

Twice Slain: Female Sex-Trade Workers and Suicide in British Columbia, 1870-1920

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Article abstract

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SUSAN J. JOHNSTON

Résumé

Between 1870 and 1920, the voluntary deaths of 13 British Columbian women, identified by coroners and jurors as prostitutes, provoked a response out of all proportion to their numbers. This essay examines this response, focusing first on the narratives created by witnesses at the coroner's inquest on the body, and then on the interpretations of those who did not literally "know" the dead woman. I argue that the bodies of the dead can be read as a text which invoke multiple interpretations and meanings. Running through all the narratives is a discourse of respectability which shifted attention from an examination of the body and morals of one woman to that of society as a whole. Those who knew the women read the death in ways that emphasized their own and the deceased's personal connection to the community in which they lived. Coroners, jurors, and the press inscribed their fears of sexual disorder and racial miscegenation upon the bodies of the dead. Through examining and responding to the deaths, the women and men involved in the inquest process helped create and bolster a particular moral and social identity which utilized the prostitute as a metaphor of social evil. When the body of the prostitute no longer evoked this response, prostitutes' deaths were excluded from the inquest process.

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Entre 1870 et 1920, en Colombie britannique, la mort volontaire de treize femmes identifiées par les coroners et les jurés comme étant des prostituées a provoqué des réactions d'une ampleur hors de proportion avec leur nombre. L'analyse de ce phénomène s'arrête d'abord aux récits créés par les témoins au cours de l'enquête judiciaire liée au cadavre, pour se pencher ensuite sur les interprétations proposées par ceux qui ne connaissaient pas directement la morte. Je tente de démontrer que les corps des morts peuvent être considérés comme un texte, dont les signes seraient interprétés de multiple façons. Un discours de la respectabilité imprègne ces récits, qui déplace l'attention du corps et de la moralité d'une femme en particulier vers la moralité de la

I would like to thank Angus McLaren for his advice and enthusiasm as I have investigated the topic of violent death. Thanks are also due to Lynne Marks and Annalee Golz for their helpful comments on an earlier draft and to the referees. A SSHRC doctoral fellowship and financial support from the University of Victoria's Faculty of Graduate Studies funded the research on which this essay is based.

société en général. Ceux qui connaissaient ces femmes eurent tendance à lire le décès d'une façon qui renvoyait aux relations personnelles que la femme et qu'eux-mêmes entretenaient avec la communauté. De leur côté, coroners, jurés et journalistes eurent plutôt tendance à inscrire sur les cadavres leurs craintes de désordre sexuel et leur peur des conséquences des croisements entre les races. Enquêtes et réponses ont contribué à créer et à renforcer une identité sociale et morale précise qui utilisait la prostituée comme une métaphore des maux sociaux. Aussitôt qu'ils cessèrent de provoquer une semblable réponse, les corps des prostituées furent exclus de ce type d'enquête.

"From your experience as a medical man," asked a juror in 1899, "is it not a common thing for a lady living that kind of life to commit suicide?"¹ "It is not an uncommon thing," replied the doctor.² Cultural representations which focused on suicide as the "wages of sin" rather than the actual evidence given in this particular case governed the exchange.³ Despite two days of testimony from colleagues and friends of the deceased, both men ignored the reality of the woman's life and death in favour of a comforting cultural stereotype which distanced the dead from the living, the disorderly from the respectable, and affirmed Anglo-Canadian expectations of female behaviour.

