

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN POSTWAR VANCOUVER

by

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Abstract

Violence against indigenous women in Canada is endemic. Through a case study of postwar Vancouver, this paper situates this ongoing violence in its historical context. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, countless Aboriginal women died on the streets and in the cheap rooming houses and hotels of Vancouver's downtown eastside. These women died from the effects of poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, tuberculosis, and malnutrition, but too often their deaths were hastened by brutal assaults, rape, and murder. Although it took place in Vancouver's very recent past, this story is remarkably absent from literature in Aboriginal history, women's history, and postwar Canadian history. Using a feminist and anti-racist analysis of a public discourse about Aboriginal women, this paper examines the grave extent of racial and sexual violence against Aboriginal women during these decades.

During the postwar period, Vancouver's Aboriginal population increased significantly, generating an anxious public discourse about the changing face of the city. This discourse, which appeared regularly in mainstream venues such as newspapers, civic reports, and social work theses, supported a narrative about Native women living and dying on Vancouver's skid road. Central to this narrative was a portrait of the "dead Indian girl," telling a fatalistic story of poverty, discrimination, loneliness, alcoholism, prostitution, rape, and death in the city. Using paternalistic language, this narrative infantilized and victimized Aboriginal women, but it was, nonetheless, designed to generate public attention. In response to this crisis, private organizations and concerned individuals established the Vancouver Indian Centre and several hostels for Aboriginal women; they thought that these facilities would keep women off the streets, and therefore, prevent further death on skid road. Yet despite these efforts, racial and sexual violence against Aboriginal women would continue.

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Prologue

*Woman's body found beaten beyond
recognition.
You sip your coffee
Taking a drag of your smoke
Turning the page
Taking a bite of your toast
Just another day
Just another death
Just one more thing you so easily forget
You and your soft, sheltered life
Just go on and on
For nobody special from your world is gone
Just another day
Just another death
Just another Hastings Street whore
Sentenced to death
The judge's gavel already fallen*

*Sentence already passed
But you
You just sip your coffee
Washing down your toast.
She was a broken-down angel
A child lost with no place
A human being in disguise
She touched my life
She was somebody
She was no whore
She was somebody special
Who just lost her way
She was somebody fighting for life
Trying to survive
A lonely lost child who died
In the night, all alone, scared
Gasping for air.*

~ Sarah Jean de Vries¹

Sarah Jean de Vries went missing from Vancouver's downtown eastside on April 14, 1998. By all accounts she was a beautiful and loving woman, a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend; but she was also a sex worker and a drug addict, and the police did not take Sarah's disappearance seriously. Her family and friends knew that something had happened to her, and worked tirelessly to get the police to take action and to raise public awareness of what had happened – what was happening – to Sarah and so many other women. At the time Sarah went missing, at least twenty-nine women had already disappeared from the downtown eastside, all within in the previous ten years. In the next few years the number of missing women would exceed sixty.

Sarah was a gifted writer. Her poems are at times achingly beautiful, funny, full of life and despair. And some are haunting. In the above poem Sarah anticipates her own fate. On August 6, 2002, after having been missing for close to four years, her DNA was found on Robert William Pickton's farm in Port Coquitlam, a suburb just east of Vancouver. In 2007 Pickton was convicted of the murders of six of the missing women, and was charged in the murders of another twenty. Canadians read about Sarah and the Missing Women, the search of the farm, and Robert Pickton's trial in their morning papers, consuming these stories along with their coffee and toast. What did they think? What did they do? Did they care?

¹ Undated and untitled poem included in Maggie de Vries, *Missing Sarah: A Memoir of Loss (Updated Since the Pickton Trial)*, (Toronto: Penguin Canada), 2008, pp. 233-234. See pp. xiii-xiv, 1, 185-197 and 224-228. Sarah Jean de Vries was of mixed racial heritage: Black, Aboriginal, Mexican Indian, and White. In her personal search to find her sister, author Maggie De Vries wrote this memoir in which she pieces together a portrait of Sarah and her life on Vancouver's downtown eastside. (Geraldine Pratt also cites this poem in "Abandoned Women and Spaces of the Exception," *The 2005 Antipode Lecture, Antipode*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2005): 1071-1072.)

Introduction: Beaten and Broken Bodies

That's two of my girls you've killed white man. You white men always take our girls, and you kill them.
~ Unidentified Mother, 1963²

On Friday, March 8, 1957, the body of twenty-seven-year-old Ann Ducharme was discovered lying on a cinder pile near Vancouver's False Creek wearing only a pink brassiere.³ A 100-foot trail, marked by her wallet, purse, and a lime-green shoe, led to her mostly naked body. Her clothing was strewn around, her grey tweed skirt ripped, torn violently from her waist. The police carefully noted that although the ground had been muddy that night, and they found her one shoe eighty feet from her body, Ducharme's feet were clean. Ducharme was a Cree woman who had moved to Vancouver from Winnipeg in the early 1950s. Her friends said they last saw her on Powell Street the evening before her body was found. Journalists reported that Ducharme was a heavy drinker and that she suffered from advanced tuberculosis. The city pathologist determined her cause of death to be alcohol intoxication and exposure. Yet on Tuesday, March 12, 1957, a coroner's jury ruled Ducharme's death homicide. No arrests were made.⁴

That same month, another young Aboriginal woman, Tilly Rose Billy, died after being beaten by a man on the streets of Vancouver's downtown eastside. Two years later, her sister Marion Billy met a similar brutal end; in June 1959, she too died following a violent attack. Both sisters were twenty-three years old at the time of their deaths. Their mother, identified only as Mrs. William Billy of the North Shore Capilano reserve, fumed with anger: white men on Vancouver's skid road had killed two of her daughters.⁵

² Reporter Tom Hazlitt quoting a mother of two young Native women who had moved to Vancouver from an unidentified reserve near the city. Both daughters died in Vancouver before the age of twenty. Hazlitt wrote that the first woman died "quickly from the blow of a white man's boot," whereas the "second died slowly from malnutrition." Tom Hazlitt, "Skidroad: Curtain falls as girl die," *Province*, 12 January 1963, p. 1.

³ Ducharme's age is reported variously as either 26 or 27. Her given name is sometimes reported as Marie.

⁴ "Woman's Death Cause Baffles City Police," *Province*, 9 March 1957, p. 1; "Near-Nude Body Found: Police Find 'Strong Clue' In Woman's Mystery Death," *Vancouver Sun*, 9 March 1957, pp. 1-3; "Find Alcohol in Body: False Creek woman killed, says jury," *Province*, 13 March 1957, p. 8; "Woman's Death Declared 'Murder': Coroner's Jury in Ducharme Case Blames 'Persons Unknown,'" *Vancouver Sun*, 13 March 1957, p. 12.

⁵ Hazlitt, "Skid road 'killed my girls,'" *Province*, 31 January 1959, p. 21; Tom Hazlitt, "Skidroad: Curtain falls as girls die," *Province*, 12 January 1963, p. 1.

After Marion Billy's death, *Province* reporter Tom Hazlitt wrote of the connection between Ann Ducharme and the Billy sisters. According to Hazlitt, these women "followed the same tragic life centred around the corner of Powell and Main," an intersection known as the core of Vancouver's skid road.⁶ Hazlitt explained how these women shared similarities not only in life, but also in death. He reported that Ann Ducharme and Marion Billy "were picked up by men in cars outside a cafe on Powell, and both were given liquor, stripped, and thrown out of the cars."⁷ While Ducharme died lying naked and alone on the False Creek cinder pile, Billy regained consciousness in Vancouver's famed Stanley Park. She retrieved her clothes and was able to return to her rooming house on Cordova Street, where she was found by her mother and sent to the hospital. She died a few days later. In a statement to the press, city coroner Glen McDonald announced that the actual cause of Billy's death was acute pancreatitis, liver failure resulting from alcoholism, but underlined, "the fact remains she was beaten up, and the investigation will continue until it is all ironed out."⁸

Aboriginal women were dying on Vancouver's skid road.⁹ Tucked away in the back pages of *The Province* on June 20, 1960, was a short article with the caption, "Another skidroad 'prey' dies."¹⁰ Another. As in so many similar cases during the 1950s and 1960s, a young Native woman's body was found in a downtown rooming house.¹¹ What were these women dying from? They were dying from the effects of alcoholism and drug abuse, tuberculosis, and malnutrition, but their deaths were hastened by the violence of others: brutal assaults and rape punctuated their short lives. A racist, sexist, and colonial system fixed Aboriginal women as easy targets and sexual "prey."

⁶ Tom Hazlitt, "Skid road 'killed my girls,'" *Province*, 31 January 1959, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Throughout this work I use the terms Aboriginal and Native interchangeably to refer to individuals of indigenous ancestry, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. I have tried to avoid the use of the term "Indian" except in the context of a direct quotation or in reference to the language of the time. Whenever the specific band, nation, or tribe of the individual was known, I have noted it.

¹⁰ "Another skidroad 'prey' dies," *Province*, 20 June 1960, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

This racialized and sexualized violence is steeped in the larger and longer histories of colonialism and patriarchy. Throughout the nineteenth century, many Christian missionaries, settlers, and state officials constructed racist and misogynist images of Aboriginal women as sexually promiscuous. Native women were portrayed as licentious and sexually dangerous, or else as lacking domestic, maternal and familial skills and habits. These images positioned Aboriginal women outside late-nineteenth century ideals of feminine respectability and sexual propriety, setting up a stark opposition between white and indigenous women. In creating this binary, these stereotypes acted as mechanisms of power in a dual patriarchal and colonial society. As historians Jean Barman, Robin Brownlie, Sarah Carter, Susan Neylan, Adele Perry, Paige Raibmon, Myra Rutherdale, Joan Sangster, and Erica Smith all demonstrate, representations of Aboriginal women as dissolute prostitutes or as unfit mothers and housewives were part of a colonial strategy to regulate Aboriginal peoples. Government officials and missionaries deployed these images to justify policies designed to remove and keep indigenous women from towns and cities, to deflect responsibility for the poverty and ill-health on reserves, to rationalize attempts to refashion Native women's lives along a model of domesticity, and to condone the sexual abuse of Native women by settler men. In short, negative discourses about Native women's work, domestic skills, motherhood, and sexual behaviour, buttressed assurances of white racial and cultural supremacy, fostering a system in which Aboriginal women routinely were viewed and treated as less than human – as sexual commodities, open and available bodies.¹²

¹² See Jean Barman, "Aboriginal Women on the Streets of Victoria: Rethinking Transgressive Sexuality during the Colonial Encounter," in *Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past*, ed. Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale, (Vancouver: UBC Press), 2005; J. Barman, "Taming Aboriginal Sexuality: Gender, Power, and Race in British Columbia, 1850-1900," *BC Studies*, 115/116, (Autumn/Winter 1997-98): 237-66; Robin Jarvis Brownlie, "Intimate Surveillance: Indian Affairs, Colonization, and the Regulation of Aboriginal Women's Sexuality," in *Contact Zones*; Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 1997; Sarah Carter, "Categories and Terrains of Exclusion: Constructing the "Indian Woman" in the Early Settlement Era in Western Canada," in *Nation and Society: Readings in Post-Confederation Canadian History*, ed. Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, (Toronto: Pearson Education Canada), 2004; S. Carter, "First Nations Women and Colonization on the Canadian Prairies, 1870s-1920s," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, Fourth Edition, eds. Veronica Strong-Boag, Mona Gleason, and Adele Perry, (Don Mills: Oxford University Press), 2002; Susan Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2003; Adele Perry, "Metropolitan Knowledge, Colonial Practice, and Indigenous Womanhood: Missions in Nineteenth-Century British

Most troubling, these are powerful and lingering stereotypes. As Sarah Carter explains, these nineteenth-century ideas have “resisted revision” and today remain “deeply embedded in the consciousness of white society” where they continue to condemn Native women as sexually promiscuous.¹³ In April 1967, the beaten and nude body of Rose Roper, a seventeen-year-old woman from the Esketemc First Nation in central interior British Columbia, was found on a logging road near Williams Lake. Three white male youths had physically and sexually assaulted Roper, pushed her out of their car, tossed her clothes out after her, and drove away with her “panties” hung on their radio aerial as if to broadcast their conquest.¹⁴ As legal historian Constance Backhouse writes, however, “Rose Roper’s death was neither the first nor the last such case.”¹⁵ Racialized and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women remains endemic. There are countless similar cases involving the violent abduction, rape, and murder of Aboriginal women spanning the late-nineteenth century through to the present day. Of the hundreds upon hundreds of women who have been murdered or gone missing in Canada in the last few decades, a disproportionate number are indigenous.¹⁶ This is not a coincidence.

Columbia,” in *Contact Zones*; A. Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2001; Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 2005; P. Raibmon, “The Practice of Everyday Colonialism: Indigenous Women at Work in the Hop Fields and Tourist Industry of Puget Sound,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Fall 2006): 25-56; Myra Rutherdale, ““I Wish the Men Were Half as Good”: Gender Constructions in the Canadian North-Western Mission Field, 1860-1940,” in *Telling Tales: Essays in Western Women’s History*, ed. Catherine A. Cavanaugh and Randi R. Warne, (Vancouver: UBC Press), 2000; Myra Rutherdale, ““She Was a Ragged Little Thing”: Missionaries, Embodiment, and Refashioning Aboriginal Womanhood in Northern Canada,” in *Contact Zones*; M. Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man’s God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002); Erica Smith, ““Gentlemen, This is no Ordinary Trial”: Sexual Narrative in the Trial of the Reverend Corbett, Red River, 1863,” in *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, ed. Elizabeth Vibert and Jennifer S.H. Brown, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press), 1996; Joan Sangster, “Criminalizing the Colonized: Ontario Native Women Confront the Criminal Justice System, 1920-60,” *The Canadian Historical Review*, (80, 1, March 1999): 32-60; J. Sangster, “Defining Sexual Promiscuity: “Race,” Gender, and Class in the Operation of Ontario’s Female Refuges Act, 1930-1960,” in *Crime and Deviance in Canada: Historical Perspectives*, eds. Chris McCormick and Len Green, (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press), 2005; J. Sangster, “Domesticating Girls: The Sexual Regulation of Aboriginal and Working-Class Girls in Twentieth-Century Canada,” in *Contact Zones*; J. Sangster, *Girl Trouble: Female Delinquency in English Canada*, (Toronto: Between the Lines), 2002; J. Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family, and the Law in Ontario, 1920-1960*, (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹³ Sarah Carter, “Categories and Terrains of Exclusion,” p. 61.

¹⁴ Constance Backhouse, ““Sordid’ But “Understandable Under the Circumstances”: Kohnke, Croft, and Wilson, 1967,” in *Carnal Crimes: Sexual Assault Law in Canada*, (Toronto: The Osgood Society for Canadian Legal History by Irwin Law, 2008): 227-262.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 258.

¹⁶ For a recent example, see “Woman fears for life after friends found dead,” *CBC News*, 26 August 2009, regarding the suspicious deaths in July and August 2009 of two young Aboriginal women who lived near Winnipeg

It is, therefore, absolutely imperative that we understand how and why it is that the stereotypes and attitudes facilitating this violence persist today. Judith Bennett provides one way that we might undertake this task. She suggests that if historians look for continuity instead of transformation over time they might start to see the past in different ways, and, more importantly, in ways that can help us understand and combat problems that continue to afflict people today.¹⁷ The boundaries between the past and the present are not fixed, but rather, fluid and porous. Therefore, this conceptual shift in the practice of history is extremely valuable. A focus on the past that ignores its continuity in the present, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, “often diverts us from the present injustices for which previous generations only set the foundations.”¹⁸ Isolating and understanding how patriarchy, racism, and colonialism operated in the past and endure through the present might, then, be the necessary condition to break their hold.¹⁹ In this case, an historical analysis of the discursive, physical, and sexual violence against Aboriginal women in the past might help explain why it exists today, and provide the tools to end this discrimination and stop this violence.

It is troubling, therefore, that although there are numerous studies that examine stereotypes and violence toward Aboriginal women in the nineteenth century, there is a scarcity of studies that do so for the twentieth century. With the exception of Joan Sangster’s work on the over-incarceration, regulation, and disciplining of Native girls and women in Ontario Reformatories and Training Schools in the mid-twentieth century, the vast majority of this research has

(http://www.cbc.ca/mobile/text/story_news-canada.html?/ept/html/story/2009/08/26/mb-deaths-women-connected-manitoba.html, accessed 11 September 2009). For other specific cases, see Backhouse, p. 258; Sherene Razack, “Gendered Violence and Specialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George,” in *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002); Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada*, October 2004, http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/sisters_overview.php, accessed 1 July 2009; and the Native Women’s Association of Canada, *Voices of Our Sisters in Spirit: A Report to Families and Communities*, Second Edition, March 2009, http://www.nwac-hq.org/en/documents/NWAC_VoicesofOurSistersInSpiritII_March2009FINAL.pdf, accessed 1 July 2009.

¹⁷ Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), pp. 1, 4, 53-55, 57-72, 63, 79-81, 146, and 148-155.

¹⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 150. See also, pp. 15-16 and 147-148.

¹⁹ Bennett, pp. 4-5 and 152.

concentrated on the mid- to late-nineteenth century.²⁰ There is still a need to ask the critical feminist and anti-racist questions about the historical mechanisms and processes that have allowed these negative assumptions about Aboriginal women to remain so pervasive, permitting sexual and racial violence to continue.

