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Constructed and Contested Truths: Aboriginal Suicide, Law, and Colonialism in the Canadian West(s), 1823–1927



In *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt*, Hugh Dempsey recounts the oral history of a suicide at the Kainai (Blood) Reserve in southern Alberta: ‘Sometimes even Low Horn could not help. In 1894, a woman named Only a Flower became despondent and wandered away from the camps. When a young boy found her hanging from a cottonwood tree, he rushed to the medicine man’s house for help. Low Horn went to the site to cut her down, but there was nothing he could do for the unfortunate woman.’¹ Only a Flower’s death occurred at a significant moment in Kainaiwa history when Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) agents and physicians campaigned to decrease the influence of medicine men by vilifying and ridiculing Aboriginal healing methods. The journalist who covered the incident, however, chose to focus on the investigation, emphasizing that the inquest on ‘the body of Black Antelope’s squaw’ had been attended by a government-appointed coroner and six white jurymen who arrived at a verdict of ‘suicide while temporarily insane.’² In his annual report, the Indian agent abbreviated the incident further: ‘The births numbered seventy-one during the year, while the deaths amounted to eighty-eight ... the latter including the suicide of a woman by hanging and the accidental death of a girl by drowning.’³ Contrary to the evidence, he concluded that the Kainaiwa were in ‘fairly good’ health that year.

In contrast to the Indian agent’s casual dismissal of Only a Flower’s death, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reported in 1995 that status Indians in contemporary Canada suffer a suicide rate three

1 Hugh Dempsey, *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt and Other Blackfoot Stories* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 44.

2 ‘Aboriginal Woman Suicides,’ *Macleod Gazette*, 20 July 1894.

3 James Wilson, Blood Agency, 8 Aug. 1895, ‘Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 30 June 1895,’ *Sessional Papers* (hereafter cited as *SP*), 1896, p. 75.

times the total national average, while adolescents are five to six times more likely to commit suicide than their non-Aboriginal age-group peers.⁴ The commission concluded that Aboriginal suicide was an outward expression of the 'cultural stress' that accompanied Canada's colonial relations with First Nations.⁵ While the correlation between colonialism and Aboriginal suicide remains unchallenged, psychologists Christopher Lalonde and Michael Chandler, focusing on British Columbia, have demonstrated that suicide rates can vary dramatically from First Nation to First Nation. Arguing that there is no monolithic 'suicidal indigene,' they established that 90 per cent of youth suicides between 1987 and 1992 occurred in only 10 per cent of bands, while half of the province's 198 bands had not experienced a single youth suicide in six years.⁶ Similarly, anthropologist Ronald Niezen has noted that although many academics and activists use official statistics to construct social pathologies in Aboriginal communities as the legacies of colonialism, 'solid connections between dispossession and depression are difficult to establish.'⁷ His observation may explain why the history of Aboriginal suicide in Canada has been limited to passing references, much speculation, and a case study.⁸

4 Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, used the generic term *aboriginal* to refer to Indian, Inuit, and Metis peoples. The term *Aboriginal* is used throughout this paper, but the suicide cases examined involved only victims defined as 'status Indian' under the 1876 Indian Act.

5 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Choosing Life: Special Report on Suicide among Aboriginal People* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1995). Cathrena Primrose Narcisse critically reviews the abundant literature on Aboriginal suicide in contemporary Canada in 'The Social Construction of Aboriginal Suicide' (master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1994). Anthropologist Peter Carstens interprets Aboriginal suicide as a *latent* function of the reserve system in 'An Essay on Suicide and Disease in Canadian Indian Reserves: Bringing Durkheim Back In,' *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 29 (2000): 309–45.

6 M.J. Chandler and C.E. Lalonde, 'Cultural Continuity as a Hedge against Suicide in Canada's First Nations,' *Transcultural Psychiatry* 35, no. 2 (1998): 193–211.

7 Ronald Niezen, *Spirit Wars: Native North American Religions in the Age of Nation Building* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 117.

8 Two recent historical studies of Aboriginal health and colonialism either make no mention of suicide or discuss it briefly in connection with residential schools: Mary-ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia, 1900–50* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 74, 78, 177, and Maureen K. Lux, *Disease, Medicine, and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Similarly, major texts on Native–newcomer relations often end with discussions of Canada's escalating Aboriginal suicide rate, while the suicide rate among contemporary adolescents has likewise added fuel to the debate on residential schools: Olive Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 418, and David Napier, 'Sins

Drawing upon a wide array of sources from British Columbia and the Prairies, this article traces these connections by exploring how representations of Aboriginal suicide and coroners' investigations into cases of unnatural death created the 'suicidal indigene' and legitimated his and her dispossession and regulation between 1823 and 1927. As Only a Flower's case illustrates, Aboriginal peoples and newcomers attached multiple, contested meanings to cases of self-directed violence in colonial settings. A rereading of nineteenth-century narrative accounts of life and travel in the region reveals that representations of Aboriginal suicide played an integral, but overlooked, role in evolutionary anthropology, which constructed race, British-Canadian identity, and modernity in Britain and North America.⁹ Fur traders, explorers, and amateur anthropologists offered tales of Aboriginal women hanging themselves on the margins of Empire as evidence that Aboriginal culture was primitive, irrational, and doomed to extinction.¹⁰ According to Aboriginal guides and shamans, however, these narratives not only misrepresented atti-

- of the Fathers: The Legacy of Indian Residential Schools,' *Anglican Journal* 126 (2000): 1–16. Elizabeth Furniss explores the suicide of a residential school student in *Victims of Benevolence: Discipline and Death at the Williams Lake Residential School* (Williams Lake: Cariboo Tribal Council, 1992).
- 9 In *Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 74, 78, Glenda Riley notes briefly the important role that tales of suicide played in constructing Aboriginal women as beasts of burden in primitive societies. Although they do not address suicide specifically, (post)colonial historians, influenced by the work of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, have likewise traced the manipulation of women's/cultural imagery and the construction of race in western Canada: Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,' in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 152–62; Jo-Anne Fiske, 'Pocahontas's Grandaughters: Spiritual Transition and Tradition of Carrier Women of British Columbia,' *Ethnohistory* 43 (1996): 663–81; Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807–1846* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997); Kim Greenwell, 'Picturing "Civilization": Missionary Narratives and the Margins of Mimicry,' *BC Studies* 135 (2002): 3–45; Carol J. Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 10 Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), and Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1992), discuss evolutionary anthropology and the 'vanishing Indian.' Anne McClintock explores the colonial figure in literature 'made mad through the intersection of her race and sexuality' in *Double Crossings: Madness, Sexuality, and Imperialism* (Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2001).

tudes toward suicide that were diverse, complex, and undergoing transformation, they constructed as normative behaviour that was either unsanctioned or (as Lalonde and Chandler suggest) confined to segments of select Aboriginal communities.

