 22 year old single mom with a grade 10 education, now on social assistance, echoed the opinion that there is a latent demand for adult education, and identified some of the barriers facing women in the Developments:

“I guess like more schooling for adults... some good adult education for immigrants and I guess low-income, Aboriginal, more programs like that.... You want to get out of the system and it’s hard to if you’re stuck in it and there’s

nowhere else to go to and there’s only so many positions out there for spots to go to school and have to get funded...”.

This young woman had heard about the health care aide/unit clerk program at Urban Circle Training Centre, and also about the Community Development program offered through the CD/CED Training Intermediary by CEDA, and was in the process of looking into each. A 20 year old who is currently completing grade 12 at the Winnipeg Education Centre—she has no children but was pregnant at the time of the interview—said about the prospect of adult education at the Developments: “I would definitely go to it. I’m sure many people would go to it, especially if they had daycare facilities”. A grandmother with grade 9 said that she would like to further her education, but “I would feel uncomfortable going to RB [Russell] or Children of the Earth because of my age”. But both she and her daughter, who also lives in the Developments, would attend adult education if it were available in the Developments, she said. A mother of 9 children, when asked what should be done to improve life in the Developments, said: “I wouldn’t mind, like, if there’s adult education, like close around here”. Numerous others said that they would attend adult education if it were to be offered at the D, and if childcare were available. The reluctance of so many of the women that we interviewed to venture beyond the ‘borders’ of the Developments is further reason to locate educational opportunities in the Developments itself.

What we have been told by the women that we interviewed is evidence, we believe, that there exists in the Developments a latent demand for adult education opportunities, so long as those opportunities are structured to accommo-

date the realities of life for low-income women with significant child care responsibilities. The location in the Developments of an Adult Learning Centre with associated childcare facilities, and perhaps with some supports—in the form of tutoring, for example—for students who have relatively low levels of formal education and have been out of school for some time, would be likely to meet with a very positive response. And there is strong evidence of the efficacy of such an approach. A recent study of adult Aboriginal learners in five Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba (Silver, Klyne and Simard, 2003) found that they do well in such settings, and many graduate with their mature grade 12 diploma after having been out of school for years. The study concluded that the warm and friendly atmosphere and holistic, student-centred approach that prevails in Adult Learning Centres, creates an environment in which Aboriginal learners can do well—including those who have had very difficult personal lives and little ‘success’ in formal educational settings. This is especially so when the curriculum and the program are infused with an Aboriginal cultural orientation, as is especially the case at the Urban Circle Training Centre. In fact the study found that for adult Aboriginal learners attending Urban Circle in particular, the experience was transformational—it changed their lives, in many ways, for the better.

We know too that specially-designed educational initiatives can be transformational for young people in large inner-city public housing projects where levels

of educational attainment have historically been low. The Pathways to Education program, started in 2001 in Toronto’s Regent Park—Canada’s largest and oldest public housing project—has achieved remarkable results (Silver, 2006b). In the mid-1990s, ‘drop-out’¹ rates in Regent Park were double the Toronto average; today, after five years of Pathways, ‘drop-out’ rates in Regent Park are lower than the Toronto average. By the mid-1990s a culture had long since taken root in Regent Park that young people from there did not complete high school; in early 2006 approximately 90 Regent Park students about to graduate from high school applied for admission to post-secondary education. The founder of the program, Caroline Acker, says: “The kids have changed inside, so they now expect and believe they can do something” (personal interview, April 19, 2006). The strength of the Pathways program lies in the intensive support system created for students, including tutoring in academic subjects, mentoring, and a student-parent support worker system.

The case of adult Aboriginal learners in Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba, and of high school students in Toronto’s Regent Park, provide evidence that people who are marginalized can make significant educational gains, and improve the quality of their lives, when specially-tailored educational opportunities are made available to them, and when supports are in place to enable them to take advantage of those opportunities. The individual benefits, and the benefits to society as a whole, are dramatic. Aborigi-

1 Aboriginal people object to the use of the term ‘drop-out’ in describing young Aboriginal school leavers. They argue—and with considerable justification—that Aboriginal youth are not dropping out, but being pushed out, of mainstream schools, which are not prepared to accommodate to their needs (Silver and Mallett 2002).

nal women in Lord Selkirk Park have told us that they want and would take advantage of such opportunities.

Doing so can legitimately be seen as a safety and security initiative. Many in Toronto's Regent Park, for example, are convinced that one of the consequences of Pathways to Education has been not only that young people are doing much better in school, but also that safety and security have been improved. The Executive Director of the Regent Park Neighbourhood Initiative (RPNI) said that one of the most important causes of improved safety and security in the public housing project in recent years has been that:

"Kids aren't out on the streets, right? They may still be on the street somewhat, but they, they're engaged, they're going to school, they're involved with tutors...

they've been pulled off the street, quite literally" (Personal interview, Catherine Goulet, June 27, 2006).

The Chair of the Board of RPNI said much the same:

"I think one of the things that has allowed that improvement [in safety and security] to happen is the Pathways to Education program. I firmly believe that Pathways to Education has been able to provide young people other opportunities... and that's really broadened their horizons" (Personal interview, Debra Dineen, June 28, 2006).

It is likely that the establishment in Lord Selkirk Park of an Adult Learning Centre, with the kinds of supports that have proved so effective at Pathways to Education in Toronto's Regent Park, would, in a matter of years, have the same impact.

Conclusions

The day-to-day lives of the Aboriginal women interviewed at Lord Selkirk Park are characterized by a politics of resistance. They struggle to create safe spaces for themselves and the children in their care in a public housing project that is a marginalized and racialized space. The Developments is also a contested space: the gangs control certain spaces, especially at night; women push back to reclaim those spaces for their children's and families' use by day. The women both accommodate, and resist, in an ongoing struggle over space. They do so in ways that, although largely invisible, are similar to those engaged in by poor and racialized women around the world.

Much of the women's day-to-day resistance is confined to their households and immediate surroundings, but to at least some extent they network with each other, usually in ways related directly or indirectly to their children and grandchildren. Most say that they would like to create more frequent connections with other women in the neighbourhood, in a variety of ways not traditionally seen as political. Some such attempts have been made. These include the women's weekly drumming sessions, and more importantly perhaps, the establishment in early 2006 of the Lord Selkirk Park Resource Centre, which creates a safe space that is much appreciated and valued by the women interviewed, where they can meet to talk, to develop relationships and ultimately networks, and to promote collective activities.

The women see safety and security as the primary problem in the Developments, and are clear and emphatic in expressing the need for a different and more community-based kind of policing strategy. They are equally clear in calling for more opportunities, particularly educational opportunities with associated childcare and other supports, as the means for improving their circumstances.

In this embattled space, the Aboriginal women interviewed for this study live with dignity and courage. Their strengths, largely hidden from the view of outsiders, constitute the basis upon which the women themselves could take the lead in rebuilding Lord Selkirk Park. These are the strengths and the hopes—unearthed by inviting these women to talk about their experiences in the community—upon which a strategy of renewal could be built.

Yet their potential for building community renewal is limited by the barriers of race, class and gender—they are poor Aboriginal women in a culture that devalues them and their work. Try though they might, the forces aligned against them are so formidable that they cannot transform their community without further public support. Left on their own without broad public support, the results of their resistance are likely to be limited. With such support, in ways that they themselves have identified—community policing and adult education among them—their formidable resistance could become transformational.

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