In fact, the suicide of female sex-trade workers in British Columbia was "an uncommon thing." In the fifty years between 1870 and 1920, eight women out of a total of 158 identified by coroners as suicide completers were also labelled as prostitutes. In four more cases, jurors could not decide whether the prostitute's intent was suicide and stated so in their verdict. In a final case, jurors deemed the death accidental. Moreover, the jurors and press had some difficulty identifying who was a prostitute. At least three of the women were not actually working in the sex trade at the time of their deaths.⁴

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1. British Columbia Records and Archives Services (BCARS), GR1327, British Columbia Attorney General, Inquisitions 1872-1937 (GR1327), Reel B2377, 1899/7. Under the provisions of British Columbia's Freedom of Information Act, certain information cannot be made public. In order to protect the identities of the deceased, their names, where used, have been changed; witnesses with the exception of medical practitioners and coroners are identified by initials only; inquest file identification numbers do not correspond to those of the Attorney General.
 2. GR1327, Reel B2377, 1899/7, deposition of J. Westwood.
 3. For discussion on representations of suicide, sexuality and/or prostitution see, Fred Cutter, "Suicidal Themes in Visual Art," *Omega* 3 (1972): 1-22. Richard Davenport-Hines, *Sex, Death and Punishment: Attitudes to Sex and Sexuality in Britain since the Renaissance* (London, 1991), 12-13, 129, 161. Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton, 1988). Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990), 9-10 and chapter 9. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Deadly Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992), particularly chapter 3.
 4. See for example, "A Married Woman in a House of Prostitution," *Victoria Daily Times*, 9 May 1885; 1; "Drank Poison to Drown Memory of a Friend," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 10 June 1904; 1; "One More Unfortunate," *Daily Columbian*, 12 January 1901.

While the number of prostitutes who killed themselves was insignificant, the response to their deaths was not. An event of local significance, the death of a prostitute provided coastal urban and interior resource-based communities with an opportunity to discuss and interpret the behaviour of these women. This paper explores the explanations of the deaths of the thirteen women labelled as prostitutes, paying particular attention to how the deaths were used to create and bolster a sense of moral and social solidarity. In that context, the death of the prostitute is treated here as a discursive text, the site of ritual dissection and multiple meanings in which the dead body of the prostitute was both the literal remains of a life and the figurative embodiment of social disorder — and was perceived as such by all those who came into contact with it.⁵ The local community read the body as a symbol, a signpost pointing to problems within its midst.

The Coroner's Inquisition, a trial held "upon the view of the body of _____, then and there within the jurisdiction of the said Coroner, lying dead," provided the ritual and majesty of law which legitimated the authority of those who judged that life and authored certain interpretations.⁶ In fulfilling the duties of his office, the coroner actively promoted a particular vision of British Columbia as a moral Anglo-Canadian society. Investigator and judge, the role of coroner required someone who could speak for the local community by deciding which deaths needed public explanation. As well, he needed to possess the social status necessary to embody the state in the ritual inquisition upon the body of the deceased. Accordingly, the provincial government appointed male British subjects, usually medical practitioners, who were thought to have the expertise needed to fulfil the technical and judicial requirements of the office.⁷

Also male British subjects, the jurors at this trial of the body were selected from a list compiled annually by the district sheriff and shared the same legal status as jurors in criminal trials. Jurors were "voters under 60 who do not hold office or are employees of provincial or federal governments, or are not clergy, law practitioners, medical practitioners, members of the military, teachers, press employees, telegraph operators, fire department employees."⁸ These British subjects viewed the body, then heard evidence from witnesses, and wrote their verdict on the death.

The raw material used to create the multiple readings of the body came from the men and women who testified at the inquest. The first section of the paper explores a few of the tales told by the women and men who had known and touched the body in life and

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5. As Anne Nesbet so eloquently puts it: "In the search for meaning which its conclusion provokes, a life, inevitably, is scrutinized for patterns, symbols, and general themes; it is read, in short, as a text." Nesbet, "Suicide as Literary Fact in the 1920s," *Slavic Review* 50 (1991): 827.
 6. Cited from a standard Inquisition form used throughout the period.
 7. E.O.S. Schofield and F.W. Howay, *British Columbia from the Earliest Times to the Present*, I (Vancouver, c. 1911), 610-612.
 8. "Jurors' Act 1883," 46 Victoria Chapter 15, *Statutes of the Province of British Columbia, 1883* (Victoria, 1883).

in death. The women who lived and worked with the dead prostitute had their own narrative which often conflicted with that of the male lovers and clients of the woman. Doctors employed their personal knowledge of the prostitute in yet another way, that of the distanced “expert” who dissected the “type” while he dissected the body. At stake for every participant was a sense of belonging to a community and the right to be included in that community. The second section explores the larger community’s interpretations of the death. Coroners and jurors quite literally read and wrote their own script. The local press then translated the death for the edification of those citizens who had not attended the inquest.