These trends escalated in the 1870s when the West entered Confederation and officials, settlers, and journalists attached new, sometimes conflicting, layers of meaning to Aboriginal suicide within the imposed and resisted structure of the coroner's inquest. In her study of coroners' investigations of prostitute deaths in turn-of-the-century British Columbia, historian Susan Johnston observes, 'The bodies of the dead can be read as texts which invoke multiple interpretations and meanings.'¹¹ When the body of the dead was 'Indian,' coroners' inquests became 'contact zones' within an intricate web of surveillance that encouraged colonial agents to define deaths as suicides by drawing upon 'shared social meanings' or 'common sense ideas' about circumstances that 'typically' culminated in Aboriginal suicide.¹² Local newspapers, inquest collections for British Columbia and Alberta, DIA reports and correspondence, and North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) investigations contain references to only sixty-seven cases of Aboriginal suicide between 1872 and 1937. Despite their rarity and confinement to select Aboriginal communities, these cases garnered intense scrutiny by government officials, police investigators, and journalists. In many cases, the imposed structure of the inquest permitted government officials, jurors, and journalists to manipulate investigations and media accounts of suicide (now defined by Canadian law as a crime) to provide concrete proof that Aboriginal peoples were in need of further 'protection,' regulation, and

11 Susan J. Johnston, 'Twice Slain: Female Sex-Trade Workers and Suicide in British Columbia, 1870-1920,' *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* [new series] 5 (1994): 147. Following the lead of cultural anthropologists and historians and ethnomethodologists in the field of sociology, Johnston foregoes attaching meaning to suicide statistics (the traditional focus of Durkheimian positivists) and instead studies the meanings attached to suicide in a given culture at a given time: Jack D. Douglas, *The Social Meaning of Suicide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), chaps. 9-13; Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System,' in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (New York: Praeger, 1966), 7-9; and Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Victor Bailey discusses the debate between ethnomethodologists and Durkheimian positivists in 'This Rash Act': *Suicide across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), chap. 1.

12 Douglas, *Social Meaning of Suicide*, chaps. 9-13. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 4, Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zones as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.'

surveillance because they were pathologically drunken, criminal, and suicidal.¹³

As a growing number of scholars argue, however, imposed colonial procedures also provided Aboriginal peoples with the opportunity to contest negative stereotypes and the government policies that promoted their emergence.¹⁴ Speaking of the traumatic impact that the loss of land, lives, and freedom was having on some community members, Aboriginal witnesses (sometimes with police cooperation) disclosed how variables like age, gender, marriage, mental illness, and the adoption of Christianity were influencing suicide patterns and responses to colonialism. In 1921, when a juryman asked a member of the Yale band in British Columbia, why his friend, the son of a chief, had taken his own life, he responded, ‘He used to say they stoped [*sic*] the fishing and they stopped the hunting. I am poor and I am going to starve.’¹⁵ Although Aboriginal witnesses frequently inscribed the suicide’s body with their

- 13 Scholars have examined the role of alcohol consumption in colonial discourse and how alcohol laws ‘criminalized the colonized’: Mimi Ajzenstadt, ‘Racializing Prohibitions: Alcohol Laws and Racial/Ethnic Minorities in British Columbia, 1871–1927,’ in *Regulating Lives: Historical Essays on the State, Society, the Individual, and the Law*, ed. John McLaren, Robert Menzies, and Dorothy E. Chunn (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 97–119; Bonnie Duran, ‘Indigenous versus Colonial Discourse: Alcohol and American Indian Identity,’ in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 111–28; Renisa Mawani, ‘In Between and Out of Place: Mixed-Race Identity, Liquor, and the Law in British Columbia, 1850–1913,’ in *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, ed. Sherene H. Razack (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 47–70; Joan Sangster, ‘Criminalizing the Colonized: Ontario Native Women Confront the Criminal Justice System, 1920–1960,’ *Canadian Historical Review* 80 (1999): 32–60.
- 14 Robin Brownlie and Mary-Ellen Kelm explore the ethical and legal ramifications of historical studies on law and colonialism that emphasize resistance and agency and underplay the real, damaging effects of state regulation and colonialism: ‘Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?’ *Canadian Historical Review* 75 (1994): 543–57. Recent studies that address the issue of resistance and representation while recognizing the coercive effects of colonialism and state regulation in western Canada include: Paige Raibmon, ‘Theatres of Contact: The Kwakwaka’wakw Meet Colonialism in British Columbia and at the Chicago World’s Fair,’ *Canadian Historical Review* 81 (2000): 157–90; Peter Geller, ‘“Hudson’s Bay Company Indians”: Images of Native People and the Red River Pageant, 1920,’ in *Dressing in Feathers*, 65–78.
- 15 Inquest 1921/116, reel B2407, GR1327, British Columbia Attorney General, Inquests 1872–1937, British Columbia Archives (hereafter cited as BCA). The British Columbia Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act prohibits certain information pertaining to inquests and inquiries after 1910 from being made public. The names of the deceased, if used, have been changed, and file identification numbers do not correspond to those of the Attorney General.

critiques of colonialism, the state invested inquest proceedings with the majesty of law,¹⁶ legitimating stereotypical, colonial constructions of Aboriginal suicide that continue to inform discussions of the issue in contemporary Canada.

SUICIDE AND EVOLUTIONARY ANTHROPOLOGY

In August 1905, a journalist with the *Edmonton Bulletin*, reporting on the return of a steamer from northern Alberta, wrote, 'The captain remarked that the Indians were acquiring the ways of the white man ... one of them committed suicide by shooting himself with his rifle this winter. It is the first case of suicide he has ever heard of among the Indians.'¹⁷ Historical geographer Cole Harris defines colonialism as 'a culture of domination, a set of values that infused European thought and letters; led Europeans confidently out into the world; stereotyped non-Europeans as the obverse, the negative counterpart, of civilized Europeans; and created moral justification for appropriating non-European lands and reshaping non-European cultures.'¹⁸ The belief that suicide was anathema to pre-contact Aboriginal culture was integral to colonial discourse. Early nineteenth-century traders and explorers believed that the 'stoic Indian' had suffered bouts of deprivation that had immunized him against normal human pain and suffering.¹⁹ Functionalist anthropologists likewise envisaged pre-contact societies as inherently cohesive. When Sebald Steinmetz and Edward Westermarck undertook the first cross-cultural explorations of suicide in 1894 and 1908, they hoped to prove that the 'noble savage' was exempt from the evolutionary hubris that had corrupted 'civilized man.' They found, however, that suicide was not exclusive to 'civilization.'²⁰

In fact, fur traders, travellers, and amateur historians had long commented upon the phenomenon of suicidal women in the North American West. Tales of Nlaka'pamux (Thompson), Stl'atl'imx (Lilloet), and Dakota (Sioux) women hanging themselves in the wilderness were

16 Johnston, 'Twice Slain,' 149.

17 'An Indian Suicided,' *Edmonton Bulletin*, 2 Aug. 1905.

18 Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), xxiv.

19 James Edward Colhoun, Stephen Long, and William Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St Peter's River, Lake Winnipeck, Lake of the Woods* (Philadelphia: H.C. Carey and I. Lea, 1824), 138.