The objective of this paper, then, is to trace the continuity of these stereotypes and accompanying violence through a case study of postwar Vancouver. In doing so, this research complicates the standard image of postwar Canada as a booming, prosperous welfare state and ‘just society’. In the decades following the Second World War, the city of Vancouver did experience a boom period, stimulated by hinterland expansion, a Pacific Rim demand for Western Canadian resources, and an exploding population. Vancouver was coming of age, and, by the 1960s, was transitioning from an industrial mill town into a modern service, financial and business Mecca, complete with dazzling sky-scraping office towers, modern highways and bridges, a new museum and theatre, and extravagant private residences.²¹ The city was, as historian Jean Barman writes, “being remade.”²²

Yet although these economic and social developments are important to our understanding of the period, the postwar era is far more complicated than this narrow vision allows. Indeed, recent scholarship on the 1950s is dedicated to exposing the difference between the “ideal” and the reality of postwar life. This literature demonstrates that even in the midst of intense pressure for

²⁰ Sangster, “Criminalizing the Colonized”; Sangster, “Defining Sexual Promiscuity”; Sangster, “Domesticating Girls”; Sangster, *Girl Trouble*; and Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*. For literature that focuses on the nineteenth century see supra note 12.

²¹ Patricia E. Roy, *The History of Canadian Cities: Vancouver: An Illustrated History*, (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company Publishers and National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, 1980), pp. 129, 135, and 137; Graeme Wynn, “Introduction,” in *Vancouver and Its Region*, eds. Graeme Wynn and Timothy Oke, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), pp. 70 and 110; Robert North and Walter Hardwick, “Vancouver Since the Second World War: An Economic Geography,” in *Vancouver and Its Region*, pp. 200-201, 203, 206, 208, 211 and 219; Trevor J. Barnes, David W. Edgington, Kenneth G. Denike, and Terry G. McGee, “Vancouver, the Province, and the Pacific Rim,” in *Vancouver and Its Region*, p. 173; Veronica Strong-Boag, “Society in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia*, ed. Hugh J.M. Johnston, (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, Department of History, Simon Fraser University, 1996), pp. 280-281; John Douglas Belshaw and David J. Mitchell, “The Economy Since the Great War,” in *The Pacific Province*, pp. 320-321, 328 and 330-332; Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia, Third Edition*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2007), pp. 286-288, 297, 306, 308-309; Christopher Dummitt, *The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), pp. 7-11.

²² Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, p. 310.

conformity to a particular model of heterosexual suburban family life, the experiences of individuals were diverse, and also that one's race, ethnicity, gender, religion, class, age, and sexual orientation often determined whether one shared in the so-called 'good life' associated with the time.²³

Historians are now doing something similar for the 1960s. The "Sixties," as Dimitri Anastakis explains, holds a particular, almost "mythical" place in public memory, creating "an ambiguous historic legacy for those who study the period."²⁴ Anastakis writes that "the era's explosion into consciousness as something new, something different, something dramatic is more often remembered symbolically." Thus, historians are now working to complicate our vision of the Sixties: they are demonstrating that the decade was, in fact, "a contradictory period," one that was far more complex than public nostalgia for an era of radical politics, counterculture, civil rights, and Vietnam allows.²⁵

In part, this paper will contribute to these revisionist efforts. A reality of the postwar era not widely remembered or discussed is the story of what was happening to too many Native women arriving and living in Canadian cities in these decades. Likely due to a long-standing assumption

²³ See for example, Alvin Finkel, *Our Lives: Canada after 1945*, (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd, Publishers, 1997); Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling, and the Family in Postwar Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1999); Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1997); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-60," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (1991): 471-504; Valerie Korinek, *Roughing It in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Magda Farhni, *Household Politics: Montreal Families and Postwar Reconstruction*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2005); and Christopher Dummitt, *The Manly Modern*.

²⁴ Dimitry Anastakis, "Introduction," in *The Sixties: Passion, Politics and Style*, ed. Dimitry Anastakis, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), p. 3.

²⁵ Anastakis, p. 3. A couple of recent edited collections, Magda Farhni and Robert Rutherford's *Creating Postwar Canada: Community, Diversity, and Dissent, 1945-74*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), and Anastakis' *The Sixties* add breadth to the existing literature on the postwar period. These volumes demonstrate the diversity of emerging scholarship; bringing together the work of new and senior historians, the essays in these two collections examine topics ranging broadly from travel narratives about the Inuit, the link between automobiles and ideas about modernity and masculinity, the rise of fast food restaurants, reactions to illegal drug use, interracial adoption, and the striptease industry. Another new work on Canada in the 1960s is Bryan Palmer's *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). Palmer surveys major themes of this decade, including the New Left, youth politics and protest, Aboriginal activism (Red Power), and the Quiet Revolution. While his focus on these themes continues to concentrate on the idea of the 1960s as being a period of abrupt change and development, Palmer does so in order to make the new argument that this decade unsettled and forever altered Canadian's sense of national identity.

that Native people and cities are incongruous, urban historians and Aboriginal historians have, until recently, neglected to research the experiences of urban Aboriginal people. A stark binary between urban and Indian, however, does not play out in reality; as several scholars have argued, indigeneity and urbanity are not, and have never been, mutually exclusive categories.²⁶ Indeed, Native people have lived in Vancouver throughout its history.²⁷ But by the early-twentieth century, the city's Aboriginal population was quite small. Beginning in the late-1940s, however, Native people began to migrate rapidly from reserves in British Columbia and other provinces to Vancouver.²⁸ By examining the way Vancouverites framed, discussed, and responded to this rising urban Aboriginal population, this paper will explore the extent to which stereotypes and violence against Native women persisted during the postwar period.

With few exceptions, in the immediate postwar years the difficulties faced by many Native women living in Vancouver passed without much notice, comment, or concern by the general public. This state of silencing likely occurred because the abuse and death of Aboriginal women in the city was so common that it came to be expected, even normalized. In the late-1940s and 1950s, silencing and expectation operated in tandem, and many people turned a blind eye to what was occurring on the streets and in the rooming houses of the downtown. In 1963, reflecting on an earlier time in his career, reporter Tom Hazlitt wrote that in the late-1940s he had

²⁶ Urban Aboriginal history is a new and rapidly developing field. See especially, Coll Thrush, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place*, (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007); Jean Barman, *Stanley Park's Secret: The Forgotten Families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch and Brockton Point* (Madeira Park, British Columbia: Harbour Publishing, 2005); J. Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver," *BC Studies*, No. 155 (Autumn 2007): 3-29; Heather Howard-Bobiwash, "Women's Class Strategies as Activism in Native Community Building in Toronto, 1950-1975," *American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 27, Nos. 3 & 4 (Summer and Fall 2003): 566-582; Nancy Janovicek, "'Assisting Our Own': Urban Migration, Self-Governance, and Native Women's Organizing in Thunder Bay, Ontario, 1972-1989," *American Indian Quarterly*, Nos. 3 & 4 (Summer and Fall 2003): 548-565; Bonita Lawrence, *'Real' Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Evelyn Peters, "Aboriginal People in Urban Areas," in *Urban Affairs: Back on the Policy Agenda*, eds. Caroline Andrew, Katherine A. Graham, and Susan D. Phillips, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); E. Peters, "'Urban' and 'Aboriginal': An Impossible Contradiction?" in *City Lives and City Forms: Critical Research and Canadian Urbanism*, eds. John Caulfield and Linda Peake, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1996).

²⁷ Vancouver is built on Squamish, Musqueam, and Tseil-Watuth (Burrard) territories. See Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver;" Barman, *Stanley Park's Secret*; and Robert A. J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status, and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996).

²⁸ Peters, "Aboriginal People in Urban Areas," pp. 45 and 53-54; and Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), pp. 308-309.

contemplated writing an article about the abuse, rape, and death of young Native women on skid road. But as he informed an older associate, decided “We can’t print that. But can’t something be done about it?”²⁹ Hazlitt’s associate replied, “Forget it. It happens all the time.”³⁰ In this article, styled as an open address to the mayor, Hazlitt explained, “That’s the first thing you will find, Mr. Mayor. People draw an invisible curtain around the things they don’t understand and don’t like. And although the curtain is invisible, it’s likely to be strong as steel.”³¹ This general (non)-response and naturalizing of Aboriginal women dying on skid road that Hazlitt both partook in and later chastised, is disquieting. A citizen body that is complacent and apathetic to such abuse occurring amidst them is perhaps more insidious than physical and sexual violence itself; it seems to deepen the first assault.

In the early 1960s, however, something shifted. What occurred was a particular – if isolated – moment in time when Vancouverites must have been unmistakably aware of what was going on around them. The press, the police, civic officials, and social workers constructed the growing presence of Aboriginal people in the city as a serious problem. As part of this discussion, a narrative about Native women arriving and living in Vancouver appeared regularly in mainstream venues, such as civic studies and reports, social work theses, newspapers, and even popular theatre. The focus of these sources was the death and life of Aboriginal women on skid road – in that order. Central to this exploding public discourse about “the urban Indian problem” was a gendered portrait of “the dead Indian girl,” telling a fatalistic story of poverty, discrimination, loneliness, alcoholism, prostitution, violence, and death in the big city.³²

²⁹ Tom Hazlitt, “Skidroad: Curtain falls as girls die,” *Province*, 12 January 1963, p. 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Aboriginal women frequently were referred to as “girls” irrespective of their age. These were not “girls” but young women in their late-teens and twenties. While this use of the word “girl” might have been racialized (indicating the infantilization of Aboriginal people), this terminology also reflected a paternalistic society insensitive to the issue of language – single white women were also referred to as “girls,” and both indigenous and non-indigenous people used the word “girl” to discuss Aboriginal women. Throughout this text I strive to use the terms “women” or “young women.” Where I have used the term “girls” it is in the context of the sources or else in a direct quotation.

This paper studies the deaths of Aboriginal women in postwar Vancouver through an examination of this narrative, and, consequently, centers on the discourses of others. An inherent limitation with this paper, then, is that it is not always about Aboriginal women and their experiences, but rather about the press, the police, civic officers and private individuals, and their stories about these women. Women's and Aboriginal historians have for years struggled to ensure that their work is about individuals, not the discourses about them. As Joan Sangster explains, when doing Aboriginal history a serious problem with focusing "on colonial *representations* is the way that we too might lose sight of the *subjective* position and experiences" of Aboriginal people, "ironically making them, again, the objects of our inquiry rather than active subjects."³³ Therefore, wherever possible I have tried to treat the Aboriginal women I discuss as historical actors and agents, and foreground their voices and experiences. Nevertheless, despite this effort, oral histories are glaringly absent from this paper. Further research that engages in open discussion with Aboriginal women and their communities, and which provides space for these individuals to tell their stories is absolutely imperative.³⁴ In the meantime, though, the research in this paper provides a crucial first step. We need to be aware of dominant discourses because they do affect lived experience; the material and the discursive inform each other, and an understanding of one is not complete without an understanding of the other.³⁵ Narratives about Aboriginal women dying in the city are only part of this history, but they are, nevertheless, integral to it.

³³ Joan Sangster, "Constructing the "Eskimo" Wife: White Women's Travel Writing, Colonialism, and the Canadian North, 1940-60," in *Creating Postwar Canada: Community, Diversity, and Dissent, 1945-75*, eds. Magda and Robert Rutherford, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), p. 25.

³⁴ Many Aboriginal scholars are critical of work that does not engage with indigenous communities. I do not wish to replicate a colonial silencing that has been endemic in Western academe, but the time and spatial limits of this study contributed to the decision to confine this project to the realm of public discourse. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, especially as an outsider coming from a position of white, middle-class privilege, relationships of trust must be built prior to the commencement of this important next stage of research. For criticisms of my chosen methodology, see Devon Abbott Mihesuah, "Should American Indian History Remain a Field of Study," in *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, ed. Devon Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Darren J. Ranco, "The Ecological Indian and the Politics of Representation: Critiquing the *Ecological Indian* in the Age of Ecocide," in *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian*, ed. Michael E. Harkin and David Rich Lewis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); and Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

³⁵ Sangster, *Girl Trouble*, p. 4; Gleason, p. 12; and Adams, pp. 4, 6-7, 16 and 18-19.

Furthermore, although this paper is a study of death in the city, I do not mean to pathologize or reify the notion that Native people are unable to cope with urban life, a criticism sometimes made against studies that focus on social problems faced by urban Aboriginal people.³⁶ Many Aboriginal women living in Vancouver were “successful” in careers such as social work, counseling, nursing, and stenography, and several of these women were active in trying to make the city a safe and welcoming place for other Native people.³⁷ It does remain, however, that although Aboriginal women’s urban experiences were diverse, many being positive, for others, poverty, violence, and death was a stark reality of life in the city. But this reality was not a result of cultural unsuitability to urban life; it was rather, the result of a host of complex structural and material factors informed by discrimination, colonialism, racism, and sexism.

Yet despite – perhaps because of – this reality, historians have been remarkably silent on this history. Although there are several possible explanations for the absence of this story from existing historical literature, including the fact that postwar and urban Aboriginal history are relatively new fields, it must be emphasized that what historians research is a choice. The pasts we deem relevant to investigate, the questions we ask, and the narratives we write, are all choices informed by our own personal experiences and political commitments, whether we are conscious of them or not. Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains that every “historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences.”³⁸ Historians cannot uncover all of these silences, and therefore, the histories that we do choose to uncover, and those that we leave in silence, matter.

My main objective in this paper, then, is to unsilence the history of Aboriginal women living in Vancouver during the 1950s and 1960s – their deaths, their lives, and the stories written about

³⁶ See for example, Thrush, p. 12.

³⁷ Many Aboriginal women living in Vancouver during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s actively worked to assist other Native men and women in the city. Some of these “activist” women included Ruth Smith (Coast Salish), Gloria (Cranmer) Webster (Namgis), Gertude Guerin (Musqueam) and R.W. Cantryn (Huu-ay-aht [Ohiaht]). This pattern of female indigenous activism was not confined to Vancouver. Howard-Bobiwash, Janovicek, and Thrush all discuss how Aboriginal women were on the front lines of Native community building, assistance, and service in Toronto, Thunder Bay, and Seattle respectively. In their work on ‘middle-class’ female Native activists, these scholars demonstrate that through various endeavours Native women sought to help their own and foster a sense of community in urban settings with, for example, boarding homes, emergency shelters, and service leagues (Howard-Bobiwash, p. 566-582; Janovicek, pp. 548-565; Thrush, pp. 166-168).

³⁸ Trouillot, p. 27; see also, pp. 96-107.

them. This history of urban Aboriginal women matters: it exposes the oft-neglected dark side of the postwar period, challenging a common consensus that an equity revolution took place after the war.³⁹ Just beyond the narrow confines of the city's elaborate high-rises and sprawling middle-class suburbs, many Aboriginal women lived in decrepit rooming houses and hotels, sold their bodies to survive, and were raped, beaten, brutalized, and murdered on Vancouver's poorest streets. Extreme poverty, racism, sexism, and colonialism did not become relics of a darker past; instead, they remained a central part – the dark underbelly – of Vancouver's postwar story. Moreover, this history matters because this story is not safely nestled in the past. Today, the Dead Indian Girl on skid road is not an image often associated with the recent past, but she should be, and she needs to be. As Native women in Vancouver, Northern British Columbia, and all across Canada continue to go missing, and continue to be raped and murdered, her story continues to haunt us in the present.

Indigenous Migration and Urbanization

Although continuing to comprise less than one percent of the city's total population, there was significant growth in the urban Aboriginal population during the postwar years. According to census statistics, in 1951 there were 239 Aboriginal people living in Vancouver, 530 in 1961, and 3000 in 1971.⁴⁰ Conditions on reserves, including population growth, overcrowding, high unemployment and extreme poverty, contributed to this rapid migration and urbanization; many individuals came to the city seeking improved conditions and better opportunities.⁴¹ This

³⁹ Strong-Boag, "Society in the Twentieth Century," p. 278; and Barman, *West Beyond the West*, pp. 321, 325-329.

⁴⁰ Vancouver's population was 344 833 in 1951, 384 522 in 1961, and 426 256 in 1971. Assuming the accuracy of these census counts, in 1951 the city's Aboriginal population would have been around 0.07 percent of the total population, in 1961, 0.14 percent, and in 1971, 0.70 percent. Peters notes, however, that census statistics on the urban Aboriginal population are inherently unreliable, and that they cannot be compared across the years (because of changing definitions and questions on the census forms, methods of data collection, patterns of self-identification, and natural increase). Nevertheless, despite the flaws of these numbers, they still demonstrate an increase in the urban Aboriginal population. Peters, "Aboriginal People in Urban Areas," pp. 54-55; and Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, pp. 441-442. For the migration of Aboriginal women to Toronto after the Second World War, see Heather Howard-Bobiwash, "Women's Class Strategies as Activism in Native Community Building in Toronto, 1950-1975."

⁴¹ Peters, "Aboriginal People in Urban Areas," p. 55; Harris, *Making Native Space*, p. 309; Sangster, "Criminalizing the Colonized," pp. 40-41, and Sangster, "Defining Sexual Promiscuity," p. 292.

movement, however, was also deeply gendered, and women were disproportionately represented in the growing urban Aboriginal population.⁴² While most men left the reserve to seek employment or educational opportunities, many women left because they were fleeing violence, or because they had lost their Indian status.⁴³ Until 1985, section 12 (1) (b) of the Indian Act removed the Indian status of Aboriginal women who married non-status men, and from “illegitimate” children of Native women whose fathers lacked status. It was many of these women and their children who were “forced to become” urban Indians.⁴⁴ Additionally, Native women also came to the cities via the criminal justice system. Arrested on reserves or in local towns mainly on liquor charges, many Aboriginal women were brought to courts, reformatories, training schools and prisons in urban settings. When released, some of these women remained in the city, by choice or because they lacked the finances to return home.⁴⁵ Yet regardless of the reason that brought these women to the city, and whatever the reason they remained – whether they were seeking a better life, or whether they were there because of discriminatory laws in the Indian Act – life in the city was not always easy, and their presence was not always welcome.