The suicide of a prostitute touched upon two potent symbols of social disorder in the late nineteenth century, the act of suicide and the prostitute herself.⁹ As Mariana Valverde argues, for Canada’s moral reformers the prostitute functioned as the symbol of social evil.¹⁰ As a symbol, the body of the prostitute became public property, open to the gaze of the community in a way that the suicides of “respectable” wives and mothers were not. Often, for instance, the absence of a cause of death in a respectable woman’s obituary provided the only clue that such a death was not a “natural” one.¹¹ Not surprisingly, given the potency of the symbol of the prostitute and the publicity attending the suicide of a prostitute, all those involved employed a discourse of respectability to interpret the individual deaths.

The great care taken to appeal to values espoused by the jurors indicates that witnesses knew how to play their part in the inquest. Natalie Zemon Davis, who pioneered the historical examination of the “literary qualities” of narratives in the criminal justice system, points to the ways in which the narrators ordered events into a coherent whole based on their gender and social status.¹² Inquest testimony shows a similar reordering

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9. A large body of literature exists on the prostitute as symbol. For recent examples see, Nickie Roberts, *Whores in History: Prostitution in Western Society* (London, 1992), 223, 242-248. Philippa Levine, “Women and Prostitution: Metaphor, Reality, History,” *Canadian Journal of History* 28 (1993): 479-494. Jeffrey S. Adler, “Streetwalkers, Degraded Outcasts, and Good-For-Nothing Huzzies: Women and the Dangerous Class in Antebellum St. Louis,” *Journal of Social History* 25 (1992): 737-55. The most obvious example of the use of suicide as an indicator of social disorder is the text by late nineteenth-century sociologist Emile Durkheim, *Suicide, A Study in Sociology*, John A. Spaulding and George Simpson Trans, and eds. (New York, 1951). For discussion on the contemporary use of “Durkheimianism” see MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, 3. See also, Howard I. Kushner, *Self Destruction in the Promised Land: A Psychocultural Biology of American Suicide* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1989), 47.
 10. Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto, 1991), 77. She expands on this argument throughout chapter four.
 11. See for example, “The City,” *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 18 August 1895; “Succumbs to Nephritis,” *Daily Times*, 8 February 1915; “Obituary Notice,” *Daily Times*, 20 February 1917.
 12. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987). John Beattie has also noted the fictions produced by condemned criminals. See Beattie, “The Royal Pardon and Criminal Procedure in Early

of events to conform to cultural constructions of both the event itself and to expected gender roles, with the result that women witnesses in particular tried very hard to portray themselves in a way that evoked respectability. All but two of these women worked in the sex trade, either as managers or fellow “inmates” of a brothel or as neighbours who lived on the same “row,” but recognizing that jurors viewed them as dissolute and unreliable witnesses, they framed their evidence in ways that suggested a connection with women the jurors deemed above reproach.

In some cases this discourse of respectability entailed creating narratives of grief and loss that could have applied to any woman. One common tale, desertion by husband or lover, embraced common motives — disappointment in love and domestic troubles — which explained the suicides of women in general. “She was feeling “blue” because a certain man had not come to see her,” claimed one woman.¹³ “He was telling her that he didn’t want her any more,” observed another.¹⁴ “Spoke about her husband . . . She often seemed downhearted. She said “What’s the use for me to live alone when my husband is living with another woman?”” explained a third woman.¹⁵ This narrative suggested that the deceased and the witness shared the same expectations of marriage as respectable wives.