20 S.R. Steinmetz, 'Suicide among Primitive Peoples,' *American Anthropologist* 7 (1894): 53–60; Edward Westermarck, 'Suicide: A Chapter in Comparative Ethics,' *Sociological Review* 1 (1908): 12–33.

central to narratives that constructed Aboriginal women as ‘squaw drudges,’ or irrational beasts of burden, in primitive polygamous societies. In his 1832 narrative of the Columbia River Expedition, for instance, fur trader Ross Cox argued that sterility drew women of the Upper Fraser River (Nlaka’pamux and Stl’atl’imx) into prostitution. Sickness and excessive labour, he added, produced a depression of the spirits that compelled them to suicide: ‘We saw the bodies of several of these wretched beings, who had hanged themselves from trees in sequestered parts of the wood.’²¹ Visiting the same area in the 1840s, Irish-Canadian painter Paul Kane reported that two sisters, married to the same man, had hanged themselves in the woods unbeknownst to each other.²² Twenty years later, the Anglican missionary Rev. Robert C. Lundin Brown, working among the Stl’atl’imx, reported that the number of young women killing themselves in *British Columbia* – for ‘contemptibly trivial’ reasons – was incredible.²³

Newcomers to the Great Plains likewise interpreted female suicide as a primitive, irrational response to arranged marriages and polygamy. Following his expedition to Dakota territory, English botanist John Bradbury reported in 1817 that the situation of Aboriginal women was so dire that they destroyed their female children and committed suicide.²⁴ In 1823, explorers James Edward Colhoun, Stephen Long, and William Keating similarly recounted the tale of Winona, a Dakota woman who committed suicide by jumping from a cliff when her family negotiated (against her wishes) marriage to an elderly, distinguished warrior.²⁵ When Edward Duffield Neill wrote *Dahkotah Land and Dahkotah Life* fifty years later, he included a chapter, ‘The Hardships of Dahkotah Females,’ wherein Dakota women were driven to suicide by their parents and husbands’ whims: ‘Uncultivated and made to do the labour of beasts, when they are desperate, they act more like infuriated brutes than creatures of reason.’²⁶ As Glenda Riley has noted, the perceived connec-

21 Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbian River* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 325.

22 Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1859), 310.

23 R.C. Lundin Brown, *Klatsassan, and Other Reminiscences of Missionary Life in British Columbia* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1873), 34.

24 John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America* (1817; repr., Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), 89.

25 Colhoun, Long, Keating, *Narrative*, 227, 230, 234.

26 Edward Duffield Neill, *Dahkotah Land and Dahkotah Life* (Philadelphia and Chicago: J.B. Lippincott; S.C. Griggs, 1859), 83; George Bird Grinnell similarly recounts incidents of suicide among young women in *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* (1892; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 216.

tion between Aboriginal marriage law and suicide provided raw material for hundreds of fictionalized, romanticized stories of the West.²⁷

Suicide by Aboriginal women fascinated newcomers because they linked it to 'primitive' marriage 'customs' and practices; the phenomenon also contravened separate spheres ideology, which constructed suicide as predominantly masculine behaviour. Armed with new English and American statistics that 'proved' that men were more susceptible, William Knighton argued in 1881 that women clung tenaciously to life because their subsumption within the family and inherent religiosity gave them a larger measure of 'that hope that springs eternal.' Those few who did commit suicide fell neatly into the stereotype of the fallen woman who preferred death to loss of innocence. By the end of the century, functional sociologists interpreted female suicides as rare acts committed by irrational individuals, while the male suicide rate became a barometer of 'civilization,' modernity, and national economic well-being.²⁸ Tales of suicidal women on the margins of Empire, consequently, fit neatly into late nineteenth-century, social Darwinian representations of the primitive, 'vanishing Indian.' In 1895, the curator of ethnology at the Smithsonian wrote, 'Even in the animal world, any species that would pollute the fountain and destroy the very foundation of life or in which females committed suicide must speedily disappear.'²⁹

Given these assumptions, few newcomers recognized that Aboriginal people's attitudes towards suicide were diverse, complex, and undergoing transformation. For instance, James Teit, an ethnographer who lived with and married into the Nlaka'pamux, was atypically interested in women's experiences and discussed suicide in *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia* (1900).³⁰ Observing that suicide was common in the 1890s among women suffering from shame, remorse, or quarrels with relatives, Teit explored the phenomenon's historical and cultural underpinnings. Elders advised him that female suicide had once been associated with touching marriages; however, the Nlaka'pamux had ceased

27 Riley, *Women and Indians*, 75, 78.

28 William Knighton, 'Suicidal Mania,' *Littel's Living Age*, 5 Feb. 1881, 430, quoted in Howard I. Kushner, 'Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective,' in *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990), 193–6, and 'Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought,' *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 3 (1993): 461–90.

29 Otis T. Mason, *Women's Share in Primitive Culture* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1895), 276.

30 Nadine Schuurman, 'Contesting Patriarchies: Nlaka'pamux and Stl'atl'imx Women and Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia,' *Gender, Place, and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 5 (1998): 141–58.

these courting practices by the 1860s. Prior to the gold rush, young men wishing to marry could touch their intended with an arrow at culturally sanctioned times and events. The touch (considered a proposal that could be accepted or rejected by the girl's parents) initiated formal courting. Elders agreed that women occasionally committed suicide out of shame or anger: some had touched a man, but met with rejection, while parents forced others into unwanted marriages. Suicide, however, was not exclusive to women: Nlaka'pamux men who wished to test their guardian spirits' ability to return them to life would occasionally take their own lives.³¹ Nor was it sanctioned behaviour: shamans agreed that the suicide's soul never made it to the land of souls.³²

Although Nlaka'pamux Elders contested and complicated colonial discourses on Aboriginal suicide, Teit explained the suicides of the 1890s by observing simply, 'The belief that they are doomed to extinction seems to have a depressing effect on some of the Indians.'³³ An Anglican missionary stationed at Lytton between 1867 and 1883 likewise observed that suicide in Nlaka'pamux communities was complex and undergoing transformation, but then proceeded to interpret it within the framework of evolutionary anthropology. Given the power of shaming in Nlaka'pamux society, the Rev. John Booth Good feared that the acceptance of monogamy by Christian converts would have an adverse effect on wives turned away because the action branded them unchaste. Booth predicted that prostitution and suicide would accompany the progress of 'civilization.'³⁴

On the Great Plains, suicide patterns and beliefs were likewise more complex than non-Aboriginal preoccupations with the status of women, arranged marriages, and polygamy suggested. John West, an Anglican missionary stationed at Red River in the early 1820s, noted that Cree and Saulteaux women occasionally committed suicide to nurse and accompany the spirit of a deceased child to the otherworld.³⁵ Similarly, Dakota Elders in the 1880s disclosed that women were known to have hanged themselves upon the death of a favoured child; the custom waned in the 1850s, however.³⁶ Finally, although Kainai elders recounted to Beverly

31 James Alexander Teit and Franz Boaz, *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1900), 324–5.

32 *Ibid.*, 358–9.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Brett Christophers, *Positioning the Missionary: John Booth Good and the Confluence of Cultures in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 130.

35 John West, *The Substance of a Journal during a Residence at the Red River Colony, British North America* (London: L.B. Sicley, 1824), 141.

36 Henry C. Yarrow, *A Further Contribution to the study of the Mortuary Customs of the North American Indians* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1881), 109.