⁴² Peters, “‘Urban’ and ‘Aboriginal’: An Impossible Contradiction?,” p. 51.

⁴³ Janovicek, p. 548.

⁴⁴ See Lawrence, p. 61, and also pp. 33, 37, 46 and 50-65; and Janovicek, p. 550-551, and p. 562, n.15 and n.17. Between 1958 and 1968 alone, 4 606 Native women who married men without Indian status were removed from the Indian registry and were forced to leave their homes (Janovicek, p. 550).

⁴⁵ Aboriginal women were over-incarcerated. Jenifer Butterfield noted in her 1958 Master of Social Work thesis that Aboriginal women comprised twenty to thirty percent of the female prison population at the Oakalla Women’s Prison in Burnaby (a suburb just east of Vancouver); most were charged for liquor violations of the Indian Act. According to reporter G.E. Mortimore, sixty percent of women prisoners at Oakalla in 1958 were Aboriginal even though Native women comprised only two to three percent of the general population. Prior to 1958 women released from prison were provided with bus ticket home once per year; if a woman was arrested more than once during the year’s period she was responsible for her own transportation. Butterfield noted that after this policy changed to provide all women with return transportation many still chose to remain in Vancouver. She diminished this act of agency, however, by writing that the Aboriginal women who stayed in the city faced extreme difficulties: “In the city, the Indian woman is ‘accepted’ only in the East End, and then usually abused and treated as a prostitute. About the only places that would hire her are disreputable restaurants, even if she wanted to work. She returns again and again to Oakalla on Intoxication charges.” (Butterfield, “A Survey of the Women’s Division, Oakalla Prison Farm, B.C., 1958: The Beginnings of a Treatment Program,” Master of Social Work thesis, School of Social Work, The University of British Columbia, 1958, pp. 33-35, 44-45, 61-65; “Jailed Indian Freed Without Fare Home,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 September 1949, p. 2; G.E. Mortimore, “Some Go to Jail 100 Times: Most Offences Involve Liquor,” *Daily Colonist*, Victoria, 15 October 1958, p. 2). For information on the Indian Act’s discriminatory liquor laws, see Robert Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver’s Beer Parlours*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), and R. Campbell, “‘A Fantastic Rigmarole:’ Deregulating Aboriginal Drinking in British Columbia, 1945-62,” *BC Studies*, Vol. 141 (Spring 2004): 81-104.

Although Canadians were beginning to have greater awareness of reserve conditions, many tended to view the growing urban Aboriginal population with “misgivings.”⁴⁶ In the 1950s and 1960s many commentators held particular ideas about Aboriginal people and their “suitability” or “adaptability” for urban life, and constructed the increasing presence of Aboriginal people in the city as a new civic and social problem.⁴⁷ In 1961 and in 1962, for example, the Vancouver Community Chest, with the financial backing of the federal government, released two reports on this so-called “problem.”⁴⁸ The Community Chest calculated that the number of Aboriginal people living in Vancouver had almost tripled during the 1950s. They referred to this growth as “largely unplanned and haphazard,” and flagged indigenous urbanization as a source of potential difficulties.⁴⁹ In their 1961 report, the Chest authors wrote that the “Indian “immigrant” to Vancouver” differed from other immigrant groups because while

[i]ndividual effort, competitiveness, saving, social advancement, are objectives within both the North American and European cultures...[i]n the Canadian Indian culture these are not “values.” Their own traditional values which may run directly counter to white values may particularly unfit them for the urban free enterprise system. Add to this handicaps of education, vocational training, sometimes language and the absence of earlier urban-integrated colonies of their own people...and we have an immigrant group particularly susceptible to the pathology of maladjustment.⁵⁰

Similarly, in their 1962 report, the Chest wrote that Native people “have difficulties on reaching the city which stem from lack of familiarity with the people and their ways, lack of friends and

⁴⁶ Barman, *West Beyond the West*, pp. 329-330; Janovicek, p. 549; Peters, “Aboriginal People in Urban Areas,” p. 45 and 55-56.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of literature written in the 1970s that reproduces this belief see Peters “Aboriginal People in Urban Areas” and Peters, “‘Urban’ and ‘Aboriginal’: An Impossible Contradiction?”

⁴⁸ “Report to the Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area: Committee on The Canadian Indian in an Urban Community (Vancouver): May, 1961,” housed at the University of British Columbia Libraries; and “Study of Problems of Canadian Indians in Urban Communities,” Social Planning Section, Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area, February 1962, Rare Books and Special Collections, UBC Library, SPAM 3908.

⁴⁹ “Study of Problems of Canadian Indians in Urban Communities,” pp. 3 and 16; see also “Report to the Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area: Committee on The Canadian Indian in an Urban Community,” pp. 4-10.

⁵⁰ Despite presenting this picture of maladjustment, the Community Chest added that this situation was not permanent: “Just as.... other groups have wholly or partially worked their way up from the lowest strata in our urban society so eventually will the Indian. But often it is a path strewn with great difficulties. Progress is slow and hostility, bitterness and frustration may often characterize these “First Canadians.”” “Report to the Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area: Committee on The Canadian Indian in an Urban Community,” p. 27.

uncertainty as to where to obtain advice.”⁵¹ Moreover, they continued, Native individuals “are also uncertain of acceptance by the white population, have limited finances and often lack training for employment.”⁵² The authors suggested that “[t]he Indian moving to the city then can find himself in trouble quickly and, unfortunately, movement to the skid-row area is almost a “normal” means of entry into the city for Indians other than students.”⁵³ Using the word “trouble” here as a reference to alcoholism, drug use, crime and prostitution, the Community Chest implied that if the urban indigenous population continued to rise as it was the city would soon face a marked increase in these issues.⁵⁴

The belief that a larger urban Aboriginal population would lead to an increase in civic problems was widespread. In 1958, for example, journalist G.E. Mortimore wrote, “There is a fairly small, but growing colony of Indians on Vancouver’s skid road, some of them moving regularly in and out of jail. It is a sign of what might happen if Indians migrated en masse to cities.”⁵⁵ To support his claim, Mortimore added that Hugh Christie, warden at the Oakalla prison, said, ““The fact that a few of the women are already moving from alcoholism to drug addiction gives warning of what may happen if the situation is not taken in hand.””⁵⁶ In 1962, city Alderman Marianne Linnell echoed these worries. Like Christie, Linnell framed her concerns about these “troubles” in explicitly gendered terms.⁵⁷ A reporter for the *Vancouver Sun* quoted her saying, “Many of them [Aboriginal women] find it hard to avoid trouble with alcohol or prostitution.”⁵⁸ “They are easy prey,” she later said, “to alcohol, disease and crime.”⁵⁹

⁵¹ “Study of Problems of Canadian Indians in Urban Communities,” Social Planning Section, Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area, February 1962, p. 14.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-7; “Indians lost in ‘jungle’ of city need guidance,” *Province*, 28 February 1962, p. 3; “Indians in City ‘Lost in Asphalt Jungle’: Chest Report Urges Social Centre to Save them from Skidroad Fate,” *Vancouver Sun*, 28 February 1962, p. 50.

⁵⁵ G.E. Mortimore “Some Go to Jail 100 Times: Most Offences Involve Liquor,” *Daily Colonist*, 15 October 1958, p. 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ “New Agency Urged for City Indians,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 September 1962, p. 7; Cliff MacKay, “Alderman Urges City Indian Centre: Integration Problems Claimed Mushrooming, Festering,” *Vancouver Sun*, 22 September 1962, p. 7; “City council to discuss plan for Indian centre,” *Province*, 24 September 1962, p. 2.

⁵⁸ “New Agency Urged for City Indians,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 September 1962, p. 7.

According to a reporter for the *Province*, Linnell claimed that Native women “easily get into trouble in the city if they are not prepared for it... When they get to Vancouver, they drift to Cordova Street... They have nowhere to go, they are lost, untrained and they start drinking.”⁶⁰ Linnell’s view of Aboriginal women, as also expressed by Mortimore, Christie and the Community Chest, represented a common postwar discourse that framed indigenous urbanization in negative terms to suggest that Aboriginal people were ill-suited for urban life.

Skid Road Girls

In the 1960s, one shape this discourse took was a narrative about Aboriginal women dying on Vancouver’s skid road. Although knowledge of these women’s deaths seems to suffer from public amnesia today, in the 1960s this was not the case.⁶¹ During this decade, the image of the Dead Indian Girl was sharply etched in the public imagination. Extensive press coverage on this issue indicates this awareness. On Friday, January 11, 1963, the front page of the *Vancouver Sun* read “Irene Goes Home – In a Coffin.”⁶² Besides the shocking headline, reporter Simma Holt’s opening lines must have captured *Sun* readers’ attention: “Irene Ruth James was like a china doll as she lay broken on a slab in Vancouver city morgue. She was found dead in a Skid Road room, the victim of a beating.”⁶³ James, who had come to Vancouver from Alert Bay in the mid-1950s, died December 17, 1962 after she fell and hit her head during a fight with another woman.⁶⁴ Her

⁵⁹ Cliff MacKay, “Alderman Urges City Indian Centre: Integration Problems Claimed Mushrooming, Festering,” *Vancouver Sun*, 22 September 1962, p. 7.

⁶⁰ “City council to discuss plan for Indian centre,” *Province*, 24 September 1962, p. 2. In 1961, the Community Chest also wrote of problems facing Native women in particular. The committee claimed that it was easier for Aboriginal men to “mingle” with white people than it was for Aboriginal women because of “the stereotypes about Indian girls which obtain [sic] within our white culture.” (“Report to the Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area: Committee on The Canadian Indian in an Urban Community,” p. 22).

⁶¹ An exception where a similar story is referenced is C. Thrush’s *Native Seattle*. Thrush describes a parallel situation in neighbouring Seattle. He notes that in 1960, thirty percent of Seattle’s skidroad population was Aboriginal, and that death was a common part of life on skidroad: “Out in the hinterland,” he writes, “many Indian reservation residents described skid roads as places where people disappeared, almost as if they had died – and, sometimes, the deaths were real: cirrhosis, a fall under a passing train, tuberculosis, a knife in the ribs. After the brief window of wartime opportunity, life in Seattle was almost as bleak as ever for its Indian population – if not worse” (Thrush, p. 165).

⁶² Simma Holt, “Irene Goes Home – In a Coffin,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, pp. 1-2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: “Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

death, however, was only the most recent in what had become a pattern of Native women moving to, and dying on Vancouver's skid road.⁶⁵

Right before Holt's story went to press, city coroner Glen McDonald wrote a letter to the Vancouver police commission stating that scores of young Aboriginal women were being driven to death on skid road. McDonald had been coroner in the late-1950s when Ann Ducharme and the Billy sisters had died, but the deaths of these three women would not be the only ones he had to investigate. McDonald told the police commission that twenty-three Native women had died on skid road in 1961, and that at least twenty had died in 1962.⁶⁶ Death was an unavoidable fact of McDonald's career, but when he personally saw the bodies of these women arriving in the morgue he became acutely aware that a serious crisis was taking place in the city. By 1960 McDonald realized that the system was failing these women, and he began to use the media to raise awareness of this situation, and to advocate for changes that he thought might protect them and prevent their untimely deaths.⁶⁷

McDonald and Holt used the inquest into the death of Irene James as one opportunity to catch the public's attention. The names and faces of the forty-three women McDonald estimated had died in 1961 and 1962 had not made newspaper headlines at the time of their deaths, nor had the

⁶⁵ Holt worked as a journalist for the *Vancouver Sun* from 1944 to 1974. She covered topics on the police, courts, crime, hospitals, education, politics, and prison reform. She has published five books, *Terror in the Name of God* (1964), a critical account of the Sons of Freedom Doukhobors which was widely condemned by the Doukhobor community; *Sex and the Teen Age Revolution* (1967); *The Devil's Butler* (1972); *The Other Mrs. Diefenbaker* (1974); and in 2008, *Memoirs of a Loose Cannon*. In 1974, Holt became the first Jewish woman to become a Member of Parliament, and served the riding of Vancouver-Kingsway in the government of Pierre Trudeau until 1979.

⁶⁶ "Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup," *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

⁶⁷ McDonald was Vancouver's coroner from 1954 to 1980. In 1960, McDonald argued for full liquor privileges for Aboriginal people. He claimed that liquor laws prohibiting Aboriginal people from buying liquor or having it on their reserves meant that "many Indian women sit in beer parlors all night, and when they come out, are easy prey for white men." Beer parlours opened to Aboriginal people in British Columbia in 1951, but they did not gain equal access to alcohol until 1962. The final liquor restrictions in the Indian Act were not removed until 1985. See Robert Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer*, pp. 12, 79, 81, 94-95, 98, 103-104, and also, R. Campbell, "A 'Fantastic Rigmarole': Deregulating Aboriginal Drinking in British Columbia." For McDonald's use of the press, see Glen McDonald, *How Come I'm Dead?*, ed. Betty Pembroke, (Surrey, B.C.: Hancock House Publishers, Ltd, 1985), pp. 82-83, and 181-182; "Find Alcohol in Body: False Creek woman killed, says jury," *Province*, 13 March 1957, p. 8; "Another skidroad 'prey' dies," *Province*, June 20, 1960, p. 21; "Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup," *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1; Simma Holt, "Irene Goes Home – In a Coffin," *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, pp. 1-2; "Rathie acts to save Indian girls," *Province*, 11 January 1963, p. 1; Simma Holt, "Cost of a Skid Road Tragedy Multiplied to \$1.2 Million," *Vancouver Sun*, 31 October 1963, p. 1-2; and Kathy Hassard, "Mortality Rate High For Skid Road Women," *Vancouver Sun*, 19 September 1965, p. 28.

women who, most certainly, had been attacked and who had died in preceding years and decades.⁶⁸ Instead, through Holt's article the public came to know these women belatedly as ignominious statistics. Although they were likely necessary to grab the public's attention, these statistics problematically divorced these women from their humanity. Consequently, when Holt wrote about James, she also tried to provide a human face for the women behind these statistics. When she posed the question, "Does anyone really care about 26-year-old Irene James?," Holt was not asking merely about James, nor being rhetorical.⁶⁹ She was calling direct attention to the general acceptance and normalization of the deaths of Native women in the city: "The way she [James] died," Holt reproached, "is typical and so common, society has accepted it just as it does minor traffic accidents."⁷⁰ The question then, was how many beaten and dead women would it take to make people take notice and care? Was forty-three in two years enough?

The answer, at least initially, was yes. On January 11, 1963, splashed in large bold font across the front page of the *Vancouver Sun*, directly above Holt's story on James, was the proclamation, "Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup."⁷¹ The *Sun* reporter wrote that Mayor Bill Rathie promised the city would act "to wipe out conditions that make Skid Road a death row for scores of Indian girls each year."⁷² Rathie was responding to the recommendation of the coroner's jury inquest into James' death that a joint federal, provincial, and civic committee be established to study "the problem of Indian women in Vancouver."⁷³ Rathie acknowledged that something needed to be done, but he did not, at first, agree that this was an issue necessitating the involvement of all levels of government. The *Province* quoted the mayor saying "I feel this is basically a city problem. We have our own departments – the licence [sic] inspector, health department, and medical health officer. This should be brought to their

⁶⁸ "Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup," *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Simma Holt, "Irene Goes Home – In a Coffin," *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ "Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup," *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

attention.”⁷⁴ In short, Rathie viewed the deaths of Aboriginal women as a straightforward problem that could be solved easily if the city health and license departments increased their regulation of alcohol and improved living conditions on the downtown eastside.

It is easy to see why Rathie thought the best approach was to deploy the city health and license departments; alcoholism and poor housing were common on skid road. Glen McDonald stated that the vast majority of women he saw in the morgue suffered from alcoholism, and suggested that alcohol often contributed to their poor health and eventual deaths.⁷⁵ Similarly, City Prosecutor Stewart McMorran informed Rathie and the Vancouver Police Commission that Irene James’ death was a prime example of Native women becoming “mixed up with undesirables,” living as alcoholics in rundown rooming houses on skid road.⁷⁶ James, McMorran argued, was one of many: “These girls come here all the time. They are fresh and young. In a short time they are falling by the wayside all over the place.”⁷⁷ McMorran stressed that Native women lived in “really terrible,” “almost unbelievable” squalor in the cheap hotels and rooming houses on the city blocks between Main and Carrall, and between Hastings and Main.⁷⁸ He said that it was actually these “appalling” living conditions that led to James’ death, and told the mayor that had James not died of head injuries sustained during the fight, she likely would have died within a month because her physical health was so poor.⁷⁹

Yet even if that had been the case, Rathie’s proposal to employ the health and license departments was far from adequate; simply put, it failed to address the precipitating factors of colonialism, racism, and sexism underlying these conditions. Nevertheless, because Rathie’s plan

⁷⁴ “Rathie acts to save Indian girls,” *Province*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

⁷⁵ “Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1; See also McDonald, *How Come I’m Dead?*; and Ronald Lloyd Cameron, “Social Characteristics of the Skid Row Alcoholic: A Survey of the Characteristics and Needs of a Group of Alcoholics Living on Skid Row, Vancouver, B.C., 1960,” Master of Social Work thesis, School of Social Work, The University of British Columbia, 1964, pp. 29-31, 73 and 85.