Related to the betrayal narrative was that of the vicious male lover. In one case, all the female witnesses spoke of the abusive nature of the relationship between the dead woman and her male lover. “She told me that he had threatened her that if she quit him he would hurt her so as to disfigure her,” said one woman.¹⁶ The manager of the house informed the jurors that the man “had threatened to bite or cut her nose off . . . she had a dread or fear of seeing him.”¹⁷ In this narrative, fear of male brutality and lust provided an alternative to the usual wages-of-sin motive favoured by jurors. These narratives of brutality and desertion projected blame for the death from the prostitute to the male lover. The witnesses carefully constructed an image of the woman which could be included in the jurors’ definitions of female respectability. Gentle, quiet women, who had not been hardened by their occupation and who did not fit the image of the polluting temptress, had died because of male betrayal; they were women like all others; they deserved to be judged on those terms.

This “everywoman” motif can also be seen in one narrative of loss which utilized the image of the bereaved mother. On the afternoon before the death, the witness stated,

Modern England,” Canadian Historical Association *Historical Papers* (1987): 14-16. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England 1660-1800* (Princeton, 1986), 21, 447.

13. BCARS, GR1323, British Columbia Attorney General, Correspondence 1902-1937 (GR1323), Reel B2076, File 5854-7-11, T.H. Montgomerie Bell to Attorney General, 29 August 1911, deposition of E.H.
14. GR1327, Reel B2383, 1908/9, deposition of E.H.
15. GR1327, Reel B2389, 1912/13, deposition of C.S.
16. GR1327, Reel B2377, 1899/7, deposition of K.K.
17. GR1327, Reel B2377, 1899/7, deposition of C.Y.

she and the deceased had spent some time together in an undertaker's parlour looking at baby caskets. She "said they were like those in which her baby had been buried," explained the witness, who went on to state that the deceased placed an order for one to be delivered to the house.¹⁸ This narrative played directly to the image of the grief-struck mother. Excessive grief proved that the deceased was an irrational mother rather than a hardened prostitute.

Women's narratives established the dead women as victims of their own emotions. As well, they permitted the witnesses to deflect the jurors' attention from their occupation. By describing themselves as caregivers and comforters, witnesses provided a way for two incompatible female occupations, family member and prostitute, to coexist. This interpenetration of the private and the public recast the women as respectable and believable witnesses. In other narratives, witnesses sought the same kind of credibility and respectability by attempting to distance themselves from the dead woman with whom they had lived — by identifying the deceased as a stranger, for example, or by denying any knowledge of her use of drugs or alcohol. "I have only known her since last Monday," one witness told the jurors. "I thought she was a little out of her mind."¹⁹ "I knew the deceased for the last two or three months. I knew nothing about her habits. I do not know if she had bought any morphine at any time," stated another.²⁰

Whether female witnesses portrayed the dead woman as a friend or a stranger, they told the story of an individual life. The details of each story could only be applied to that one woman, and she remained a subject whose occupation was coincidental to her self-identity as a woman. Interpreting the death in the same way as relatives who testified at the inquests of "respectable" women, these witnesses attributed responsibility to individual circumstances such as the woman's physical or mental health, or to abusive treatment by an insensitive man. That was not the case for males giving testimony. While the narratives of male clients and ex-lovers involved the story of an individual, they also identified the woman as a commodity and, like the jurors to whom the witnesses directed their evidence, defined her by occupation. Summoning the "brazen hussy" image and accepting no responsibility for her death, they denied that her feelings could have been affected by their behaviour. In short, these narratives served to distance the witness from the deceased and to place the blame for her death on the prostitute herself.

One example of this objectification can be found in the testimony of the steady client of a woman. Having already spent two to three hours with her, the client "got very much annoyed" when she began to cough and show symptoms of illness. Rather than concern himself with the woman's health, however, he complained to the manager of the house about her noisy breathing and lack of response to his touch. By that time, the woman was

18. "Probably Suicided," *Rossland Miner*, 22 March 1901. The Attorney General no longer holds the depositions in this case so inquest testimony has been gathered from newspaper reports.