Hungry Wolf that suicide had been 'not uncommon' among young women married to older men with many wives, cultural anthropologist Alan Klein argues that polygamy itself became a notable feature of Blackfoot political economy only with colonialism and the buffalo-robe trade.³⁷

As was the case in Nlaka'pamux culture, suicide by women was a serious transgression in plains societies. In the 1820s, Stephen Long and William Keating's Dakota guide, Wazecota, explained that the souls of the dead travelled to Wanare-tebe, the dwelling place of souls. In order to reunite with friends, family, and ancestors, however, the soul had to pass over a sharp rock. Those who fell entered the region of the evil spirit, where they were doomed to chop wood and carry water for eternity. Women who had violated their chastity, committed infanticide, or hanged themselves were most likely to enter this realm. The latter, he continued, 'are said to go to the regions of the wicked, dragging after them the tree to which they are suspended. ... for this reason they always suspend themselves to as small a tree as can possibly sustain their weight.'³⁸ Assiniboine guides related similar beliefs to Alexander Henry and David Thompson. Explaining that the soul had to cross a river to get to the land of Eth'tom-E, the guides recounted that a hideous red bull would force the guilty to tumble headlong into the river: Female suicides were 'the most miserable wretches of the earth.'³⁹

The figure of the suicidal Aboriginal woman fit neatly into European and North American narratives written for popular, metropolitan audiences seeking evidence of primitive man. Written by men who used male Elders, shamans, and guides as informants, these tales represented but a fragment of the complex, diverse behaviour patterns and belief systems in the region. For instance, evidence suggests that all plains warrior societies – with various degrees of institutionalization – had traditions of 'masked' suicide whereby the family and band sanctioned voluntary death in battle as an acceptable and honourable way for an elderly, ill, or grief-stricken warrior to die. If the warrior died in battle, he would gain prestige in the tribe's collective memory; if he failed, he

37 Beverly Hungry Wolf, *The Ways of My Grandmothers* (New York: Quill, 1982), 27; Alan M. Klein, 'The Political Economy of Gender: A Nineteenth-Century Plains Case Study,' in *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*, ed. Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983), 143–73, and 'The Plains Truth about the Fur Trade: The Impact of Colonialism on Plains Indian Women,' *Dialectical Anthropology* 7, no. 4 (1983): 308–9.

38 Colhoun, Long, and Keating, *Narrative*, 394, 293.

39 Alexander Henry and David Thompson, *Henry and Thompson Journals* (New York: F. Harper, 1897), 2: 521.

would be ridiculed. Anthropologist Karin Andriolo argues that masked suicide mitigated surplus alienation for the individual within cultures that evaluated self-killing by hanging negatively and considered it a characteristically feminine form of behaviour.⁴⁰ As was the case in the Pacific Northwest, evidence of suicide by Aboriginal men rarely found its way into popular narratives because it contested dominant, evolutionary models that constructed suicide as a masculine behaviour particular to ‘modern’ civilizations. With Confederation, this trend would change as officials, juries, and journalists attached new layers of meaning to Aboriginal suicide within the imposed structures of the Indian Act and the inquest.

CONSTRUCTING ABORIGINAL PATHOLOGIES

In May 1881, a journalist reported that a ‘Penelecot’ man, arrested for drunkenness, had hanged himself in the Nanaimo jail. Allegedly, the cook had raised an alarm, but no officers were present to aid the prisoner. Officer Drake deposed at the inquest that he had arrested the deceased – who appeared to be ‘quite rational’ – in the morning and left him alone in a cell that afternoon.⁴¹ Although the incident could have opened a public inquiry on jail conditions, the treatment of Aboriginal prisoners, or police practice (indeed, the jury recommended that officers always be in charge of prisoners), the article’s follow-up focused on the character of the deceased: ‘It is now stated that the Indian who hung himself in the Nanaimo jail was a bad character. The Indians were very generally afraid of him, but now say that he has been mixed up in several murders.’⁴²

Historian John Lutz has argued that state surveillance of Aboriginal peoples made colonization and the extension of settlement possible.⁴³ As Qual-ah-que-ah’s case illustrates, coroners’ inquests – and the newspaper accounts they generated – created and reproduced knowledge about Aboriginal peoples and cultures for consumption by white settlers,

40 Karin R. Andriolo, ‘Masked Suicide and Culture,’ in *The Relevance of Culture*, ed. Morris Freilich (New York: Morris Freilich; Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1989), 173–4; George Grinnell, ‘Early Blackfoot History,’ *American Anthropologist* [old series] 5, no. 2 (1892): 153–64.

41 ‘Suicide at the Jail,’ *Nanaimo Free Press*, 28 May 1881.

42 ‘Bad Character,’ *Nanaimo Free Press*, 29 May 1881; Coroners’ Inquiries/Inquests, vol. 3, 1865/1937, 1881, GRo431, British Columbia Attorney General, BCA.

43 John Lutz, ‘Relating to the Country: The Lekwammen and the Extension of European Settlement,’ in *Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia*, ed. Ruth Sandwell (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 18.

government officials, and legal authorities bent on unsettling them. When British Columbia and the North-West Territories (Alberta and Saskatchewan) entered Confederation, the federal government assumed responsibility for 'Indians'; the revised and consolidated 1876 Indian Act constituted a comprehensive program for naming, defining, and providing surveillance of Aboriginal peoples. By designating 'Indians' as a special class of persons legally dependent on the Crown, legislators consigned them to a 'legal never-never land.'⁴⁴ Legislation defined Indians as British subjects, but made them wards of the state – a status they shared with children, felons, and the insane. As Lutz argues, the state 'pathologized' Aboriginal peoples by blurring the line between 'Indians' and 'criminals'; it criminalized behaviour (like drinking or selling alcohol) carried out routinely by non-Aboriginals. Furthermore, Indian agents acted as justices of the peace for Indian Act offences, presiding over summary trials in special courts.⁴⁵

Coroners' inquests and police investigations of suicide were one more thread in an intricate web of surveillance. Provincial governments designated local physicians who were British citizens as coroners, working on the assumption that these men had the expertise required to fulfill the office's judicial and medical functions. When a physician, police officer, Indian agent, or concerned citizen reported a sudden or unnatural death, coroners (at their discretion) could either conduct an inquiry or order the summons of six local citizens to act as jurors at a formal inquest. After viewing the body, the jury heard depositions and rendered a verdict.⁴⁶ If the jury concluded that the death was a suicide, it chose between three verdicts: *felo de se*, felonious self-murder; *non compos mentis*, temporary insanity; or insufficient evidence as to state of mind.⁴⁷ The evidence suggests that when coroners, police, government officials, and juries considered the evidence and judged the state of mind of the deceased, their investigations and verdicts were governed variously by colonial constructions of Aboriginal suicide, political expediency, and public policy.

Given prevailing discourses on the 'vanishing Indian,' officials could be remarkably indifferent to the death of reserve residents. Indian agents rarely mentioned suicide in annual reports, and police investigators cited instances of coroners being unwilling to travel to reserves.⁴⁸ In May

44 Sydney L. Harring, *White Man's Law: Native People in Nineteenth-Century Canadian Jurisprudence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 262.

45 *Ibid.*, 263–4; Lutz, 'Relating to the Country,' 23; Indian Act, 1894, 57 & 58, c. 32, s. 8.

46 Johnston, 'Twice Slain,' 149; Coroners' Act 1885, *Statutes of the Province of British Columbia; An Act Respecting Coroners, Statutes of Alberta, 1906*, c. 15.