⁷⁶ “Rathie acts to save Indian girls,” *Province*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* The language used by McMorran here is interesting. His assertion that these women are “fresh and young” seems to slide off his tongue without much forethought, and serves as a reminder of the highly sexist society in which these women lived.

⁷⁸ “Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*; and “Rathie acts to save Indian girls,” *Province*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

was so obviously limited, it had the positive effect of generating public discussion on the matter. Several commentators spoke to the narrowness and insufficiency of his plan, and emphasized that while cleaning up skid road conditions was important, it would only be a first step.⁸⁰ The editor of *The Victoria Daily Times*, for example, praised Rathie for taking steps to improve conditions on skid road, but stated that Rathie's proposal was "palliative only, not a cure," for what was a more serious problem.⁸¹ He wrote that "[a]n attack on alcoholism and depravity in one locality...reaches only the fringe of the problem involving native [sic] girls attracted to the city and either unable to cope with urban living or victimized in the big town."⁸² Similarly, the editor of *The Vancouver Sun* summed up Rathie's plan as being "Only Half the Job."⁸³ This editor wrote, "If health and licence [sic] departments succeed in sweeping out some of the sordid corners of Vancouver's Skid Road, they will have been of some service to the confused, impoverished and friendless Indians who now collect there. But this would be to do only half the job."⁸⁴ Although these editorials were couched in paternalistic language and cultural assumptions about Native people, they, along with Rathie, McDonald, and McMorran's comments, represent an important shift – Aboriginal women dying on Vancouver's skid road finally was acknowledged as a serious issue deserving of public attention and action, a crisis that the city could no longer ignore.

Over the next few months and years there was a flurry of interest in the question of "Skid Road Girls." Ensuing discussion produced a fatalistic narrative purporting to tell "the story" of what was happening to Aboriginal women in the city. Told time and time again in newspapers, civic reports, community agency reports, and social work theses, was a story of a young "Indian

⁸⁰ "Only Half the Job," *Vancouver Sun*, 12 January 1963, p. 4; "Social Centre Proposed to Save Skid Road Girls: Concern Mounts Over Alcoholism Death Toll," *Vancouver Sun*, 12 January 1963, p. 21; "Attack on Skid Road," *Victoria Daily Times*, 14 January 1963, p. 4; Percy Andy Paull, "Result? Only a Handshake," *Vancouver Sun*, 15 January 1963, p. 4; "Used for Profit, Says Williams: Police War on 'Sale' Of Indian Girls Urged," *Vancouver Sun*, 14 January 1963, p. 25; "Committee Plans Centre for Indians," *Vancouver Sun*, 14 January 1963, p. 25; "No Evidence Girls 'Sold,' Says Booth," *Vancouver Sun*, 15 January 1963, p. 19; "City welfare committee to study girls' plight," *Province*, 16 January 1963, p. 3; "Guidance for girls stressed," *Province*, 15 January 1963, p. 3.

⁸¹ "Attack on Skid Road," *Victoria Daily Times*, 14 January 1963, p. 4.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ "Only Half the Job," *Vancouver Sun*, 12 January 1963, p. 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

girl” who arrived in the big city from her reserve. In the city, this “girl” unwittingly followed the path of so many others into degradation and despair. Racial discrimination, combined with a lack of education and training, meant that she was unable to secure employment, and could not obtain or afford a decent flat. She was a lonely, lost “girl” in an unwelcoming and dangerous “asphalt jungle.”⁸⁵ Alien to city ways, far from the protection of home, and unsure of where to go for help, she “drifted” to skid road where she felt accepted and could find cheap accommodation. Once on the row, she inevitably fell in with the “wrong” crowd, turned to alcohol, drugs and prostitution, and, consequently, became “easy prey” to “men with the appetites of beasts.”⁸⁶ When friends saw her, her body was covered with cuts and bruises. She did not eat. Instead, she drank. She continued to spiral further down this dark path, eventually meeting her fate in death.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ “Indians lost in ‘jungle’ of city need guidance,” *Province*, 28 February 1962, p. 3; “Indians in City ‘Lost In Asphalt Jungle,’” *Vancouver Sun*, 28 February 1962, p. 50.

⁸⁶ “Study of Problems of Canadian Indians in Urban Communities,” Social Planning Section, Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area, February 1962, p. 62; and Tom Hazlitt, “Skidroad: Curtain falls as girls die,” *Province*, 12 January 1963, p. 1.

⁸⁷ For examples of this narrative see, “Report to the Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area,” especially pp. 22, 51, 62, 64, 81, 126; “Study of Problems of Canadian Indians in Urban Communities;” “Downtown-East Side: A Preliminary Study,” City of Vancouver Planning Department, W.E. Graham, Director of Planning, June 1965, located at UBC libraries; “Skid Road: A Plan for Action,” a report prepared by the Sub-Committee of the Special Joint Committee of the Vancouver City Council, September 1965, located at UBC libraries; Cameron, “Social Characteristics of the Skid Row Alcoholic;” Hubert Hein, Marcel L’Heureux, Barbara Thomilson and Margaret Wick, “Skid Road: Vancouver: An Exploratory Study of the Nature and Organization of Skid Road and the Effectiveness of Existing Social Policy,” Master of Social Work thesis, School of Social Work, The University of British Columbia, 1966, pp. 103-104 and 130-131; Anthony Eberts, “Adjust or die: Mary: One more tragedy in the Big City,” *Province*, September 29, 1962, p. 4; “Skid Road Death Spurs Civic Action: Rathie Promises Early Cleanup,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1; Simma Holt, “Irene Goes Home – In a Coffin,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1; Tom Hazlitt, “Skidroad: Curtain falls as girls die,” *Province*, 12 January 1963, p. 1; Anthony Eberts, “Adjust or die: Mary: One more Tragedy in the Big City,” *Province*, 29 September 1963, p. 4; “Cost of a Skid Road Tragedy Multiplied to \$1.2 Million,” *Vancouver Sun*, 31 October 1963, p. 1; “Our Indians: Sympathy but little help,” *Province*, 4 November 1963, p. 4; Moira Farrow, “5-Year Skid Road Journey Fatal for Onetime Heroine,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 May 1964, p. 9; Stan Shillington, “Where Were You Going, Little One? Bubble of City Glamour Burst in Bundle of Death,” *Vancouver Sun*, 10 November 1964, p. 2. This narrative was so prevalent in public discourse that it would have been difficult for Vancouverites to be ignorant of the situation. One can look, for example, to the widespread success of George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, a play about an Aboriginal woman who came to the city from her reserve, became a prostitute, and was raped and murdered. *Rita Joe* premiered in Vancouver in 1967, and was remounted again in Vancouver in 1969, and in Ottawa in 1969. The Ottawa remount was attended by B.C. Premier W.A.C. Bennett, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, and Indian Affairs Minister Jean Chrétien, and was broadcast on CBC radio. In 1971, a ballet adaptation was done for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Because *Rita Joe* was designed as a political documentary-drama, Ryga became uneasy about its success; he was concerned that the play was viewed as mere entertainment, and that praise for it acted in lieu of dealing with the social problem it documented. More recently, *Rita Joe* was mounted by the Vancouver Firehall Arts Centre (2007), and by the Western Canada Theatre Company (2009). For more on Ryga and *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* see George Ryga, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*; James Hoffman, *The Ecstasy of Resistance: A Biography of George Ryga*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 1995), pp. 114, 159-160, 199, 202 and 214; Christopher Innes, *The Canadian Dramatist: Volume One: Politics and the Playwright: George Ryga*, (Toronto: Simon & Pierre Ltd., 1985), pp. 17-18, 28-30, 31-32, 56, 59, 61, and 98; Douglas Cole, “Leisure, Taste and Tradition in British Columbia,” in *The Pacific Province*, pp. 368-369.

This is the narrative used by Simma Holt in her rendition of the Irene James tragedy. She told her readers, “Coroner Glen McDonald says every Indian girl who comes to Skid Road is signing her own death warrant, just as Irene did.”⁸⁸ Holt described how James arrived in Vancouver in the early 1950s like a lost and innocent child “out of the protection of an Indian reserve into the jungle of the city’s Skid Road, to be used and abused.”⁸⁹ Holt wrote how one concerned woman who constantly saw James with “bruises fade and new bruises come,” pleaded with her to return to her reserve.⁹⁰ But James chose to remain, continuing, Holt suggested, along a dire path into prostitution, violence and degradation:

At first there were men ready to profit by this little girl whose pony tail was neatly combed into place. At first one man took care of her, as she described it. But he shared her with others for a price.

She came to know the pain of ruthless, drunken beatings, of waking up drunk from falls and kickings, what it was like to wake in hospital with stitches in her scalp.

She knew the inside of almost every dirty, crowded room on Skid Road between Columbia and Main along Hastings, Cordova and Powell. She was dragged or led submissively into these rooms, drunk and exhausted.

She cried out in pain. But no one cared. Tears and screams are the trademark of Skid Road.⁹¹

Holt’s portrait of James here is problematic for several reasons. Adding that this was the story Mayor Rathie would find over and over again when he investigated the situation, as he had promised he would do, Holt infantilized and victimized all Native women. She stripped them of agency and individuality, and cast them as being in need of maternal guidance and protection. James, described as a “little girl” with her hair in a ponytail, was a woman in her mid-twenties. But despite Holt’s own sexism, her intentions were good: she wanted to make Vancouverites aware of the problems facing many Native women, and to do so in a way that might make them care enough to do something about it.⁹²

⁸⁸ Simma Holt, “Irene Goes Home – In a Coffin,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, p. 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² In her 2008 memoirs Holt confirmed that this was a motivation for her writing. She wrote, “I have had the experience of knowing that exposure of truth and facts forces action in the real politics of life. Over and over I saw

Holt was not alone in this goal. Guy Williams, the president of the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia, declared that “Indian girls” are “victims of circumstances.”⁹³ He suggested that unable to find jobs or apartments in the city, these women headed to skid road where they became tangled in a life of poverty, alcohol, drugs, and men; Williams implied that once in this life it was difficult, if not impossible to escape. He stated, “Soon the girls lose their desire for normal employment and the Skid Road becomes a one-way road.”⁹⁴ Clearly concerned for the well-being of these women, Williams claimed that of approximately 150 Native women who had followed this path downtown, “a good percentage of them are being used by men for their own profits.”⁹⁵ He said these men treated these women as “commodities for gain” rather than as human beings.⁹⁶ Through these comments Williams did something significant: by drawing attention to the societal factors that led many of these women to be on the streets in the first place, and to the johns who abused them once they were there, he deliberately and explicitly shifted blame away from the women. Williams wanted others to recognize that poor living conditions, poverty, alcoholism, and prostitution could not be understood in isolation from the seedy combination of racism, sexism, and colonialism.

Thus, although Williams endorsed the mayor’s proposal to tackle alcoholism and poor living conditions on skid road, he was adamant that more had to be done. Williams explained his reason: “We [the Brotherhood] are always hearing complaints from fine Indian girls that they’ve been approached by men on the street who think all Indians are the same.”⁹⁷ Concerned that all Aboriginal women, regardless of their vocation or their address, were “looked upon as candidates for prostitution,” Williams argued that what was required was a police crackdown on men who

public servants and politicians act because a story in the newspaper told the whole world something was seriously wrong.” Holt, *Memoirs of a Loose Cannon*, ed. George Down, (Hamilton, Ontario: Seraphim Editions, 2008), p. 243.

⁹³ “Used for Profit, Says Williams: Police War on ‘Sale’ of Indian Girls Urged,” *Vancouver Sun*, 14 January 1963, p. 25.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

“sell” Indian girls on Vancouver’s Skid Road.”⁹⁸ He feared that without police action the situation of skid road “girls” would “cast a shadow on the 400 to 500 young Indians living normal lives on the Lower Mainland.”⁹⁹ These young people, he wrote, “are capable, ambitious and working to goals through education or in the business world – they are just like any other Canadians. Yet the inevitable often happens.”¹⁰⁰ Williams’ concerns indicate that the long-standing stereotype about indigenous female sexual promiscuity had maintained its powerful hold, often with disastrous consequences. Because of a mix of circumstances, many Aboriginal women did sell their bodies on Vancouver’s skid road, but because of their race, many others faced a reflexive stigmatization. This stigma would be reflected by the press, the police, the courts, and by the men who continued to rape, beat, and murder these women.

“Just another cut and bruised Indian girl”

In early May 1964, Vancouver’s skid road “claimed the life of yet another young Indian girl.”¹⁰¹ Myrtle Rose Joe, age twenty-two, “died during the weekend after trudging through a weary life that ended in a dirty skid road hotel.”¹⁰² The press depicted Joe’s life as a tragic tale, informing readers that she left the reserve with her fiancé, but shortly afterwards he abandoned her and their baby in Vancouver. Readers were told that Joe then “drifted to Skid Road and into the life which has killed many other Indian girls.”¹⁰³ The Children’s Aid Society took her son, but as *Vancouver Sun* journalist Moira Farrow claimed, Joe “was too well established in the Skid Road way of life to change,” and “[s]he plunged deeper into the dismal routine of too much drinking and too little eating.”¹⁰⁴ Her male companion thought that Joe was unwell and took her to the hospital. The doctor informed Joe that there was nothing physically wrong with her but

⁹⁸ “Used for Profit, Says Williams: Police War on ‘Sale’ of Indian Girls Urged,” *Vancouver Sun*, 14 January 1963, p. 25.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ “Another victim: Skid Road claims Indian girl, 22,” *Province*, 4 May 1964, p. 1.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Moira Farrow, “5-Year Skid Road Journey Fatal for Onetime Heroine,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 May 1964, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

advised her to stop drinking and to eat more. Two weeks later, Joe's companion found her lying unconscious in their hotel bed. She was rushed to the Vancouver General Hospital but this time did not make it home.¹⁰⁵ The autopsy determined her cause of death to be aspirated stomach contents and acute pancreatitis.¹⁰⁶

Five months later, police found the body of twenty-two-year-old Yvonne Florence Williams – partly clothed with a bruised face – lying on a bed in a Water Street hotel.¹⁰⁷ Stan Shillington, a reporter for the *Vancouver Sun*, called Williams the “[l]atest victim of the sordid alcohol dominated existence,” and described her “tragic ending” as “inevitable.”¹⁰⁸ Shillington's report demonstrates that the deaths of Aboriginal women on Vancouver's skid road increasingly were being normalized. He wrote, “Vancouver's Skid Road has become the final home for scores of other Indian women who seek out liquor and sell themselves to men in order to obtain it.”¹⁰⁹ To position Williams within this group, Shillington reported that since she was nineteen years old, she had been convicted on alcohol and vagrancy charges numerous times in Edmonton, Calgary, and most recently, in Vancouver.¹¹⁰ This common characterization of Aboriginal women likely influenced the police response to many suspicious deaths, including Williams'. For example, after the return of Williams' autopsy report, which indicated that she too had died from aspirated stomach contents and liver failure, the police released the thirty-year-old logger who had rented the hotel room mere hours before her body was found there. No inquest was scheduled. No murder or manslaughter charges were laid. Yvonne Williams was cast as a “common prostitute” – a drunk, Indian prostitute – and therefore, her death in a sordid East End hotel room was deemed foreseeable, expected, even ordinary.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Moira Farrow, “5-Year Skid Road Journey Fatal for Onetime Heroine,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 May 1964, p. 9; “Another victim: Skid Road claims Indian girl, 22,” *Province*, 4 May 1964, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Moira Farrow, “5-Year Skid Road Journey Fatal for Onetime Heroine,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 May 1964, p. 9

¹⁰⁷ Stan Shillington, “Another Indian Tragedy: Yvonne Slides Skids to Death,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 October 1964, p. 2; “Pretty Indian girl: Death probe draws blank,” *Province*, 9 October 1964, p. 23.

¹⁰⁸ Stan Shillington, “Another Indian Tragedy: Yvonne Slides Skids to Death,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 October 1964, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*; “Pretty Indian girl: Death probe draws blank,” *Province*, 9 October 1964, p. 23.

A reporter for the *Province*, however, was suspicious. Williams was the tenth Aboriginal woman to die in the area in the last three years, and charges had not been laid in any of these cases. A police representative told this reporter “in most cases the Indian women just faded away through malnutrition, liquor, narcotics, and disease.”¹¹² But what about those face bruises? What about that logger? One month later, an eleventh woman was added to the recent death toll. On November 10, 1964, twenty-year-old Annette McGee was dumped from a car. Once again, Stan Shillington described her story as “familiar”: “the innocent Indian girl drawn by the glamour of the big city only to find sordid death” through a life of drinking, drugs, prostitution, and jail.¹¹³ Her autopsy report stated that she had died from a narcotics overdose.¹¹⁴ That no one seemed to care that a woman was thrown from a car like a sack of garbage underscores how Aboriginal women were bestowed little humanity. When Marion Billy died in 1959, also after being tossed from a car, her death was recorded as liver failure. But at that time, however, coroner Glen McDonald called attention to the violent nature of what had happened to Billy, and promised that an investigation would continue regardless of the “official” cause of her death.¹¹⁵

So what had happened in the intervening five years? As women continued to suffer beatings and continued to die, as this violence continued unremittingly, did the police, the hospitals, the coroner, and the public become more complacent? Had Rose Joe, Yvonne Williams, and Annette McGee become fixed in the public imagination as “just another” dead Indian prostitute, with nothing to be done and no point in placing blame? Simma Holt seemed to think so, and implicated the police in supporting this system of violence. She wrote that one time Irene James had “laid a complaint with police against her blond, blue-eyed attacker,” but nothing ever came of

¹¹² “Pretty Indian girl: Death probe draws blank,” *Province*, 9 October 1964, p. 23.