19. GR1327, Reel B2372, 1885/1, deposition of F.L.

20. GR1327, Reel B2391, 1895/5, deposition of D.S.

unconscious; she died a few hours later.²¹ The man had known the woman before she went to work at this particular location and had chosen to seek her out no matter where she worked. Despite visiting her at least three times a week for several months, he did not see her as a person but as a prostitute who had failed to fulfil her contract.

Lovers also tended to label the women as prostitutes rather than treat them as individuals. The same man who supposedly threatened to bite off the nose of his lover if she left him was reported by a male friend to have “remarked that he couldn’t do anything with her and [to have] asked for Kate.”²² Another man was “surprised” to learn that the woman had shot herself because he had left her.²³ These witnesses distanced themselves from the woman by claiming not to be involved emotionally with the “prostitute.” Conjuring up stereotypic images of drunken, depraved women, they became the respectable party in the story.²⁴ Neither they nor the jurors questioned their presence at the house. An active sexuality was a man’s prerogative and these women existed to fulfil his needs. The narrative of the client or lover, consequently, was that of the distanced and uninvolved witness who was forced to testify to a woman’s disgraceful behaviour but who had in no way acted improperly himself. This reading of the death placed full responsibility on the woman who was viewed as a type, the details of her life coincidental to her occupation.

Male witnesses who did not have a sexual relationship with the deceased produced the “minding my own business” narrative. They claimed that they did not know the deceased, that they did not pry into the affairs of others, and that they could only provide evidence as to the whereabouts of the woman. An hotel keeper, for example, stated that he had rented the deceased a room and that he had gone up to collect the bill for the room at seven o’clock, at which time she seemed fine. A messenger boy then testified that he was in the room at the same time as the hotel keeper but that he “couldn’t really understand what she was saying. I knew there was something wrong with her . . .”²⁵ Recalled to the witness stand, the hotelier indignantly stated: “I saw nothing wrong with her . . . I didn’t pay any attention to what passed between the messenger boy and the woman.”²⁶ Clearly, he had ordered his story to distance himself from the deceased, to maintain his hotel’s reputation as a respectable inn, and most importantly, to maintain his reputation as an affable and discreet host.

In another case, a witness tried to distance himself from the deceased by claiming that he found her behaviour surprising and offensive. The witness stated that two women and two men entered his residence and that one of them, a drunken woman whom he did not recognize, lay down on his bed. When asked why he thought she was drunk, he

21. GR1327, Reel B2389, 1912/13, deposition of C.H.

22. GR1327, Reel B2377, 1899/7, deposition of F.R.

23. GR1327, Reel B2373, 1889/3, deposition of J.C.

24. See for example, GR1327, Reel B2383, 1908/9, deposition of C.J.

25. GR1327, Reel B2380, 1904/8, deposition of W.A.

26. GR1327, Reel B2380, 1904/8, deposition of D.B.

replied: “because she lay down upon his bed.” The witness “wanted her to go away. It was not proper for a white girl to lie down on a Chinaman’s bed.”²⁷ This “minding my own business” tale played to the jurors’ outrage at the thought of a woman entering a Chinese “den” and portrayed the witness as equally outraged. In this case, the witness attempted to include himself in the respectable community by identifying with its values. The jurors, of course, ignored his claim that race was no indicator of respectability. Their verdict read that the woman “died from the effect of opium administered at Hap’s Chinese joint in Chinatown, and we are strongly of the opinion and recommend that the city authorities should take immediate steps not to licence hop joints, but to abolish the same in the city of Rossland.”²⁸ Clearly, the success of this type of narrative depended directly on the racial status of the witness.