47 Bailey, 'This Rash Act,' 65–6.

48 W.L. Reynolds, Indian agent, File Hills, 13 Aug. 1888, Annual Report of the DIA for

1920, the Alberta Provincial Police received a report of a hanging at the Hobbema Reserve. When the investigating officer phoned Dr. Stevenson to proceed to the scene, he discovered that the coroner was away on business. A second coroner informed the police that he was too ill to travel. Advised to proceed alone, the officer arrived at the reserve and discovered that the majority of residents were away attending a local pageant. The deceased's body had been hanging unattended in the heat for more than a week. Although the second coroner promised to catch the next train, he never arrived. In the absence of a coroner, the Indian agent advised a department physician to examine the body. When the physician declared the death a suicide, Officer Cowey advised the coroners to conduct a proper investigation. Upon their refusal, he travelled to Wetaskiwin to present the case to Stevenson. Based on the testimony of two Aboriginal witnesses who had informed Cowey that the deceased, a nineteen-year-old unmarried youth, had been 'acting strangely of late,' Stevenson accepted the agency physician's verdict and ordered an immediate burial.⁴⁹

Working closely with Aboriginal scouts and witnesses, police investigators produced evidence that contradicted the Indian agents' interpretations. In March 1904, the Kainai Reserve agent reported to the commissioner that Clay-Bank-Foot shot his wife and himself 'under the influence of a condition of despondency not uncommon to the Indian mind, this being the fourth case of the sort occurring on this reserve within the memory of the writer.'⁵⁰ However, the investigating officer reported that the Kainaiwa believed that Clay-Bank-Foot's behaviour stemmed from depression brought on by chronic tuberculosis. The deceased allegedly believed that his wife had been unfaithful during his stay at the Roman Catholic hospital at Stand Off. Despite his fears, the couple moved into a shack together upon his release. At the scene, Indian scouts found no signs of foul play and reported that all signs indicated a deliberate murder-suicide – the carefully arranged contents of the shack, the fully clothed condition of the bodies on the bed, the deceased's papers pinned to the wall.⁵¹

the Year Ended 31 Dec. 1888, *SP (1889)*, 65; Harry Guillod, agent, West Coast, Victoria, 11 Aug. 1891, DIA Annual Report for the Year Ended 1891, *SP (1892)*, 118.

49 J.N. Cowey, Crime Report, Alberta Provincial Police, Wetaskiwin Detachment, 12 May 1920, file Cor-184, box 12, Coroners' Inquiries, acc. 68.261, Attorney General, Provincial Archives of Alberta (hereafter cited as PAA).

50 R.N. Wilson, Indian agent, Blood Agency, to Indian commissioner, Winnipeg, 24 Mar. 1904, file 19103-3, pt. 1, vol. 7468, reel C-14768, RG 10, Department of Indian Affairs (hereafter cited as DIA), Library and Archives Canada (hereafter cited as LAC).

51 P.C.A. Primrose, Macleod, Crime Report, 'D' Division, 23 Mar. 1904, series A-1, file 373-04, vol. 274, RG 18, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), LAC.

Unlike police investigators, DIA officials concentrated on turning suicide cases in the department's favour. In 1893, Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed reported to Deputy Superintendent General Lawrence Vankoughnet that an Oak River Sioux woman in southern Manitoba had hanged herself because her husband took two more wives. Although Reed dismissed the woman's actions as a 'jealous fit,' Vankoughnet advised him to see to her children's care: 'It would be well, *considering the character of the father* ... to get them if of proper age into some Industrial School where they will be properly cared for and trained.'⁵² Similarly, in 1937 the Cote Reserve (Saulteaux) agent lamented that alcohol had not played a role in a recent triple murder-suicide in southern Saskatchewan: 'Although the Cote Indians are rather noted for their drinking of intoxicants, this had nothing to do with the case in question. If no other good results for the other Indians in this case, it has at least shown them the evil results of an uncontrollable temper.'⁵³

Because evidence of alcohol abuse led to criminal charges and resonated with settler perceptions of Aboriginal suicide, police, jurors, and journalists likewise fixated on the issue. When a resident of the Piikani (Peigan) Reserve in southern Alberta allegedly committed suicide after murdering his wife, son, and another man in 1907, the coroner claimed that suicide was 'too evident' since he found rye whiskey at the scene and the deceased had recently lost a wife and child. Sergeant J.S. Piper concurred, expressing the belief that no man would take his son's life unless crazed with drink or insane. Piper's assumption reflected the colonial myth that Aboriginal peoples – constructed as racially and physically inferior – did not have the same tolerance for alcohol as non-Aboriginals.⁵⁴ While the murder-suicide case was built on little more than circumstantial evidence, the Indian commissioner advised the agent, 'Although the tragedy seems self-explanatory, an effort should be made to discover whether whisky constituted a factor in bringing it about, and if so, to discover and punish the parties or parties who supplied it.'⁵⁵

52 Deputy superintendent general to Indian commissioner, DIA, 10 Apr. 1898, file 99752, vol. 3900, reel C-10196, RG 10, LAC.

53 Report of J.P.B. Ostrender, Indian agent, Dec. 1937, file 1911 7-2, vol. 7469, reel C-147-69, RG 10, LAC; 'Three Slain on Reserve in Saskatchewan,' *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, 29 Nov. 1937.

54 J.S. Piper, Crime Report, 'D' Division, Macleod, 25 Oct. 1907, file HG-681-K-1, F-2, vol. 3229, RG 18, LAC; Geoffrey York discusses the colonial myth of Aboriginal alcohol consumption in *The Dispossessed: Life and Death in Native Canada* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1989), 188.

55 David Laird, Indian commissioner, to agent, Peigan Reserve, 20 Nov. 1907, file 19116-2, pt. 1, vol. 7469, RG 10, LAC.

While alcohol played a role in only 15 per cent of reported cases, jurors subjected most Aboriginal witnesses to intense questioning regarding the drinking habits of their friends and loved ones. In June 1875, the death of 'Indian Maggie' resulted in an inquest at New Westminster, British Columbia. The deceased's husband alleged that he had been in town the previous night buying shingles; when he returned home, his wife accused him of being unfaithful. Later that evening, a married couple living with him found Maggie hanging from a tree. In response to questioning, the husband denied that he, or any members of his household, had been drinking. Night watchman William Moresby corroborated the husband's deposition, disclosing that he found no liquor on the premises.⁵⁶ Ten years later, two members of the North Arm Fraser River Band likewise deposed that their stepfather had not been drinking when he hanged himself at New Westminster; he was, in fact, elderly, blind, and infirm.⁵⁷ When a Tlatlasikwala woman allegedly poisoned herself near Alert Bay in 1909, her husband testified that they had recently quarrelled over money and separated. Although the ownership of wages appeared to be at issue, the coroner and juror focused their questions on whether the husband had purchased liquor. He responded, 'I did not buy a case of whiskey in town. I do not drink.'⁵⁸

Journalists reflected and enhanced jurors' biases and assumptions by recording only those cases where alcohol played a role or, when it did not, exaggerating or manipulating the evidence to fit prevailing stereotypes of the 'drunken' or 'criminal Indian.' In October 1890, the *Victoria Daily Colonist* reported that an Indian man, suffering from temporary insanity induced by alcohol, committed suicide. A contributor to the same edition wrote, 'It is much to be regretted that the Canadian Indian who has been long in contact with civilization is not a very interesting specimen of the genus "homo."' Indians, the author continued, had few recognized virtues: Most were addicted to vice, and only a few appeared to be intelligent or communicative.⁵⁹ A non-Aboriginal visitor to the Lekwammen Reserve had reported the suicide to the authorities. Claiming that he had witnessed excess drinking there, the informant named the deceased as the party responsible for the debauch. An investigating officer failed to find evidence of 'drunken Indians' on the date in question, however.⁶⁰

56 Indian Maggie, 1875, vol. 1, GR 0431, BCA.

57 File 11/86, reel B2372, GR 1327, BCA.

58 File 170/09, reel B2384, GR 1327, BCA.

59 'A Verdict of Suicide' and 'The Canadian Indian,' *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 17 Oct. 1890.