¹¹³ Stan Shillington, “Where were you going, little one? Bubble of City Glamor Burst in Bundle of Death,” *Vancouver Sun*, 10 November 1964, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* For additional examples of similar institutionalized racism, see Constance Backhouse, *Carnal Crimes: Sexual Assault Law in Canada, 1900-1975*, pp. 244-262. Backhouse argues that press, physician and autopsy reports used in the trial of the sexual assault and murder of Rose Roper in 1967 seemed to be designed to exonerate the three white male accused.

¹¹⁵ Tom Hazlitt, “Skid road ‘killed my girls,’” *Province*, 31 January 1959, p. 21.

it.¹¹⁶ At the root of this non-responsiveness, Holt implied, was a particular attitude about Native women: “Irene was drunk, just another cut and bruised Indian girl, and nobody took much interest in the complaint.”¹¹⁷ In 1966, a discussion group at a conference of the Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada raised this same issue.¹¹⁸ The group reported that Native women were hesitant to file complaints with the police because they believed police officers and the courts would not “back them up.”¹¹⁹ According to the discussion group, these women felt that the law and the justice system were not made for their protection.¹²⁰

Their distrust of the criminal justice system was not without substance. Joan Sangster notes that when they moved to cities, Native women were often unable to escape the stigma about their sexuality. “The long-standing European view of Aboriginal women in a ‘dialectic of denigration and desire,’ as sexually licentious and in need of ‘conquest,’” Sangster writes, “meant they were the special mark of regulation by police and the courts.”¹²¹ There is evidence of such over-regulation taking place in Vancouver. In 1945, city magistrate Mackenzie Matheson informed the Vancouver Board of Police Commissioners that Native women were “flocking” to the city, appearing in increasing numbers before him in Police Court on charges of intoxication and prostitution.¹²² “The situation is bad,” Matheson claimed: “I have two or three women up before me every morning. All the Indian prostitutes in the country seem to be gathering here.”¹²³ Matheson told the Police Commission that young women of seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen “are just lying in wait for the men coming home from overseas who don’t know what to do with

¹¹⁶ Simma Holt, “Irene Goes Home – In a Coffin,” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 January 1963, pp. 1-2.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ “Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada, Conference on Concerns of Indians in British Columbia – Theme: “Equal Opportunity in Our Land,” Hotel Vancouver, Vancouver, B.C. December 2-4, 1966,” Sponsored by British Columbia Interim Committee of the Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada (Housed at University of British Columbia Libraries). The Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada was a national voluntary organization composed of Native and non-Native people. The organization’s goal was to promote understanding of indigenous peoples and to educate Canadians about poverty on the reserves. The IEA worked on fundraising, workshops, and community and economic development. (Hugh Shewell, “Bitterness Behind Every Smiling Face: Community Development and Canada’s First Nations, 1954-1968,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 83, no. 1 (2002): 58-84.)

¹¹⁹ “Indian-Eskimo Association of Canada, Conference on Concerns of Indians in British Columbia,” pp. 24-25.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*, p. 188.

¹²² “City May Get Indian Police,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, 11 August 1945, p. 15.

¹²³ “Indian Cops May Check ‘Firewater,’” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 August 1945, p. 15.

their money.”¹²⁴ Matheson’s comments reveal that the police and the courts viewed Native women coming to the city as prostitutes, or else, potential prostitutes, and suggest that they placed these women under heavy surveillance.¹²⁵

By the 1960s this police attitude shifted more toward what might be called a discourse of caring. Officers began to claim that when they arrested Native women it was “mainly for their own protection.”¹²⁶ In her 1966 Master of Social Work thesis about women in Vancouver’s justice system, Aileen Sien noted that policewomen with the Vancouver City Police said that they often arrested intoxicated women in order to protect them. According to Sien, policewomen claimed that “if they did not literally lift women off the street, there would be many more deaths on Skid Row.”¹²⁷ Yet even within this new discourse, remnants of the older sentiment lingered. In 1963 when Guy Williams asked the police to do something about the “trafficking” of “Indian girls” in the city, the police responded by denying Williams’ allegations; Police Chief Ralph Booth reportedly stated that the police “have no evidence of any traffic in Indian girls on Vancouver’s Skid Road.”¹²⁸ Morality officers said “in the case of most Indian girls they were living with various men and moving from room to room with anybody who would provide them with liquor and a roof over their heads.”¹²⁹ This description of Aboriginal women fits within a history of police categorizing sexually deviant girls and women as “promiscuous pick-ups.” This was a term used during the postwar period to refer to women who had sexual relations with men

¹²⁴ City May Get Indian Police,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, 11 August 1945, p. 15; and “Indian Cops May Check ‘Firewater,’” *Vancouver Sun*, 11 August 1945, p. 15.

¹²⁵ For examples of parallel police sentiment and anxiety in Ontario during the 1940s, see Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*, p. 187.

¹²⁶ “No Evidence Girls ‘Sold,’ Says Booth,” *Vancouver Sun*, 15 January 1963, p. 19. See also, “City welfare committee to study girls’ plight,” *Province*, 16 January 1963, p. 3.

¹²⁷ Sien, “The Administration of Justice in the Greater Vancouver Area: The Female Offender,” Master of Social Work Thesis, The University of British Columbia, 1966, p. 72. This shift in language may have been due in part to a growing presence of women on the police force. This police discourse of caring, where the incarceration of Native girls was carried out under the rhetoric of protection, was also common in Ontario from the late 1940s onwards. (See Joan Sangster, “Criminalizing the Colonized,” p. 44, and Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*, pp. 122-123.)

¹²⁸ “No Evidence Girls ‘Sold,’ Says Booth,” *Vancouver Sun*, 15 January 1963, p. 19.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

in exchange for lodging, food, alcohol, clothing, or entertainment in lieu of money.¹³⁰ Thus, this comment by morality officers indicates that, at least on some level, the police continued to subscribe to the stereotype of Native female sexual promiscuity, and suggests that officers may have been complacent when dealing with complaints of abuse and with cases of suspicious death.¹³¹

But even if the police and the courts did not take violence against Aboriginal women seriously, other citizens in Vancouver did. Indeed, the public discussion about Native women “drifting” to and dying on skid road was not entirely fatalistic; although presented in a linear fashion, its underlying message was that this story could be interrupted and arrested. It aimed to convey the idea that with the status quo the result is death, but, and more to the point, that the status quo could and needed to be changed. Guy Williams’ demand in 1963 for police action against violent johns, however, was not the main course of action advocated by others. The seeming consensus among concerned individuals was that since what was at hand was a matter of life and death, “stopgap” relief needed to take precedent over long-term solutions.¹³² Most thought that rather than directly targeting the criminals, or challenging racist and sexist attitudes, the most viable way to assist Aboriginal women would be to do something that might get and keep them off the streets. The measures subsequently implemented to achieve this goal

¹³⁰ The idea of “the promiscuous pick-up” was regularly used in police and public health discourses surrounding anti-venereal disease campaigns to justify the over-regulation and policing of women. (See D.O. Anderson, D.O., “A Sociological Analysis of the Venereal Disease Repeater-Patient,” Graduation thesis, Faculty of Medicine, The University of British Columbia, 1954. Douglas Alastair Peyman, “Some Factors Involved in the Spread of Venereal Disease,” Master of Arts thesis, Department of Philosophy and Psychology, The University of British Columbia, 1946; Enid Stewart Wyness, “A Social Work Approach to the Venereal Disease Problem in British Columbia: An Analysis of the Social Problems involved in Controlling the Infected Individual, with particular reference to Recidivism at the Vancouver Clinic, Division of Venereal Disease Control, British Columbia,” Master of Social Work thesis, School of Social Work, The University of British Columbia, 1950; Arnie Myers, “An Examination of the Venereal Disease Epidemic in British Columbia,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 1965, (Reprinting of a series of articles at the request of the Provincial Health Branch.); and British Columbia, Provincial Board of Health, Division of Venereal Disease Control, *Annual Reports (1940–1956)*, Victoria, B.C.

¹³¹ Although more research would need to be conducted in order to substantiate this possibility, both Sherene Razack and Constance Backhouse document how racialized and sexualized violence toward Aboriginal women was sustained or normalized in the Canadian criminal justice system. See Backhouse’s account of the trial in the 1967 murder of Rose Roper (*Carnal Crimes*) and Razack’s account of the trial in the 1995 murder of Pamela George (“Gendered Violence and Spacialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George”).

¹³² “Action on an Indian reception centre...,” *Province*, 2 February 1963, p. 4.

demonstrate that many in the city were concerned about these women and wanted to alleviate this crisis. But as “stopgap” measures, however, their efforts would prove to be insufficient.

An Indian Centre for Vancouver

One “solution” often suggested by both non-indigenous and indigenous people to change this situation was to send Native women “back where they came from originally,” exposing a belief that Aboriginal people did not “belong” in the city.¹³³ Several Native leaders, concerned citizens, and local organizations, however, disagreed with this view, and recommended instead the establishment of an Indian Social Centre. These individuals recognized that options on reserves were limited, and that the attraction to the city was often a response to overcrowding, poverty, and unemployment in reserve communities. After Irene James’ death, one man pointed out this reality. He decried, “Mayor Rathie says “Send them back to where they came from.” Send them back to what? Mayor Rathie could start now by getting an Indian centre in Vancouver.”¹³⁴ A social centre, it was suggested, by introducing Aboriginal people to available city resources, assisting them with finding employment and housing, and helping them meet other people, would ease their transition to the city and prevent them from heading downtown.¹³⁵

¹³³ For example, Police Chief Ralph Booth said “We are concerned with the squalor...But these people (Indian girls) get into trouble and end up in the hands of police. Once they are dealt with they are turned loose again in the city. They should be taken back where they came from originally” (“Rathie acts to save Indian girls,” *Province*, 11 January 1963, p. 1). Native individuals also expressed this sentiment. In a 1943 letter to the editor, the author, signed only as “Canadian Indian,” suggested that the Indian Department needed to send “home” the young Native women “roaming the streets in the East End” (“Indian Girls,” *Vancouver Sun*, 19 October 1943, p. 4). In 1969, Chief Clarence Joe of Sechelt told a Vancouver court where his 28-year old daughter Iris Mayer was being tried on the charge of heroin possession that he wanted to bring her “back to the reservation where she belongs.” He claimed that in the city she became involved with people “who led her astray.” Joe supposedly said, “I can’t see any future for this girl living here in this place. It’s better that she return to the place from which she came – the reservation. That is the only solution I can see. And I’m not only speaking for my daughter.” (“Only misery in white man’s city,” *Province*, 17 January 1969, p. 34. See also “Indian woman ‘prey to white man’s world,’” *Province*, 4 February 1969, p. 17.)

¹³⁴ “Percy Andy Paull, ‘Result? Only a Handshake,’” *Vancouver Sun*, 15 January 1963, p. 4.

¹³⁵ “Hostel For Girls,” *Native Voice*, March 1948, p. 8; Ruth Smith, “Appendix II: Need for a Girls’ Hostel in Vancouver,” in *Report of Conference on Native Indian Affairs at Acadia Camp, University of British Columbia, Vancouver B.C., April 1, 2, and 3, 1948, Sponsored by the B.C. Indian Arts and Welfare Society, Provincial Museum, Victoria, B.C., Conference Chairman and Editor, Dr. H.B. Hawthorn.*; Members of the B.C. Indian Arts and Welfare; “Report to the Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area: Committee on The Canadian Indian in an Urban Community”; “Study of Problems of Canadian Indians in Urban Communities,” Social Planning Section, Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area, February 1962; “Indians lost in ‘jungle’ of city need guidance,” *Province*, February 28, 1962, p. 3; “Indians in City ‘Lost in Asphalt Jungle’: Chest Report Urges Social

The idea for such a guidance and recreation facility had been in the works since the late-1940s, but sustained public and municipal attention toward creating it did not occur until the early 1960s, especially after the death of Irene James. Yet despite this new attention, the establishment of the Vancouver Indian Centre was plagued by a scarcity of finances and by indecision over where it should be located.¹³⁶ In August 1963, Alfred Scow, the new president of the Indian Centre Society, expressed concern about the continual delay in the opening of the centre, and in an effort to overcome these hold-ups, reiterated the main objective behind the idea of an Indian centre – “preventing repetition of the Irene James tragedy.”¹³⁷ Yet, unfortunately, as the Centre struggled to get off the ground, this would not be the case. In October 1963, ten months after the death of Irene James, another Native woman’s death made the headlines. Frances Chow, age thirty-two, died on Saturday, October 26, 1963 after being released from jail on an alcohol charge. As they had done with the death of Irene James, Simma Holt and Glen McDonald brought Chow’s story to the public’s attention. This time, though, seemingly fed up with the continuing lack of substantive action, McDonald tried a new approach. On October 31, 1963

Centre to Save them from Skidroad Fate,” *Vancouver Sun*, February 28, 1962, p. 50; “New Agency Urged for City Indians,” *Vancouver Sun*, September 8, 1962, p. 7; Cliff MacKay, “Alderman Urges City Indian Centre: Integration Problems Claimed Mushrooming, Festering,” *Vancouver Sun*, 22 September 1962, p. 7; “City council to discuss plan for Indian centre,” *Province*, September 24, 1962, p. 2; “Aldermen praise alderman,” *Province*, September 27, 1962, p. 23; “Alderman’s proposal: Indian Centre plan hailed,” *Province*, September 28, 1962, p. 47; “Social Centre Proposed to Save Skid Road Girls: Concern Mounts Over Alcoholism Death Toll,” *Vancouver Sun*, January 12, 1963, p. 21; “Only Half the Job,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 January 1963, p. 4; Percy Andy Paull, “Result? Only a Handshake,” *Vancouver Sun*, 15 January 1963, p. 4; “Indian Centre on way,” *Province*, 30 January 1963, p. 3; “Mayor offers house for new Indian centre,” *Province*, 31 January 1963, p. 17; “Action on an Indian reception centre...,” *Province*, 2 February 1963, p. 4; “Social centre for Indians,” *Province*, February 6, 1963, p. 17.

¹³⁶ “Mayor offers house for new Indian centre,” *Province*, 31 January 1963, p. 17; “Action on an Indian reception centre...,” *Province*, 2 February 1963, p. 4; “Social centre for Indians,” *Province*, 6 February 1963, p. 17; “Indian Centre Set for Spring,” *Vancouver Sun*, 7 February 1963, p. 29; “Indian house backed,” *Province*, 26 March 1963, p. 5; “Indian Centre Aid Possible,” *Vancouver Sun*, 26 March 1963, p. 9; “2 meetings to study Indian Social Centre,” *Vancouver Sun*, 28 March 1963, p. 35; “2 sites Studied for Indian Centre,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 July 1963, p. 29; “Sites Studied for Indian Centre,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 July 1963, p. 29; “Aid promised: Indian centre by fall,” *Province*, 5 July 1963, p. 6; “Indian society formed to solve city problem,” *Province*, 13 August 1963, p. 6; Ruth Pinkus, “Another tragedy – still no Indian refuge from skidroad,” *Province*, 1 November 1963, p. 41.

¹³⁷ “Indian society formed to solve city problem,” *Province*, 13 August 1963, p. 6. Scow was the first Aboriginal person to graduate from law school in British Columbia. In 1965 he became the City Prosecutor for New Westminster, and from 1971 to 1994 served as a judge for the B.C. Provincial Court. He has been recognized for his active community service through several awards and honours, including Aboriginal Achievement Awards, an Honorary Doctor of Laws from the University of British Columbia, the Order of British Columbia, and the Order of Canada (“Alfred Scow,” *The Scow Institute*, <http://www.scowinstitute.ca/aboutalfred.html> (Accessed 29 August 2009)).

Vancouverites woke up to the news, “Cost of a Skid Road Tragedy Multiplied to \$1.2 Million.”¹³⁸

Simma Holt reported:

The tragedy of Indian women dying on Vancouver’s Skid Road was brought down to simple arithmetic Wednesday by Coroner Glen McDonald.

He estimated that the cost to taxpayers over the past six years – the cost of allowing Indian women to degenerate and die – was \$1.2 million.

This was the cost of arresting them, bringing them before the courts, and imprisoning them. This was the cost of the ponderous and futile legal cycle that continues until they die.

McDonald did his simple arithmetic Wednesday at the inquest of yet another woman who had staggered along the treadmill to death on Skid Road.¹³⁹

Since previous appeals to humanity had not been effective, McDonald appealed here to something that he thought people in the city might care more about – money. He stated, “Let us bring this life of Frances Chow down to cold dollars and cents...Let’s take the figures involved – the cost to the taxpayer – with no emotion, no Christian endeavor, no sociological implication.”¹⁴⁰ McDonald calculated that thirty-two percent of women arrested for intoxication in the previous year were Native, “although Indians constitute only one per cent of the city’s total women’s population.”¹⁴¹ Based upon Chow’s thirty-two arrests in the previous six years, McDonald argued that “if Frances Chow’s case was typical of the 507 Indian women who came to court on drunk charges last year – and in his opinion, it was typical – then each woman cost taxpayers \$2, 543 over the past six years.”¹⁴² Using these calculations McDonald reduced the deaths of Aboriginal women in the city to a crass dollar sign.