While the women and men who knew the deceased could testify to the circumstances surrounding the death, medical testimony proved the death itself. Employing the narrative of the scientist, medical practitioners supplied the inquest with two distinct types of evidence: the condition of the woman before she died and a post mortem report. Attending physicians — those who were called to the suicide or those who had treated the woman in life — adopted an objective and factual approach using measurements which distanced the scientific expert from the amateur witnesses and which gave their testimony an authority seldom questioned by jurors. Statements such as “her face was six or eight inches from the stove,” “I also found pure carbolic acid, about half a teaspoon,” and “gave her at intervals teaspoonful doses of the sodium sulphate solution as an antidote” presented the doctor as a scientist, an expert who had known enough to collect this evidence for the inquest and who, in the last example, had done all that he could to save the woman.²⁹ The narrative of the attending physician was that of the respectable samaritan who laboured for the good of the community in physically and morally unsanitary circumstances.

More precise than the physician’s oral recollection of treatment, the post mortem report presented both the cause of death and an exciting look at the internal woman. In one case, George Frederick Curtis informed the jury that while “the mucosa of the stomach was roughened and brown in color and cracked in appearance with hemorrhagic infiltration around the parts acted upon by the acid . . . the uterus and its

27. “Jury Gives an Open Verdict,” *Rossland Miner*, 23 March 1901.

28. BCARS, GR432, British Columbia Attorney General, Inquisitions Register, Vol. II, 20, insert, nd. The police had arrested several men and had raided at least eight Chinese residences the day after the woman’s death. See “The Chinese Raid,” *Rossland Miner*, 22 March 1901, and “Opium Charges,” *Rossland Miner*, 23 March 1901. The municipal government took the jury’s verdict to heart, touring the supposed “opium dens” and then having the city solicitor write to Victoria for their bylaws on the subject. See “City’s Hop Joints,” *Rossland Miner*, 27 March 1901.

29. GR1327, Reel B2391, 1913/11, deposition of J. Shaw; Reel B2389, 1912/13, deposition of F. McTavish; Reel B2378, 1901/6, deposition of F. Kenny.

appendages were normal.”³⁰ Similarly, the examination of a woman, whose body was found some months after her death, provided a bizarre image of a sexualized fragmented body: “the skull was separated from trunk and lower jaw from the scalp. The body was partly covered with some black material and the legs with red colored stockings, kept in place by garters with metal clamps.”³¹

Testimony about a healthy uterus and red stockings provided little proof of the cause of death — carbolic acid poisoning in the first case, drowning in the second — but it was crucial to identifying the body as a type of woman, a prostitute. Quite simply, physicians used the post mortem to comment on the occupational identity of the woman as well as the cause of death. Furthermore, they were also called on to identify the type in life, and doctors often provided a narrative which implied a connection between prostitution and suicide. As one medical practitioner stated: “knowing the conditions I thought it was suicide, although I had never heard her making any threats.”³² In another case, a doctor testified that he had “attended this girl on one or two occasions lately and considered her of a very excitable disposition, and one who might commit suicide on any small provocation.” Neither man bothered to elaborate on his remarks: suicides were, after all, the wages of sin, and “not an uncommon thing.”³³

Unlike other witnesses, the doctor did not have to create a moral distance between himself and the deceased: the role of medical practitioner carried with it a respectability recognized by the community. Nevertheless, these “experts” shared with other male witnesses a construction of the prostitute as a type, and like the male clients and lovers they tended to identify her by occupation rather than as an individual. If suicide can be defined, as it has been by Anne Nesbet, as the “final and incontrovertible assertion of authorial control over one’s own life,” male witnesses violated the body by denying that authorship, by treating the dead woman as an object, a type to be dissected.³⁴

The narratives of the witnesses suggest that many readings of the body were possible. These interpretations were in turn read by others, first by coroners and jurors at the inquest, then by the press. The Department of the Attorney General administered the Coroner’s Acts. Often the department’s interest was influenced by financial considerations as can be seen in the amendments to the 1879 Act which emphasized the cost of the inquest and set strict limits on the expenses recoverable by the coroner.³⁵ Wherever possible the province offloaded the costs of the inquest onto municipalities.³⁶