60 File 56/90, reel B2373, GR 1327, BCA.

Prairie journalists similarly manipulated the evidence. When a Secwepemc (Shuswap) man, visiting Alberta from British Columbia, jumped from the roof of a Calgary hotel in 1921, the newspaper contradicted inquest findings by reporting, 'The police officer who found the body stated that he detected a strong odor of liquor on the dead man.'⁶¹ Four years later, the *Lethbridge Herald* similarly slanted the evidence when it reported that a Montana Blackfoot, 'deciding that life held nothing for him ... hanged himself from a Canadian Pacific Railway bridge.' The deceased, the article continued, had been an 'on and off inmate of the provincial jail.'⁶² Although the article created the impression that the deceased was a hardened criminal, witnesses testified that the police and Indian agent had arrested and convicted him for trespassing on the Kainai Reserve each time he visited friends and family.⁶³

The process of inquest and inquiry not only permitted non-Aboriginal government officials, jurymen, and journalists to impose their own interpretations of suicide on Aboriginal communities, it allowed jurors to pass judgment on the deceased. By the late nineteenth century, juries rarely used the *felo de se* verdict of exclusion to punish the deceased posthumously, yet seven Aboriginal men and women suffered the label in British Columbia between 1871 and 1937. Although British legislators abolished traditional common law penalties for suicide (like confiscation of property) prior to Confederation, it remained a crime, and self-murder verdicts carried considerable social stigma.⁶⁴ The condemned men included one who allegedly got drunk and stole a pair of boots, one who tried to kill his wife and a police officer, and another who allegedly practised Indian medicine.⁶⁵ All three women were Cowichan of Vancouver Island who hanged themselves only months after giving birth – one also threatened to leave her husband.⁶⁶ Jurymen perhaps used *felo de se* verdicts to express strong disapproval of practices that threatened the construction of a liberal, Christian order and patriarchal conceptions of

61 'Jumps from Fire Escape of Local Hotel to Death,' *Calgary Herald*, 30 Sept. 1921; file 1554, box 28, Coroners' Inquests, acc. 67.172, PAA.

62 'Indian Found Dead: Appears To Be a Case of Suicide,' *Lethbridge Herald*, 24 Dec. 1925.

63 Vol. 2, file Cor-168, box 11, acc. 68.261, PAA.

64 Bailey, 'This Rash Act,' 69.

65 Cold Chuck Joe, G-P, file 1876, vol. 1, GR 0431, BCA; 'Suicide,' *Mainland Guardian*, 27 Sept. 1876; Indian John, file 11/86, reel B02372, GR 1327, BCA; 'Suicide,' *Mainland Guardian*, 28 Apr. 1886; Auchilla, file 44/95, reel B2375, GR 1327, BCA; Indian Edward, file 47/02, reel B02379, GR 1327, BCA.

66 Qual-i-ah, K-W, file 1877-2, vol. 2, GR 0431, BCA; Se-nel-e-air, file 52/94, reel B0237, GR 1327, BCA; Josephine, file 83/96, reel B02375, GR 1327, BCA.

marriage and motherhood. In addition, two of the Cowichan cases involved female witnesses who tried to revive the deceased by blowing into her ears. Occurring in the 1890s, these verdicts likely enhanced campaigns, led by missionaries and physicians, to discredit Aboriginal healing practices.⁶⁷ In all cases, the meaning that non-Aboriginal jurors attached to Aboriginal suicides rarely corresponded with the testimonials of their friends, family, and neighbours.

CONTESTING TRUTHS IN THE CONTACT ZONE

The stereotypes that emerged out of coroner's inquests and inquiries not only legitimated increased state regulation and surveillance of Aboriginal peoples, it also disguised colonialism's impact on suicide patterns in certain Aboriginal communities. In 1879, Edgar Dewdney, Indian commissioner for the North-West Territories, kept a journal of his travels in the region. At Blackfoot Crossing he recorded, 'From French & Father Scollen heard awful tales of the state of Indians. They have been selling their horses for a mere song, eating gophers, mice, Badgers & for the first time have hunted the Antelope & nearly killed them all off. One woman came to French and said she must have food for her children ... if not she we go off and hang herself.' When Dewdney visited Isapomuxika's (Crowfoot's) camp, another woman informed French, 'If I can't get any food for my two children I must kill myself. I live only for them & I can't bear to see them starve.'⁶⁸ Although they were less direct, police reports and inquest depositions also contain Aboriginal people's critiques of and active resistance to the loss of lives, land, and freedom that accompanied colonization.

On the Canadian Prairies, the disappearance of the buffalo in the 1870s, the treaty process, and resettlement on reserves ushered in two decades of widespread suffering, destitution, and starvation. The Metis military defeat during the 1885 Rebellion also signalled a new direction in Canadian Indian policy: Its architect, Hayter Reed, sought to dismantle the 'tribal' system by promoting individualism through 'the policy of the Bible and the plough.' Missionary-run residential and industrial schools would promote 'aggressive civilization' by severing the ties that bound children to the customs and traditions of their parents, while a ban on all forms of cultural and religious ceremonies (notably, the potlatch and Sun Dance) would destroy 'communist' perceptions of prop-

⁶⁷ Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies*, 92–3, 158–9.

⁶⁸ Hugh A. Dempsey, ed., 'The Starvation Year: *Edgar Dewdney's Diary for 1879*,' pt. 1, *Alberta History*, 31 (1983): 9. Thanks to Sarah Carter for this reference.

erty. Significantly, although Canadian courts accepted the legality of Aboriginal marriages (but not divorce) in 1867, Indian Act provisions and unofficial DIA policies encouraged agents to discourage practices that fell outside of monogamy and life-long union by cutting off male and female 'offenders' from treaty payments and rations.⁶⁹

Within a cultural milieu characterized by confinement and surveillance, warrior societies could no longer sustain the tradition of voluntary death in battle. The available evidence suggests that only a few women, including Only a Flower, hanged themselves on the Great Plains in the early reserve period.⁷⁰ By contrast, possibly the first recorded, 'unmasked' incident of a man attempting to commit suicide occurred in 1885 when Kapapamahehkwew (Wandering Spirit), Mistahimaskwa's (Big Bear) war chief, stabbed himself in the chest to avoid punishment following surrender.⁷¹ After pleading 'guilty' to murder, Kapapamahehkwew told a reporter 'that he had always been a friend of the white man until last spring, and that he had been a great warrior fighting the Blackfeet until the white men came into the country.'⁷² Although a priest baptized Kapapamahehkwew, the prisoner sought assurances that the guards would remove his shackles prior to hanging because he feared they would accompany him to the afterlife.⁷³ Kapapamahehkwew's attempted suicide marked a turning point in the history of suicide on the Prairies. Two-thirds of the twenty-two suicides collected for analysis involved men from Great Plains warrior societies. Although the tradition of masked suicide was no longer sustainable, culturally patterned behaviours persisted: With the exception of a few who hanged themselves in prison, the majority of men chose death by firearm.