Holt, on the other hand, took a more sensitive approach in reporting Chow’s story, albeit only slightly. She told her readers that shortly after Chow’s move to Vancouver her husband left her, and she subsequently “drifted into Skid Road along the same path taken by 500 of the 1,000

¹³⁸ Simma Holt, “Cost of a Skid Road Tragedy Multiplied to \$1.2 Million,” *Vancouver Sun*, 31 October 1963, p. 1-2.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

Indian women who live in Vancouver.”¹⁴³ Holt wrote that Chow did not seek out help from social welfare or church organizations; instead, she claimed, Chow “sought out a man with a bottle, and, in exchange for his liquor and bed, but rarely for any food, she gave him her body. She lived as her 500 counterparts did, from day to day, depending upon the men who gave them liquor, and who beat and abused them.”¹⁴⁴ These lines, although likely designed to generate sympathy and understanding, typecast Native women, and, like McDonald’s financial calculation, may simultaneously have hardened the stereotype of the drunken Indian prostitute.

Yet even as she removed Chow’s individuality and portrayed her in this negative light, Holt took care to emphasize her humanity. In a very powerful statement, Holt drew attention to the abhorrent conditions of apathy and complacency ongoing in the city. Describing the scene at the inquest into Chow’s death, Holt wrote:

There were few people present when the final chapter was written at her inquest Wednesday. There were the coroner, the pathologist, three police witnesses, the jury, three Indian women, and – at the coroner’s request – Ald. Marianne Linnell. The press table was empty except for one reporter.

It was as though the dead woman had no right to public compassion.¹⁴⁵

Holt depicted this scene to illustrate a larger problem: general public indifference to the unnecessary loss of life, particularly when those lost lives were Aboriginal women who lived and died on the societal and geographical fringes of the city.

Indifference and apathy, however, remained a common response to these deaths. As in the inquest into Irene James’ death, the coroner’s jury in Chow’s death recommended co-operation between the federal, provincial, and municipal governments to devise an alternative to life on skid road. But rather than taking this advice, officials from the different governments passed blame and responsibility onto the others. F.A. Clark, the regional superintendent of the Indian Affairs branch of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, said that although the federal

¹⁴³ Simma Holt, “Cost of a Skid Road Tragedy Multiplied to \$1.2 Million,” *Vancouver Sun*, 31 October 1963, p. 1-2.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

government would be willing to assist civic officials in this matter, his department had no jurisdiction over Native people who had lived off reserve for more than one year.¹⁴⁶ Provincial authorities made a similar claim, and argued that the difficulties faced by Aboriginal people on skid road was a city problem outside provincial jurisdiction. Rod McInnes, the Director of the Provincial Indian Advisory Board made his stance clear: “We are not at all involved with the welfare of Indians living in Vancouver. It’s a civic problem.”¹⁴⁷ In response, Mayor Rathie said that he hoped city councilors would take more responsibility, in particular by approving financing for the Indian Center. Rathie argued, though, that, “it was unreasonable to expect the city to foot the bill for Indians coming here from all parts of the province.”¹⁴⁸ He stipulated that the provincial and federal officers must also step up: “It’s too easy for them to wash their hands of the problem,” Rathie declared, and stressed that the higher governments must hold “partial responsibility.”¹⁴⁹ The city’s welfare administrator agreed, and said that although a program to assist Native women with accommodation, education, and vocational training was necessary, claimed, it “would be hugely expensive, and I don’t know where the money would come from.”¹⁵⁰ This debate sharply exposed what the governments deemed important and therefore worthy of financial investment, and conversely, what they deemed expendable. Government officials recognized that something needed to be done, but no one wanted to assume responsibility, financial or otherwise.

The question loomed large: how many Native women would have to die on skid road before real action was taken? Frustrated with this continuing (non)-response, journalist Ruth Pinkus posed this very question. She lamented, “There was a great fuss at the time [of Irene James’ death]. Newspapers said something should be done. Mayor Rathie said something would be

¹⁴⁶ “Indians’ Plight Blamed on City: Reaction Follows Inquest Into Death of Frances Chow,” *Vancouver Sun*, 1 November 1963, p. 17.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ “Rathie Disclaims Onus for Indians: Says Senior Governments Have Part Skid Road Responsibility,” *Vancouver Sun*, 4 November 1963, p. 13.

¹⁵⁰ Ruth Pinkus quoting T.T. Hill, “Big ‘ifs’ could save Indian women,” *Province*, 2 November 1963, p. 3.

done. Welfare Minister Black said he would help. What happened could be considered an object lesson in how great is the gap between talking and doing.”¹⁵¹ And what happened was “another tragedy” on skid road – the death of Frances Chow – while the Indian Center remained in limbo and government officials deflected responsibility.

Thus, still without enough money to cover the first year budget, the Board of the Indian Center Society realized that they could wait no longer. In October 1963, they decided that they had no choice but to rent a house, staff it themselves, and, in the meantime, hope that someone would provide the needed funds.¹⁵² Soon thereafter the Society’s appeal for financial assistance from city council came through and they finally decided upon a location.¹⁵³ On December 1, 1963, the Indian Centre Society took occupancy of a house in the Fairview district and immediately began operations. The Vancouver Indian Centre would serve as both a social and recreation facility, as well as a referral agency for housing, employment, education, counseling, medical, and legal advice. A year and a half after opening, Alfred Scow remarked on its success, noting that over 4000 individuals had used the facility since it opened.¹⁵⁴ But while the new Vancouver Indian Centre surely kept many of these visitors from skid road, it would not, unfortunately, be enough to halt the trend. As the decade progressed and the death toll continued to rise, it became apparent to many that the Indian Centre alone could not arrest the system of poverty, assault, and death on skid road: people saw that something more was needed.

¹⁵¹ Ruth Pinkus, “Another tragedy – still no Indian refuge from skidroad,” *Province*, 1 November 1963, p. 41.

¹⁵² *Ibid*; and “Indian Centre Provided in City: Director Will Act as Adviser, Job Counsellor,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 November 1963, p. 29.

¹⁵³ The Society eventually received funding from the civic, provincial, and federal governments. “Indian Centre opening set,” *Province*, 16 November 1963, p. 3; “Indian Centre Provided in City: Director Will Act as Adviser, Job Counsellor,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 November 1963, p 29; “First Annual Meeting of the Vancouver Indian Centre Society held at 1200 West Broadway, Vancouver, B.C., June 8th, 1964,” Rare Books and Special Collections, UBC Library, SPAM 3820.

¹⁵⁴ The majority of these visitors came from British Columbia, but many also came from other Canadian provinces and from the United States. “Second Annual Meeting of the Vancouver Indian Center Society held at Oakridge Auditorium June 12th, 1965,” Rare Books & Special Collections and University Archives, The University of British Columbia. SPAM 3821.

Hostels for Aboriginal Women: the Enduring Need of Private Social Services

An abandoned Indian baby was plucked out of danger during a mad-drunken party in a Skidroad hotel this week.

The day before, the body of a woman – mother of seven – had been taken to the morgue. It was found in a hotel alley, a week after death.

Last week a bruised and bleeding girl poured out the story of a \$50 prostitution fee that was promised her. When she later asked for it, she was kicked down the stairs of a hotel.

Their stories all found their way – some too late – to Mrs. May Gutteridge, a church social worker.¹⁵⁵

These lines were written in 1964 by journalist Kay Kelly in her effort to help May Gutteridge gain support to open a hostel for Aboriginal women on skid road. The idea of establishing such a hostel for Native women, however, was not new. In 1948, Ruth Smith, a Coast Salish woman living in Vancouver, and the editor of *The Native Voice*, expressed the need to open a hostel for young Native women in Vancouver.¹⁵⁶ This need, Smith wrote, had been recognized for years. Smith said that although Native boys faced difficulties adjusting to city life, the difficulties faced by girls were more severe. Smith declared, “The way may be no easier for a boy, but our girls require more protection.”¹⁵⁷ Expressing her concern, she wrote, “Young girls arrive here as strangers, live in the cheaper hotels and consequences follow, not because they are bad Indian girls, but because so often they are young and lonely Indian girls.”¹⁵⁸ Smith did not specify what these “consequences” were, or precisely what it was the girls required protection from, but her readers likely knew exactly to what she was referring. In a letter appended to the report of the 1948 Conference on Native Indian Affairs, Smith expanded upon the reason for her concern. In this letter Smith explained the need for a hostel:

The policewomen have gone beyond the call of duty over and over again to help. The descriptive words of one, “These frightened girls who’ve never had a chance,” tells a story. The need is so great that something concrete must be done. The doctor here waits in every week and he does not wait in vain. Our girls are brought in with broken arms

¹⁵⁵ Kay Kelly, “Skidroad – someone cared,” *Vancouver Times*, 19 September 1964, p. 8.

¹⁵⁶ *The Native Voice* was a monthly paper produced by the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia. Smith was the editor in 1947 and 1948. “Hostel for Girls,” *Native Voice*, March 1948, p. 8; Ruth Smith, “Appendix II: Need for a Girls’ Hostel in Vancouver,” p. 6.

¹⁵⁷ Ruth Smith, “Appendix II: Need for a Girls’ Hostel in Vancouver.”

¹⁵⁸ “Hostel for Girls,” *Native Voice*, March 1948, p. 8.

and broken legs. This is only part of the picture. These things are so and it is useless placing the blame.

A hostel would help.¹⁵⁹

A sense of urgency marked Smith's remarks. If broken bodies were "only part of the picture," what else was painted on this tableau? Given the severity of the situation, rather than trying to locate blame, Smith's concern was with achieving immediate, even if only short-term results. She thought that a girls' hostel might achieve this goal. A hostel, Smith explained, "is just part of an answer, but its worth is great."¹⁶⁰

Smith's desire to help, however, was not enough: sixteen years later, another concerned woman, May Gutteridge, was still trying to make a Native women's hostel a reality. A parishioner at St. James Anglican Church, located at the corner of Gore and Cordova Street, Gutteridge worked extensively with the men and women living on skid road.¹⁶¹ Her social service work in the neighbourhood began in 1961 when she helped to establish the St. James Social Services Society.¹⁶² Three years later, Anglican Bishop Godfrey Gower asked her to assist Native women facing court charges; it was through this work that Gutteridge began to recognize the critical need for a hostel for Aboriginal women in Vancouver.¹⁶³

Her assistance, though, was not limited to women in trouble with the law. Operating out of the church's basement office, Gutteridge listened to the stories of many Aboriginal women. She told reporter Kay Kelly about a twenty-four-year-old Native woman who had come to Vancouver to find work. This young woman was unable to find a job, and was refused accommodation in

¹⁵⁹ Ruth Smith, "Appendix II: Need for a Girls' Hostel in Vancouver."

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Gutteridge immigrated to Canada from England in the 1950s, and moved to Vancouver in 1958. In addition to several additional honours and accolades for her service in the downtown eastside, Gutteridge was awarded the Order of Canada in 1981, and an honorary degree from Simon Fraser University in 1987. (F-59 East Enders Society fonds, "Finding Aid". Simon Fraser University Archives and Records Management Department Online Finding Aids, <http://www.sfu.ca/archives2/F-59/F-59.html>, accessed 1 May 2009; "Obituary: May C. Gutteridge, March 01, 2002," The Anglican Church of Canada, <http://news.anglican.ca/news/stories/1027>, accessed 1 May 2009.

¹⁶² This Society initially was designed as a non-profit club to aid old-age pensioners.

¹⁶³ F-59 East Enders Society fonds, "Finding Aid". Simon Fraser University Archives and Records Management Department Online Finding Aids, <http://www.sfu.ca/archives2/F-59/F-59.html>, accessed 1 May 2009; "Obituary: May C. Gutteridge, March 01, 2002," The Anglican Church of Canada, <http://news.anglican.ca/news/stories/1027>, accessed 1 May 2009.

the West End. Where did she go? To skid road where, within the next twenty-four hours, she was “badly beaten.”¹⁶⁴ She found her way to St. James where Gutteridge provided her with money to return to her reserve. Kelly wrote that this woman “was one of the lucky ones. She got out before she was dragged down. Had she stayed she may have become a prostitute, a drug addict, a drunkard. Or a corpse.”¹⁶⁵ This pattern was one with which Gutteridge was all too familiar. In November 1964 she had tried to help young Annette McGee. When McGee was released from jail on vagrancy charges, Gutteridge provided her with a bus ticket back to her reserve in Powell along with a few clothes, toys for her daughter, and some spending money. McGee, however, wanted to stay in the city, and as soon as her bus had pulled out of Gutteridge’s view McGee asked the driver to stop and she got off. “Mrs. Gutteridge next saw her Monday in the city morgue,” wrote *Vancouver Sun* reporter Stan Shillington.¹⁶⁶

Gutteridge, however, did not give up. Seeing these women’s troubles firsthand, seeing poverty, prostitution, violence, and racial discrimination as the norm, Gutteridge became determined to open a hostel for Native women in the downtown eastside. There were other women’s hostels in the city, but, as Gutteridge decried, these were “all proper home-away-from-home places for girls who come to town to further their education or work. For the down-and-out there is nothing!”¹⁶⁷ Gutteridge criticized the conditions of the hotels where these women often lived as “deplorable,” and condemned their owners, arguing that they should have their licenses suspended.¹⁶⁸ These buildings were decrepit, but Gutteridge was not referring solely to their material condition: as she informed city council, “many [Native] women report that the (hotel) manager will send a man to their room without their permission.”¹⁶⁹ Tired of having to tell

¹⁶⁴ Kay Kelly, “Skidroad – someone cared,” *Vancouver Times*, 19 September 1964, p. 8.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Stan Shillington, “Where were you going little one? Bubble of City Glamor Burst in Bundle of Death,” *Vancouver Sun*, 10 November 1964, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ Kay Kelly, “Skidroad – someone cared,” *Vancouver Times*, 19 September 1964, p. 8.

¹⁶⁸ “Council Goaded, Acts on Skid Road,” *Vancouver Sun*, 14 May 1965, pp. 1-2.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* In 1961, the Community Chest also drew attention to the problem of hotel owners and employees. The authors reported that although many hotels had exclusionist policies toward Aboriginal people, in many cases regardless of the hotel’s policy, “white tenants were permitted to bring Indian girls to their rooms – frequently for

women that there was no alternative to these rancid hotels and rooming houses except the streets, in June 1964, with the assistance of several other women, Gutteridge formed an organization to open a hostel for Native women.¹⁷⁰

The “East-Enders” as they called themselves, had to work tirelessly to overcome financial obstacles standing in the way of this goal. These women lobbied the city council for grant money, appealed to private citizens for donations, and began a dollar-a-month club to raise funds. Gutteridge picketed the synod when she learned that the Anglican diocese intended to allocate money to a residence for the Bishop when the hostel project was struggling to generate necessary finances. And in what must have been a constrained effort to do something immediately while still fundraising, the East Enders began a club for Native girls and women that they operated out of the basement of the St. James Church. Yet it would take close to a full year before a large donation from two anonymous United Church women allowed their main project to move forward. With this donation of \$10 000, the East Enders purchased a house at 883 East Hastings Street, and in May 1965, opened the East End Hostel for Native women.¹⁷¹

This hostel operated as a temporary home with living space to accommodate eight women; in emergencies, room was often made for more, sometimes entire families. By their six-month anniversary, the East End hostel had provided shelter for more than eighty women. Women staying at the hostel had access to the services of a social worker, a lawyer, a psychiatrist, and a psychologist, as well as the support of Margaret White who lived in the hostel full-time as a house matron.¹⁷² The East End hostel operated at its East Hastings location for five years until

purposes of prostitution. In this respect Indian girls appeared to be seen only as commodities rather than persons. At worst, this was seen only as a minor problem.” (“Report to the Community Chest and Councils of the Greater Vancouver Area Committee on: The Canadian Indian in an Urban Community (Vancouver) May 1961,” p. 64.

¹⁷⁰ Kay Kelly, “Skidroad – someone cared,” *Vancouver Times*, 19 September 1964, p. 8.

¹⁷¹ F-59 East Enders Society fonds, “Finding Aid”. Simon Fraser University Archives and Records Management Department Online Finding Aids, <http://www.sfu.ca/archives2/F-59/F-59.html>, accessed 1 May 2009; “Obituary: May C. Gutteridge, March 01, 2002,” The Anglican Church of Canada, <http://news.anglican.ca/news/stories/1027>, accessed 1 May 2009; Kay Kelly, “Skidroad – someone cared,” *Vancouver Times*, 19 September 1964, p. 8; Nikki Moir, “The door is always open at Skid Road haven,” *Province*, 19 November 1965, p. 35.

¹⁷² Although these are important services, it is necessary to consider what, if any, conditions were placed upon women staying at the hostel. Residents, for example, were not always there voluntarily; often, women who were charged with intoxication and vagrancy were given suspended sentences on the condition that they go to the East End hostel.

the house was torn down as part of an urban renewal scheme. The East Enders then moved the hostel to a new location on East Fourth Avenue where they continued to provide shelter for Aboriginal women until the mid-1970s.¹⁷³

Nevertheless, although the East Enders were able to re-locate, the fact that a house that served as a female refuge from Vancouver's poorest streets was demolished in the name of civic gentrification reflects the city's priorities during these years. The postwar period is generally thought of in tandem with the advent of the welfare state, but the reality was that as municipalities funneled their dollars into clearing dilapidated buildings to make room for luxurious skyscrapers or tourist attractions, the provision of public social services remained insufficient to meet demand. In Vancouver, as across Canada, the 'rise of the welfare state' did not mean the end of private charities and volunteer-based organizations, and it certainly did not mean the end or even the universal reduction of poverty.¹⁷⁴ Relying largely upon volunteers and donations, private and

Furthermore, according to Nikki Moir, a journalist for the *Province*, women at the hostel were expected to maintain tidy rooms, help prepare breakfast and lunch, and do dishes. While these seem like reasonable expectations, it is possible that they belie efforts at regulating or 'domesticating' these women. More research would have to be conducted on this possibility, but there is a long tradition from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries of female missionaries and field workers criticizing Aboriginal women's domestic skills and hygienic habits in order to justify involvement their lives. See for example, Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia, 1900-50*, (Vancouver: UBC, 1998); Adele Perry "Metropolitan Knowledge, Colonial Practice, and Indigenous Womanhood: Missions in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia;" Myra Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man's God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field*; Rutherdale, "'She Was a Ragged Little Thing': Missionaries, Embodiment, and Refashioning Aboriginal Womanhood in Northern Canada;" and Susan Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Missions and Tsimshian Christianity*. Similar to these nineteenth- and early-twentieth century missionaries, the female volunteers who organized and helped operate the East End hostel came largely from white, middle-class, Christian backgrounds. Assisting the East Enders in the operation of the hostel, for example, were the United Church Women, the Anglican Women's Auxiliary, the Soroptopists, the Fresco Club, and various Lions Clubs. For contrast, see Nancy Janovicek, "'Assisting our own': Urban Migration, Self-Governance, and Native Women's Organizing in Thunder Bay, Ontario, 1972-1989." Janovicek discusses the founding in the late-1970s of a similar women's shelter in Thunder Bay. Beendigen was an emergency hostel for Aboriginal women and their children fleeing violence, but unlike the East End hostel, Beendigen was operated by Anisinabeque, a chapter of the Ontario Native Women's Association. This hostel was run by Aboriginal women, based upon indigenous knowledge and values, and was designed to provide cultural support in addition to safety and shelter.

¹⁷³ F-59 East Enders Society fonds, "Finding Aid".

¹⁷⁴ This argument is elaborated in Farhni, *Household Politics*. She documents how in postwar Montreal private and public charities co-existed. Farhni documents the many ways that private agencies, voluntary associations, and the Catholic Church "remained essential in providing for needy postwar citizens" (pp. 8, 20, 45, and 62). See also, Strong-Boag, "Society in the Twentieth Century," pp. 301-303 and 308; and the essays in Judith Fingard and Janet Guildford, eds, *Mothers of the Municipality: Women, Work, and Social Policy in Post-1945 Halifax*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

religious groups continued to be the main providers of social services for the unemployed, the elderly, for Aboriginal people, and for other marginalized groups in the downtown eastside.¹⁷⁵

One service many private groups thought necessary was more safe and low-cost housing for Aboriginal people. In September 1965, coroner Glen McDonald informed attendees at a meeting sponsored by the East Enders that there were nine “accidental” deaths of Native women in 1963, “accidental” referring to death from poisoning, alcohol, drugs, and/or violence, twelve such deaths in 1964, and in the first six months of 1965, ten. McDonald told the audience that if projected to the years’ end, this most recent figure would mark an increase of 180 percent.¹⁷⁶ And the numbers did keep rising: according to the *Vancouver Sun*, a total of seventeen Native women died on skid road in 1967 alone.¹⁷⁷ In the wake of these “grim statistics” there was a growing sense that the crisis was growing not abating, and the sense of urgency to do something to “protect” these women became more, rather than less, pronounced.

¹⁷⁵ While my objective is to demonstrate the persistence of sexism, racism, and violence toward Aboriginal women in postwar Vancouver, this story also fits within the larger stories of poverty and urban renewal in 1960s Vancouver. Some of the social agencies operating in the downtown eastside in this period included: St. James Anglican Church, First United Church, Central City Mission, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities Hostel for Men, Franciscan Sisters of Atonement, Alcoholism Foundation of B.C., Alcoholics Anonymous, the YWCA, the Coqualeetza Fellowship, and the Native Indian Service Council. The Coqualeetza Fellowship was formed in the early 1950s as a branch of the alumni association of the Coqualeetza residential school. Prior to the establishment of the Vancouver Indian Centre, the Coqualeetza Fellowship provided services for Native people in Vancouver through, for example, organizing recreational and sports activities, and through providing referrals to housing and employment agencies. Similarly, the Native Indian Service Council, composed of Native and non-Native members, was founded in the mid-1950s as a collaborative effort of various religious denominations. The Council worked closely with Coqualeetza to provide services to young Aboriginal people when they arrived in the city, including directing them to available resources. In May 1965, the same month that the East End hostel opened, a coalition of these church and social agencies presented a petition to city council in which they condemned the city for neglecting to deal with the difficulties faced by people living in the downtown eastside. In June 1965, the city responded by releasing a report about the social characteristics and conditions on skidroad. This report, however, was conducted in the stated interest of urban renewal, not in the interest of relieving human suffering. The Planning Department characterized the area as physically run down and an economic burden, and admitted that their study was conceived as the “necessary prelude to the preparation of plans for physical rehabilitation and renewal” in the area. Moreover, the report’s main recommendation to help reduce “human problems and social costs” on skid road was the co-ordination of the various private agencies and organizations already operating in the neighbourhood (“Council Goaded, Acts on Skid Road,” *Vancouver Sun*, 14 May 1965, p. 1; City of Vancouver Planning Department, “Downtown – East Side: A Preliminary Study,” June 1965, housed at University of British Columbia Libraries; Hein et al, *Skid Road: Vancouver*, pp. 4-5, 8-9 and 14-15). For information on urban renewal in Vancouver during the 1960s see Dummitt, *Manly Modern*, p. 145-147; Dummitt in Ley, Hiebert and Pratt, pp. 259-261; Dummitt in *The Sixties: Passion, Politics, and Style*, pp. 89, 91; Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, p. 311; and Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), pp. 178-210. For more information on how urban renewal projects of the 1960s disproportionately affected racialized communities see, Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis William Magill, *Africville: the Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community*, (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 1999) and Kryss Verrall, “Art and Urban Renewal: MoMA’s New City Exhibition and Halifax’s Uniacke Square,” *The Sixties: Passion, Politics, and Style*, ed. Dimitry Anastakis, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008).

¹⁷⁶ Kathy Hassard, “Mortality Rate High for Skid Road Women,” *Vancouver Sun*, 10 September 1965, p. 28.

¹⁷⁷ Kathy Hassard, “Tag Day March 30: Funds Needed to Found Hostel,” *Vancouver Sun*, 15 March 1968, p. 30.

Recognizing that the Indian Centre and the East End Hostel alone were insufficient, in the later half of the 1960s other community groups, including socialist students and churches, opened additional hostels for Aboriginal people. In 1966, for example, the Canadian Union of Students established the Indian Youth Co-Operative House in the Kitsilano neighbourhood to provide accommodation for female Aboriginal students.¹⁷⁸ Taking a different approach than the East Enders, a few months after opening the Board decided to stop employing a “house mother.” Instead, residents worked together as a “Co-Op Council” to run and maintain the house, and Anne Jamieson and Marie Baker, both students and members of the Home’s Board of Directors, lived in the house as “house leaders.”¹⁷⁹ Baker explained their reason for this decision: “The girls are not in need of supervision. When there is an older person of authority living in the house the residents tend to abdicate all responsibility and destroy the co-operative nature intended.”¹⁸⁰ The intent of the House was not only to provide accommodation, but also to allow for “the expression of independent thought and decision making on the part of the residents.”¹⁸¹ It was to be a place where the students could live on a voluntary basis without heavy restrictions, and where they could rely on the mutual support of each other to adjust to life in the city. It was to be a place that they could “consider their own home.”¹⁸²

Other hostels and homes soon followed. In September 1967, the Company of Young Canadians established a half-way house in Kitsilano for Aboriginal people recently released from prison.¹⁸³ House manager Richard Sutherland saw the house as “a quiet place for them to relax” that “keeps them away from Skid Road and the beer parlors.”¹⁸⁴ Two months later, the United Church Board of Home Missions opened Darby Lodge in the Fairview neighbourhood to provide

¹⁷⁸ Ann Bishop, “A new blow at race prejudice,” *Province*, 26 January 1967, p. 38. Sources conflict on if the house opened in 1965 or 1966. (Margaret D. White, “Home Established,” *Vancouver Sun*, 6 December 1966, p. 5);

¹⁷⁹ Ann Bishop, “A new blow at race prejudice,” *Province*, 26 January 1967, p. 38.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ “Half-Way House: Indians Get Haven In Kits,” *Vancouver Sun*, 14 September 1967, p. 14.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

temporary accommodation for Aboriginal people coming to the city from reserves.¹⁸⁵ This home had space for nine single individuals and one family. A steady flow of people arriving in the city searching for jobs, vocational training, medical services, or just to visit, meant that it consistently maintained a full house.¹⁸⁶ And that same fall, another organization, the Nasaika Lodge Society, began operating a hostel for young Aboriginal women in West Point Grey.¹⁸⁷ The Nasaika Lodge, however, stirred up an intense neighbourhood controversy. The ensuing protest would reveal that despite an increase in concern about the difficulties faced by many Aboriginal women in the city, strong antipathy toward Aboriginal people continued.

Hostel Protest: Not in My Backyard

*When an Indian girl is found drunk on Skid Road, people shrug.
When an Indian girl is found dead, they shudder.
But the steps that lead from the first to the final event are a
mystery to most – a puzzle they are not prepared to solve.
However, the Nasaika Lodge Society, a realistic group
comprised of Indians and non-Indians, has the answer – at
least one of the answers:
Get the girls off the streets and into a home atmosphere.¹⁸⁸*

In October 1967, psychiatrist Dr. Shauna Makaroff transformed her and her husband's former West Point Grey residence into a home for young Native women. The Nasaika Lodge was designed to keep "young Indian girls who come to Vancouver from rural areas and drift into a self-destructive life on the skidroad" off the streets.¹⁸⁹ Makaroff and the Nasaika Lodge Society believed it was best to focus their attention on younger girls rather than on older woman already on skid road. The Society thought that these "girls" needed a safe home-like atmosphere, and

¹⁸⁵ Individuals were limited to one-week stays, and couples to two.

¹⁸⁶ Seventy people stayed at the Lodge within its first month of operation. "Centre for Indians Proves 'Successful'," *Vancouver Sun*, 27 November 1967, p. 10; "Indian centre approved," *The Province*, 17 June 1967, p. 9.

¹⁸⁷ "Indian hostel hearing postponed two weeks," *Province*, 19 January 1968, p. 15.

¹⁸⁸ Kathy Hassard, "Tag Day March 30: Funds Needed to Found Hostel," *Vancouver Sun*, 15 March 1968, p. 30. Of the Society's twelve directors, nine were Native.

¹⁸⁹ "Indian girls hostel fought," *Province*, 18 January 1968, p. 17.

thus operated the Lodge as a “family-style” group home for young women aged sixteen to twenty.¹⁹⁰

This impulse to provide guidance and protection to young women fits within a longer history of maternal benevolence, philanthropy, and anxiety about the ‘single girl in the city.’¹⁹¹ While concerns about single “girls” or “women adrift” in the city had been ongoing since the nineteenth century, in the mid-twentieth century this concern took on a racialized tone. Joan Sangster explains that in the twentieth century while no adolescent girls were immune from warnings of “delinquent endangerment, usually a fall from sexual grace,” those from working class, poor, and, increasingly, racialized backgrounds were presumed more likely to descend into a life of “drinking, sex, and criminality.”¹⁹² Thus, Sangster implores us to examine the “ideological suppositions” behind protectionist efforts like the Nasaika Lodge. She writes that the word protection should set “off alarm bells” for historians. Protection, she argues, “was always differentially applied according to class, and it could become racialized paternalism when directed at Native girls.”¹⁹³ Sangster asks that we consider whether such “good intentions” served

¹⁹⁰ “Indian girls hostel fought,” *Province*, 18 January 1968, p. 17; “Indian hostel hearing postponed two weeks,” *Province*, 19 January 1968, p. 15; and “Boarding House Gets Time Limit,” *Vancouver Sun*, 2 February 1968, p. 23. As Tamara Myers demonstrates, the group home model for adolescent girls was a common approach to girl reform in the 1960s. In the mid-twentieth century, the “pre-delinquent” girl – adolescent girls “in danger of becoming juvenile delinquents” – became the focus of female benevolent and social workers who established institutional “homes” for young girls with the goal of preventing delinquency and criminality, and of producing good feminine citizens (Myers, “Regulation, Agency, and the Transformation of Care for “Predelinquent” Girls,” in *La régulation sociale entre l’acteur et l’institution: Pour une problématique historique de l’interaction / Agency and Institutions in Social Regulation: Toward an Historical Understanding of their Interaction*, eds. Jean-Marie Fecteau and Janice Harvey, (Sainte-Foy, Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2005), pp. 344, 352-354, 356).

¹⁹¹ See: Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Alan Hunt, “Regulating Heterosocial Space: Sexual Politics in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, (Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2002); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Tamara Myers, *Caught: Montreal’s Modern Girls and the Law, 1869-1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Tamara Myers, “Regulation, Agency, and the Transformation of Care for “Predelinquent” Girls”; Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1780-1860*, (New York: Knopf, 1986); Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1991); and Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁹² Sangster, *Girl Trouble*, p. 6.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 3. See also pp. 47-48, and Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*, p. 1.

“to undermine, reinforce, or question prevailing class, race, and gender relations,” and moreover, whether they “offer[ed] real alternatives to girls, or simply, more surveillance?”¹⁹⁴

The Nasaika Lodge Society’s rescue narrative did indeed merge gender with racial tropes. Drawing upon assumptions about Aboriginal women’s reserve, cultural, and racial backgrounds, the Society saw young Native women in particular as requiring maternal guidance, supervision, and protection; female sexuality made them vulnerable “girls,” but with an elevated vulnerability because of their race. It is possible, therefore, that layers of regulation, surveillance, and “racialized paternalism” may have infused the operation of this hostel.¹⁹⁵ But even if this was the case, we should keep in mind that the organizers did in fact have “good intentions”: they established this hostel because they saw a need and were doing what they thought would help. Given the alarming rate of violence against young Aboriginal women in the city, providing these women with a safe place to live and sleep must have been better than doing nothing.

The problem, though, was that Makaroff overestimated the good will – even paternalism – of her neighbours. Indeed, these well-intended facilities did not always receive the full support of the greater community. In January 1968, a public controversy erupted over Nasaika Lodge. Residents of West Point Grey, a historically white affluent neighbourhood, protested against the operation of this hostel. Led by University of British Columbia English Professor T.E. Blom, Point Grey residents presented a petition to the city zoning board of appeal filing a complaint against the lodge.¹⁹⁶ Blom, who lived across from the hostel, argued that their protest was not related in any way to racial discrimination.¹⁹⁷ Upon opening, the Nasaika Lodge was home to

¹⁹⁴ Sangster, *Girl Trouble*, p. 8.

¹⁹⁵ In future research, therefore, questions about the negative implications of facilities such as the Nasaika Lodge and the East End Hostel need to be asked. This research will be necessary to flesh out the forms and extent to which residents were subject to surveillance and regulation, if at all.

¹⁹⁶ By the end of the controversy Blom had solicited the support of upwards of 50 residents.

¹⁹⁷ “Indian girls hostel fought,” *Province*, 18 January 1968, p. 17; “Indian hostel hearing postponed two weeks,” *Province*, 19 January 1968, p. 15; “Hostel must move,” *Province*, 2 February 1968, p. 25; “Boarding House Gets Time Limit,” *Vancouver Sun*, 2 February 1968, p. 23; “Hostel Protest ‘Not Discouraging,’” *Vancouver Sun*, 5 February 1968, p. 43.

two house “parents,” their two children, and two female Native boarders.¹⁹⁸ But soon thereafter, “the pressure of girls needing help became so great,” said Makaroff, “that three more girls were taken in.”¹⁹⁹ Yet when these additional women came to live at the home, the Nasaika Lodge violated the area’s zoning regulations. The area was classified as a single-family dwelling zone, which permitted a maximum of two boarders per residence. Thus, Blom was able to counter accusations of racial discrimination by arguing, “Our sole objection to the boarding house is that it will create a precedent that could lead to our single-family way of life being wiped out.”²⁰⁰ Blom said that while the petitioners were not opposed to the Nasaika Lodge Society’s aim of helping young Native women stay off skid road, “we feel they shouldn’t disturb an already established single-family area. We are apprehensive that a boarding house of this type will jeopardize the amenities of the neighbourhood, and cause fluctuation of property values.”²⁰¹ “It is unfortunate,” Blom suggested, a touch condescending, that “the people in charge of the lodge allowed the Indian community to build up their hopes for a hostel.”²⁰² In a classic example of the NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) syndrome, Point Grey residents were supportive of the Society’s goals in theory, but in practice, did not want their efforts carried out in their neighbourhood.

Although it is probable that similar opposition would have been mounted had the hostel housed white working-class or poor women, it remains difficult to understand how the residents’ opposition was not, at least in part, racially motivated.²⁰³ What the residents’ protest demonstrates is a disappointing failure by a group of Vancouverites to recognize that the crisis of death on skid road had anything to do with them. Given the media’s carefully constructed image

¹⁹⁸ “Indian hostel hearing postponed two weeks,” *Province*, 19 January 1968, p. 15; “Hostel must move,” *Province*, 2 February 1968, p. 25.

¹⁹⁹ “Indian hostel hearing postponed two weeks,” *Province*, 19 January 1968, p. 15.