69 Indian Act, 1894, 57 & 58, c. 32, s. 4. For literature that discusses government attempts to create patriarchal, bourgeois families, see Jean Barman, 'Taming Aboriginal Sexuality: Gender, Power, and Race in British Columbia, 1850–1900,' *BC Studies* 115–116 (1997–98): 237–66; Sarah Carter, "'Complicated and Clouded": The Federal Administration of Marriage and Divorce among the First Nations of Western Canada, 1887–1906,' in *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West through Women's History*, ed. Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Patricia Roome, and Char Smith (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2005); Julia V. Emberley, 'The Bourgeois Family, Aboriginal Women, and Colonial Governance in Canada,' *Signs* 27 (2001): 59–85; Pamela White, 'Restructuring the Domestic Sphere: Prairie Indian Women on Reserves: Image, Ideology, and State Policy, 1880–1930' (PhD diss., McGill University, 1987).

70 DIA Annual Report, 1888, *SP* (1889), 65; 'Indian Woman Suicides,' *Lethbridge News*, 28 July 1904.

71 *Saskatchewan Herald*, 26 Oct. 1885.

72 *Ibid.*, 30 Nov. 1885.

73 B-1, vol. 1421, 196A, Capital Case Files, RG 13, Department of Justice, LAC.

Subtexts of resistance to unfair police practices and government policies run throughout police and coroners' investigations of these cases. In September 1894, the NWMP commissioner reported that 'Peigan Mike' had shot himself while awaiting trial for horse theft at Pincher Creek. Police investigators learned later that, contrary to procedure, officers had forced the prisoner to work as a cook assistant rather than relocating him to district gaol following committal. A constable informed Superintendent Steele that he had locked Peigan Mike into a cell each evening, but admitted that physicians had condemned the cell four years ago. Prior to his death, Peigan Mike told police that his mother had forced him to sell the horse for food. He also informed the police that he would rather die than suffer the indignities of imprisonment. The local paper reported simply and inaccurately that the prisoner had been awaiting trial for 'killing cattle' and had 'managed to get a hold of a revolver.'⁷⁴

Sun Calf, a Siksika (Blackfoot) man sentenced to three years at Stony Mountain Penitentiary for horse theft, echoed Peigan Mike's sentiments following his escape and recapture on the Piikani Reserve in June 1905. When the police promised his return to prison, Sun Calf attempted suicide by puncturing his arm with a needle. He later informed the NWMP that his conviction and sentence had been unjust and that 'he would cut his throat rather than go back to Stony Mountain' where, he argued, conditions were so deplorable he contracted tuberculosis.⁷⁵ When Tail Feathers, a Kainai scout with the NWMP, shot himself in 1907, the investigation likewise revealed subtexts of resistance to Canadian criminal justice. Kainai witnesses deposed that Tail Feathers had become enraged when a local justice of the peace sentenced a man found guilty of sexually assaulting his wife to only one month in prison. The scout, they continued, also believed that the Kainaiwa detested and distrusted him because he worked for the police and that the NWMP had cheated him of rations. Only Chief deposed that he last saw Tail Feathers riding towards the house of his wife's rapist 'chanting the old song the Indians used when starting on the war path.'⁷⁶

While members of the Siksika Nation connected suicide to state surveillance, legal regulation, and the loss of freedom that accompanied

74 File 679-94, vol. 98, A-1, RCMP, RG 18, LAC; *Macleod Gazette*, 5 Oct. and 14 Sept. 1894.

75 P.C.H. Primrose, superintendent, 'D' Division, Macleod, Crime Report, 9 July 1905, series A-1, file 550-05, vol. 301, RG 18, RCMP, LAC.

76 Corporal C.B. Miles, Stand-Off, to Officer Commanding NWMP, Macleod, 4 Oct. 1907, A-1, file 615-07, vol. 343, RG 18, RCMP, LAC; Inspector J.W.S. Grant, Crime Report, Macleod, 5 Oct. 1907; 'Trusted Indian Scout Suicides,' *Montreal Daily Star*, 14 Oct. 1907.

colonialism, Aboriginal witnesses more generally associated it with the moral uncertainty and confusion that accompanied government and missionary attempts to impose monogamous, Christian marriages. Over 90 per cent of the suicides examined involved not adolescents, but young to middle-aged married men and women. In 40 per cent of cases, Aboriginal witnesses cited domestic disputes as the precipitating cause. As the earlier example involving the Oak River Sioux woman suggests, a husband or wife's acceptance or rejection of Christian marriage could precipitate disagreements that culminated in suicide or murder. In 1887, a member of the Little Black Bear Band of the File Hills Agency (Cree) shot his wife, then himself, following a dispute. Family and friends testified that the husband had left the reserve with another woman; in his absence, the wife returned to her father's tent. When the husband returned and demanded that the wife return to him, she turned to the Indian agent for advice. Although witnesses provided a clear narrative of events leading up to the murder-suicide, the coroner's jury found that Mes-Kan-achs had committed murder-suicide for 'no known reason.'⁷⁷

In British Columbia, where women accounted for 40 per cent of all reported cases, Aboriginal witnesses likewise connected suicide to the confusion in gender roles and marital relationships that accompanied colonialism. In 1891, a Saanich witness deposed at an inquest into the death of 'Loxin Bill' that the deceased was his son whom he had not seen for two years. The deceased's sister-in-law, a Semiahmoo widow, testified that she had refused to marry the deceased until a Catholic priest arrived to perform the ceremony. Loxin Bill and his sister-in-law belonged to Coast Salish cultures, where parents arranged marriages, wives lived in their husband's village, and widows married a brother-in-law upon their husband's death.⁷⁸ In this case, when the widow refused her brother-in-law's proposal, he went into the woods where he was found 'hanging by his gaily coloured yarn belt to the limb of a little maple.'⁷⁹ When a Cowichan woman hanged herself in October 1902, witnesses likewise cited uncertainty regarding her marital status as a key motivating factor. Thomas, her husband by Aboriginal law, deposed that he and his wife had been preparing to marry in a church when family members forbade it because Thomas's first wife, by Christian marriage, was still alive.

77 'Murder-Suicide at File Hills,' *Regina Leader*, 19 July 1887; file 41151, vol. 3784, reel C-10192, DIA, RG 10, LAC; file 501-1887, vol. 1083, B-1, RCMP, RG 18, LAC.

78 Homer G. Barnett, *The Coast Salish of British Columbia* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1955), 250.

79 File 92/91, reel B2373, GR 1327, BCA; 'A Curious Mistake,' *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 7 Nov. 1891.