²⁰⁰ “Indian girls hostel fought,” *Province*, 18 January 1968, p. 17.

²⁰¹ “Indian hostel hearing postponed two weeks,” *Province*, 19 January 1968, p. 15.

²⁰² “Indian girls hostel fought,” *Province*, 18 January 1968, p. 17.

²⁰³ This was not the first time Point Grey residents expressed concern over the destruction of their ‘single-family’ dwelling zone. In October 1964, residents complained about the possible rezoning of the area to allow the construction of high-rise apartments, which they believed would ruin the area’s family atmosphere (“Point Grey apartment fight not yet lost,” *Vancouver Times*, 24 October 1964, p. 4.) There is, though, a history of racial discrimination in Point Grey. In 1941, when a Chinese couple tried to buy a lot in the neighbourhood residents asked city council to restrict “Orientals” to certain areas of the city (See Roy, pp. 137-138; Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, pp. 310; and Ley, Hiebert, and Pratt, pp. 230-240, 250).

of Native women living and dying on skid road streets and rooming houses, it is too implausible to think that Blom and the other Point Grey residents were unaware of the implications of their petition. Yet Blom had the audacity – for it could not have been ignorance – to say, “We feel it would be unwise to relax present regulations except in hardship cases... The petitioners feel the society has failed to show there would be hardship if it was denied the right to operate.”²⁰⁴ Did seventeen deaths in the previous year alone not classify as hardship? These residents effectively turned a blind eye, shuttering themselves off from what was happening in their city; they chose to maintain a spatial and ideological boundary between their own privileged lives and the reality of the lives of so many others.

Fortunately, the petitioners’ sentiment was not universally held. Some citizens were outraged over this protest. One woman, for example, wrote to *The Province* to express her disgust:

The residents of the 3800 block West Thirteenth who are protesting against the operation of a hostel for Indian girls in their neighbourhood cannot possibly be thinking clearly.

If the petition which they have signed influences the zoning board of appeal to turn down the request of the Nasaika Lodge Society (asking permission to board five Indian girls) those residents will have committed another act of unthinking, subtle aggression against humanity.

Most would agree with the aim of the Nasaika Lodge Society – that there is a need for some place other than Skid Road for young Indian girls to live while adjusting to city life – but these people are adding the hypocritical postscript “but not here.”²⁰⁵

This woman saw right through the petitioners’ reasoning and called them on exactly what it was that they were doing – placing private property and self-interest above the well-being of others.²⁰⁶

But Blom and the Point Grey petitioners were successful. At the beginning of February the city zoning board told the Nasaika Lodge Society that they had until the end of May, a total of four months, to find a new location for the hostel.²⁰⁷ Through the act of their protest, these residents said that they did not want young Native women living among them, and through their

²⁰⁴ “Hostel must move,” *Province*, 2 February 1968, p. 25.

²⁰⁵ Barbara N. Barron, “Hostel rejection ‘unthinking aggression,’” *Province*, 27 January 1968, p. 4.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ “Hostel must move,” *Province*, 2 February 1968, p. 25; “Boarding House Gets Time Limit,” *Vancouver Sun*, 2 February 1968, p. 23.

decision, the zoning board ruled that Native women did not “belong” in West Point Grey. No one wanted to see them on the downtown streets, but they were unwelcome in this elite neighbourhood. Makaroff, however, claimed that she was not discouraged, and the Nasaika Lodge Society carried on. Shortly after the zoning board ruling, Makaroff announced that the society had found a “more suitable” house in the Fairview district. Their new location was deemed more “suitable” because it was close to the Indian Centre and because it had space for more women. But it was also likely deemed more suitable simply because it was not in West Point Grey.²⁰⁸ Spatial segregation and intolerance was to remain the status quo.

The Point Grey opposition to Nasaika Lodge was not the only case of community antagonism towards Aboriginal people during these years. A similar controversy took place early in June 1969 when property owners in Kitsilano objected to the Indian Centre’s proposal to re-locate to the neighbourhood. The Indian Center Society had asked city council for a permit to move to an old church on Vine Street, making the case that the current location on West Broadway was too small, poorly ventilated, and a fire hazard. One Vine Street resident, however, raised a fuss: “They’re going to have dances up there to midnight; we won’t enjoy any quiet or peace. There is no yard on the church. Where will they spill on to? The sidewalks? The streets? Our lawns?”²⁰⁹ This same resident also suggested that the daily activities of the centre would cause traffic congestion. The executive director of the Indian Centre, Harold Lavallee, responded by stating what he thought the real objection was: “I think they’re afraid they’re going to have a lot of drunken Indians around.”²¹⁰ To counter these objections, he said that the Centre would only have one “well-supervised” dance per month, not permitting liquor or anyone under the influence.²¹¹ Secondly, he explained how the notion of traffic congestion was preposterous; these youths did

²⁰⁸ “Hostel Protest ‘Not Discouraging,’” *Vancouver Sun*, 5 February 1968, p. 43; “Indian Girls’ Hostel to Open Next Month,” *Vancouver Sun*, 30 March 1968, p. 11; Kathy Hassard, “Tag Day March 30: Funds Needed to Found Hostel,” *Vancouver Sun*, 15 March 1968, p. 30.

²⁰⁹ “Kits on warpath over Indians,” *Province*, 6 June 1969, p. 46.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.* Lavallee was of Cree, Saulteaux, and French heritage. (“Better way of life: City big hope for Indian,” *Province*, 30 September 1968, p. 2.)

²¹¹ “Kits on warpath over Indians,” *Province*, 6 June 1969, p. 46.

not have cars, he pointed out. “They can’t afford them.”²¹² Lavallee said that he could not claim with certainty whether racial discrimination motivated the residents’ objection, but he did say that one thing was for sure: “they certainly don’t understand.”²¹³

Lavallee was right. The residents did not understand. Their lack of understanding meant that negative stereotypes and attitudes toward Native women remained ubiquitous, be it manifest in a man who raped and then threw her from a car into the street, a police officer who did not believe her story, or a home-owner who did not want her living next to his family. Kay Cronin, director of the Roman Catholic Indian Study and Leadership Club, identified the mutually reinforcing character of these acts of discrimination. In response to the death of Irene James, Cronin stated that the main factor behind Native women going to skid road was lack of acceptance in white society. She told a *Province* reporter, “If the Indian were truly accepted in our society, the skid-road problem would be much smaller.”²¹⁴ Pointing to a situation of pervasive hypocrisy, Cronin continued, “So many do-gooders plan bazaars and raise money to help the poor Indian on skid-road – but the minute you put an Indian child next to their youngster at school they raise a devil of a fuss...Until they are accepted you won’t get to first base with the problem.”²¹⁵

True to Cronin’s word, despite the establishment of an Indian Centre and several hostels for Aboriginal women, violence and death on skid road continued. While these places likely helped many women, they were not an ultimate solution. In November 1968, Dr. Shauna Makaroff stated that in the last few months ten Aboriginal women had died on skid road from “alcoholism, overdose of drugs, tuberculosis and even from beatings.”²¹⁶ Yet the Nasaika Lodge was always overcrowded, consistently housing more women than space permitted.²¹⁷ It was the same story at other hostels in the city. Need and demand continued to exceed available beds. One summer evening in 1969, R.W. Cantryn, an Aboriginal counselor at the Indian Centre, could not find a

²¹² “Kits on warpath over Indians,” *Province*, 6 June 1969, p. 46.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ “Guidance for girls stressed,” *Province*, 15 January 1963, p. 3.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ “Skid Road Deaths,” *Victoria Daily Times*, 27 November 1968, p. 54.

²¹⁷ Terry French, “Caring at Heart of Hostels: An Alternative to life of Rita Joe,” *The Province*, 6 June 1969, p. 34.

room anywhere for two young Native women who had come to the Centre looking for a place to spend the night. Cantryn called Darby Lodge, Nasaika Lodge, and a few other hostels, but there was simply was no room. Frustrated, as this was far from the first time this situation had arisen, Cantryn signed a lease on a house that very evening just so those two women would not have to spend the night on the streets.²¹⁸ But Cantryn's effort, like those of others before her, would not be enough; it provided temporary relief, but the attitudes and stereotypes that necessitated her concern had not disappeared. And so the story would continue.

Conclusions: Bringing the Past to the Present

During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, countless Aboriginal women died on the streets and in the cheap hotels and rooming houses of the city's downtown eastside. This history forces us to re-conceptualize our image of the postwar period. Many people remember this era as being characterized by the rise of the welfare state, an equality revolution, and the 'good life.' What has been widely forgotten, or conveniently ignored, is this other dark symbol of this period: the dead Indian girl. Aboriginal women formed a small, albeit growing, proportion of Vancouver's population during these years, but the rate of women dying in this neighbourhood was staggering. Poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, and malnutrition often contributed to their poor health, yet far too frequently their lives were cut short by physical assault, rape, and murder. While many Aboriginal men and women who came to the city during these years found new opportunities, for many others, life in the city was framed by intense poverty, racial discrimination, physical and sexual violence, and early death.

Although it took place in Vancouver's very recent past, this story of death in the city is remarkably absent from existing literature in Aboriginal history, urban history, women's history, and postwar Canadian history. At the time, though, many Vancouverites were aware of and

²¹⁸ Johanne Leach, "Indian girls find haven," *Vancouver Sun*, 6 August 1970, p. 33.

concerned about this situation. In the 1960s, public discussion about the “plight” of Aboriginal women on skid road infused community organizations’ meetings, newspaper articles, and civic reports, and in response, concerned citizens established the Vancouver Indian Centre and several hostels for Aboriginal women. This discussion, however, was not without problems: by describing Aboriginal women in the context of alcoholism, drug abuse and prostitution, and by using paternalistic language that infantilized and victimized these women, often casting them as “girls” in need of protection, this discourse may have inadvertently reinforced the stereotype of indigenous female sexual promiscuity, and upheld a long-standing assumption that Native people do not “belong” in urban areas. Notwithstanding these problems, however, this narrative came from the good intention of awakening the public’s attention in order to avert assault and death on skid road. Unfortunately though, despite the persistent, if feeble, efforts by concerned individuals and groups to achieve this goal, racialized and sexualized violence against Aboriginal women continued as before.

Indeed, this story of life and death on skid road did not terminate with the Sixties’ end; rather, it continued through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. It continues today. Thus, uncovering and unsilencing this traumatic piece of Vancouver’s history is only one goal of this research; it also aims to demonstrate that the present cannot be divorced from this past. In 1970, Colleen Gonu, a young Native woman from New Aiyansh, a First Nations community near the Nass River, was living with a white family in Kitsilano to attend secondary school. Gonu expressed her fear of straying from the city’s west side: “If I go downtown with an Indian friend I know men on street corners are going to try to pick us up. And I know that it isn’t just because we are two girls – it’s because we are two Indians. It makes me sick. I want to cry and scream at them.”²¹⁹ Gonu was not alone. During the succeeding decades Aboriginal women all across Canada continued to be condemned by racial stereotypes that fixed them as targets of sexual violence. In 1971, Helen Betty Osborne, a nineteen-year-old Cree woman from northern Manitoba, was abducted, sexually

²¹⁹ “Two views of a city: Life looks different off the reserve,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 November 1970, p. 58.

assaulted, and then stabbed more than fifty times by four white men.²²⁰ In 1995, two white male university students drove 28-year-old Saulteaux woman Pamela George to a field on the outskirts of Regina, where they forced her to perform oral sex, beat her to death, and then abandoned her face down in a muddy ditch. Her attackers reportedly bragged to friends that they “beat the shit” out of “an Indian hooker.”²²¹ In March of 2003, three decades after the murder of Helen Betty Osborne, her sixteen-year-old cousin Felicia Solomon went missing. In June of that year Winnipeg police discovered parts of her body in the Red River.²²²

The stories of Helen Betty Osborne, Pamela George, and Felicia Solomon are three individual tragedies that reflect a larger and systemic crisis. In 1991, twenty years after her death, the Manitoba Aboriginal Justice Inquiry reported that Osborne “would be alive today had she not been an Aboriginal woman.”²²³ Members of this Inquiry wrote, “Her attackers seemed to be operating on the assumption that Aboriginal women were promiscuous and open to enticement through alcohol or violence. It is evident that the men who abducted Osborne believed that young Aboriginal women were objects with no human value beyond sexual gratification.”²²⁴ In the eighteen years since this inquiry alarmingly little has changed. According to the Native Women’s Association of Canada, as of March 31, 2009, there are 520 known cases of Aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in Canada in the last thirty years.²²⁵ Forty-three percent of these disappearances and fifty-five percent of these murders have occurred since 2000.²²⁶

²²⁰ Backhouse, p. 259. For more on Osborne’s case, see Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters*.

²²¹ Razack, p. 140. For Razack’s account of George’s murder and the trial see pp. 123-156. See also, Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters*.

²²² Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters*, pp. 59-61.

²²³ Manitoba, *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba: The Deaths of Helen Betty Osborne and John Joseph Harper*, vol. 2 (Winnipeg: Queen’s Printer, 1991), cited in Backhouse, p. 259.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ The Native Women’s Association of Canada, *Voices of Our Sisters in Spirit*, p. 88. The NWAC estimates that since Aboriginal girls and women make up less than two percent of the Canadian population, if these rates are applied to the general population, the number would be equivalent to over 18 000 women missing and/or murdered in the past thirty years. Fifty-two percent of these women were under the age of thirty at the time of their disappearance or murder (pp. 88-94).

²²⁶ The Native Women’s Association of Canada, *Voices of Our Sisters in Spirit*, p. 91.

As Aboriginal women in this country continue to disappear, continue to be brutalized, and continue to be murdered – continue to be treated as less than human – it is time that we learn from this history. Death on skid road in the 1960s happened in a time and place where it held the public’s attention, yet since that time a wall of silence has surrounded these deaths. So what changed? Why did the deaths of Aboriginal women move from the headlines to the back-pages, if they were reported at all, from public awareness to public amnesia? Perhaps as the pattern of tragedy continued some people became cynical and came to think that this situation was inevitable, and thus, that there was nothing to be done. Although he had been a long-time advocate for change, when coroner Glen McDonald reflected back on his career in the 1980s, he portrayed the circumstances of Native women on skid road as being futile, an “impossible” problem. “I began,” he lamented, “to think that having an inquest into a Skidroad Indian death was much the same thing as having an inquiry into why the sun comes up in the morning. Where was the point in it?” Continuing with this train of thought, McDonald wrote, “I was passionately interested in and profoundly saddened by what I saw everyday on the Skidroad. Every seaport has its Skidroad and Vancouver’s is one of the worst insofar as being an insult to human dignity. Skidroad is the graveyard of native Indians. It entraps them and sentences them to death.”²²⁷ After decades spent immersed in skid road death and failing to see marked improvement, McDonald had become severely jaded.

McDonald’s fatalistic conclusion, however, is unacceptable. It is precisely because there is continuity between violence against Aboriginal women in the past with the violence in the present that we need to historicize the current situation. In doing so, we learn that citizens of postwar Vancouver did not seriously challenge the destructive trio of colonialism, racism, and sexism that affected so many Aboriginal women. The Vancouver Indian Centre and hostels for Native women, for example, were designed as “stop-gap” measures, not long-term solutions. The persistence of sexual and racial violence thus points to the continuing operation of social

²²⁷ McDonald, *How Come I'm Dead*, p. 87; see also, pp. 82-90.

hierarchies and power structures that dictate whose bodies matter and whose lives count. The bodies of broken, bruised, raped, missing, and murdered Native women – past and present – are symbols of enduring colonialism and patriarchy, and moreover, of an ongoing collective failure to combat these vicious systems.

These women, though, also speak powerfully to us through death. Their broken bodies are simultaneously symbolic of resiliency, strength, and hope – hope that their stories will empower change. They teach us that what is required is a fundamental revolution in our thinking. Physical and sexual violence are manifestations of colonialism, racism, and sexism, but these structures continue at their strongest and most embedded form at the level of beliefs and attitudes. Before real material changes can take place, the process has to begin with thoughts, ideas, and words. Negative stereotypes about indigenous women must be challenged, and the attitudes that lead to this violence rejected.

It is my hope that by raising awareness of this piece of Vancouver's past, this research will contribute to this goal. Bain Attwood suggests that the historian's role is not only a matter of acknowledging the presence of a traumatic past, "it is also a matter of encouraging a consciousness of this so that our readers might know of and acknowledge their relationship to a (post)traumatic culture and thus create an opportunity to work through the problems that continue in the present."²²⁸ So although this history, in revealing that there was a time when Vancouverites were cognizant of what was occurring on the streets of their city, can make the facts of today more infuriating, rather than submitting to teleological explanations of inevitability, or stewing in anger, let us instead use this knowledge to achieve something different. This history of Aboriginal women in postwar Vancouver exposes a traumatic past that cannot be changed, but perhaps it is through remembering it that we can ensure the future is better.

²²⁸ Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*, (Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest NSW, Australia, 2005), p. 180.

Understanding that violence against Aboriginal women is not a new problem will force us to think more radically and creatively about how to move forward. As anthropologist David Scott argues, we live in tragic times; in many ways, our world is no better than it was several centuries ago. Scott suggests that the reason we have not generated the answers to eliminate oppression, racism, sexism, and colonialism might be because we have been continually asking the wrong questions.²²⁹ So perhaps by understanding the workings of these forms of power in the past, and acknowledging their presence in the present, we might begin to ask the new questions that will allow us to imagine, and then achieve, a better future. New questions are required because the stakes are high. It truly is a matter of life and death.

²²⁹ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004).

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