When Thomas told his wife that he would ask the priest if they could marry legally, she started to cry, fearing ‘they would bring my first wife back.’⁸⁰

Aboriginal testimony at the inquests into the suicide deaths mentioned by Teit likewise bore out Booth’s predictions that colonialism would have an adverse effect on women. Three Nlaka’pamux women at the Nicola reserves committed suicide in the brief period between 1891 and 1900. Their cases coincided with mass British settlement, which abruptly ended female out-migration and the cross-cultural sexual relationships that had characterized the gold-rush era. Historical geographer Nadine Schuurman argues that the advent of colonial administration, missionaries, and disease increased women’s physical labour and hardships.⁸¹ In 1891, ‘Indian Frank’ testified that his wife, Tell:whiliks, had committed suicide following a domestic dispute. According to the husband, Tell:whiliks had accused him of giving her a venereal disease; when he denied it, she confessed to carnal relations with another. When Frank left to confront the man in question, Tell:whiliks hanged herself in the woods. Frank admitted that he had been living with the deceased for two years, but had not married her in a church. When asked by a jurymen to explain his wife’s actions, Frank responded, ‘All the young Indian women hang themselves when they feel bad over men.’ A male friend corroborated his testimony.⁸² Martin Shuta likewise represented his wife’s behaviour as ‘customary’ when she hanged herself in 1897. Residents of the Nicola Lake Reserve, the Shutas married according to Aboriginal law in 1882 and within the church ten years later. On the day in question, Shuta came home from the fields to discover his wife having ‘criminal connections’ with his brother. When Shuta told his wife that the act was bad, owing to their Christian marriage, she claimed that his brother had forced her. Martin did not believe his wife and assured the jury that shame, remorse, and heartsickness had motivated his wife’s actions: ‘Suicide by hanging is an Indian custom among women, when in trouble.’⁸³

Nlaka’pamux men perhaps represented these suicides as ‘traditional’ because of the method chosen; they may also have been playing to non-Aboriginal perceptions to avoid trouble from a legal system they feared. Female Nlaka’pamux witnesses more freely connected the suicides to changes that accompanied colonialism. Martin Shuta’s sister, for in-

80 File 103/02, reel B2379, GR 1327, BCA.

81 Schuurman, ‘Contesting Patriarchies,’ 141–59.

82 File 82/91, reel B2373, GR 1327, BCA.

83 File 162/97, reel B02376, GR 1327, BCA.

stance, testified that her sister-in-law had been labouring unhappily in the fields on the morning of her death and had suffered the deaths of three children since her marriage.⁸⁴ When Agnes, a resident of the Coldwater Reserve, committed suicide in May 1900, her sister likewise testified that her status as an unmarried woman with an illegitimate child motivated her decision.⁸⁵ Whereas the Nlaka'pamux had once viewed suicide as an option for women shamed during the rituals of courtship, within the imposed structures of colonialism it became a last desperate option for women caught on the boundary between two cultures.

CONCLUSION

In January 1876, a Skwxwúmiş man, identified as 'Lazy Jim,' testified that he, 'Indian Ginger,' and another man had attended a dance near their home at Burrard Inlet after drinking two glasses of gin. Ginger's sister informed the court that her brother threatened to hang himself later that night. Suspecting that it was only the alcohol talking, she took the rope from her brother and went to bed. The next morning, a neighbour discovered Ginger hanging in a deserted building. The jury passed a verdict of 'suicide' with insufficient evidence as to state of mind. According to Ginger's friend, however, the deceased would often get drunk and threaten to kill himself because he did not know where his father was buried.⁸⁶

As sociologist Jack Douglas argues, police officers, relatives, coroners, jurors, and the suicides themselves draw upon commonsense ideas or 'shared social meanings' about the circumstances and motives that 'typically' culminate in suicide.⁸⁷ When white settlers in colonial societies met to determine the cause of death of Aboriginal peoples like Only a Flower and 'Indian Ginger,' the shared social meanings they drew upon were constructed visions that had developed over a century of cultural contact. Although nineteenth-century anthropologists had assumed that suicide was a phenomenon unique to 'civilized,' capitalistic societies, European travellers, fur traders, and missionaries recorded instances of its feminine form in pre- and early-contact cultures. When viewed through a lens clouded by European gender norms, Aboriginal suicide fell neatly into the colonizers' perceptions of Indigenous peoples as

84 Ibid.

85 File 50/100, reel B02378, GR 1327, BCA.

86 File 1876, G-P, vol. 1, GR 0431, BCA.

87 Bailey, 'This Rash Act', 23; Douglas, *Social Meaning of Suicide*, chaps. 9–13.

primitive, irrational, and doomed to extinction. With the advent of federal administration and the Indian Act, settlers, journalists, and colonial agents added new layers of meaning to Aboriginal suicide. The non-Aboriginal men who met to judge 'Indian Ginger's' suicide concentrated on alcohol as a motivating factor and, consequently, failed to take seriously 'Lazy Jim's' belief that the deceased's behaviour stemmed from unresolved grief over the loss of his father – and the links to the cultural community that his father represented.

As 'Indian Ginger's' example illustrates, the case files collected by police investigators and coroners contain subtexts of resistance to the stereotype of the 'suicidal Indian' and to the loss of lives, land, and freedom that accompanied colonialism that have only recently entered public discourse on Aboriginal suicide in Canada. Some Aboriginal witnesses contested the assumption that substance abuse or conflicts with the law were the motivating cause of their friend or loved one's death; others directly linked substance abuse and suicide to the regulation, death, poverty, and confusion in gender roles and marital relationships that accompanied colonialism. While it is impossible to mistake the connections between dispossession, depression, and suicide contained in many of these testimonies, depositions by Aboriginal witnesses indicate that variables like age, marital status, religion, gender, and mental illness influenced responses to colonialism *within* Aboriginal communities. As Christopher Lalonde and Michael Chandler argue, the myth of the 'suicidal aboriginal,' constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cloaked the realities of intra-community variability.

If coroners' inquest depositions truly reflect the 'realities' of suicidal behaviour within Aboriginal communities, then the historical record also supports Lalonde and Chandler's finding that suicide rates vary dramatically from community to community. Although some First Nations bands and tribes like the Cowichan, Nlaka'pamux, and Siksika experienced suicide 'clusters' in the early reserve period, the trend waned by the First World War. In British Columbia, only five status Indians committed suicide between 1910 and 1937; in Alberta, six did so between 1910 and 1927. Significantly, only two of the pre-Second World War suicides examined involved adolescents. Despite their rarity, these cases helped to construct the 'suicidal,' 'drunken,' and 'criminal' Indian in the settler imagination and to legitimate increased regulation and surveillance of reserve populations. Lalonde and Chandler's contemporary research has revealed a strong correlation between cultural continuity and suicide: Communities with self-government, control of land, band-controlled schools, community-controlled health services, cultural facilities, and control of police and fire services are significantly less at risk.

The historical record reveals that the state's usurpation of the process by which Aboriginal peoples defined and mediated suicidal behaviour – and the conflicts that precipitated it – contributed to the cultural trauma that accompanied colonialism. The inquest process promoted myths and stereotypes that have disguised the need for in-depth studies of suicide in specific First Nations communities. In addition, the internalization of these stereotypes by subsequent generations of Aboriginal children has likely contributed to escalating rates of adolescent suicide in certain First Nations communities since the Second World War.⁸⁸

88 For studies that connect Indigenous suicide to internalized oppression, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1960); Lisa M. Poupart, 'The Familiar Face of Genocide: Internalized Oppression among American Indians,' *Hyppatia* 18 (2003): 86–100; Maria YellowHorse BraveHeart and Lemyra DeBruyn, 'The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,' *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: Journal of the National Centre* 8 (1998): 60–82.

I would like to thank John Weaver and the editors and reviewers of the *Canadian Historical Review* for insightful suggestions and comments on earlier drafts of this article, and the SSHRC for supporting the research on which it is based.