30. GR1327, Reel B2389, 1912/13, deposition of G.F. Curtis.

31. GR1327, Reel B2377, 1899/7, testimony of J. Westwood.

32. GR1327, Reel B2391, 1913/11, deposition of J. Shaw.

33. GR1327, Reel B2377, 1899/7, deposition of J. Westwood.

34. Nesbet, “Suicide as Literary Fact,” 827.

35. “Coroners’ Act 1885,” *Statutes of the Province of British Columbia* (Victoria, 1885).

“Coroners’ Act Amendment Act” (1913), *Statutes of the Province of British Columbia* (Victoria, 1913).

36. “An Act Respecting the Expenses of Coroners’ Inquests Held Within Municipalities” (1887),

Nevertheless, the inquest met provincial needs by providing the first bureaucratic link in a chain of intervention that often led to criminal charges.³⁷ As well, the inquest, like institutions such as the criminal courts or the public school, bound local communities to the state by providing a standardized ethical and social code on geographically, economically, and ethnically diverse groups.³⁸ As such, the inquest process legitimated a particular moral and social construct of Anglo-Canadian society embodied in the coroner himself.

The coroner's primary responsibility was to investigate violent death. Section 2 of the "Coroner's Act (1879)" required the coroner to hold an inquest on all persons, not residing in a provincial institution, who had "died from violence or by culpable or negligent conduct either of himself or of others under such circumstances as require investigation and not through mere accident or mischance."³⁹ This section of the Act, never amended, gave a certain amount of discretion to the coroner who relied on his own knowledge of the community as well as information provided by the police or attending physician when deciding whether to hold an inquest.⁴⁰

Statutes of the Province of British Columbia (Victoria, 1887).

37. These linkages have been examined by historians using the Attorney General's collections. See for example, Angus McLaren, "Illegal Operations: Women, Doctors, and Abortion 1886-1939," *Journal of Social History* 26 (1993): 797-816. See also the homicide files held in BCARS, GR419, British Columbia Attorney General, Court Records, which usually contain a copy of the inquisition form and the depositions of witnesses.
38. A rich literature exists on the role of the public school in western societies as an assimilative institution. For Canadian examples see J.T.M. Anderson, *The Education of the New Canadian: A Treatise on Canada's Greatest Educational Problem* (London, 1918); Susan E. Houston, "Politics, Schools, and Social Change in Upper Canada," in Michael B. Katz and Paul H. Mattingly (eds.), *Education and Social Change: Themes from Ontario's Past* (New York, 1975); Susan E. Houston and Alison L. Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto, 1988), 273-274. For examples of the criminal justice system see Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago, 1993), 9, 87-89 and Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto, 1991), 76-78.
39. Section 2, "An Act Respecting Coroners," 42 Victoria Chapter 9. 29 April 1879, *Statutes of the Province of British Columbia*, (Victoria, 1879). Inmates of provincial institutions were covered by Section 3 of the Act.
40. While amendments to the Act did not remove the discretionary powers of the coroner, instructions from the Attorney General's department and community sentiment delimited the use of such power. See for example, GR1323, Reel B2076, File 5415-7-11, Deputy Attorney General to A.P. Diplock, 18 August 1910, which states, citing the Act, the grounds for holding an inquest but then continues: "It is not, however, necessary in all cases to hold an Inquest but the Coroner may have an investigation and if he thinks an Inquest is unnecessary he, in his discretion, may decline to hold an Inquest." GR1323, Reel B2081, File 5086-7-12, John West to Attorney General, 17 June 1912, in which a family disagrees with the coroner's decision not to hold an inquest in what they feel is a case of homicide. See also "Instructions to Coroner," *Boundary Creek Times*, 13 May 1899, which criticizes the Attorney General's regulations and suggests that "it were much better that too many inquests should be held than that one case

The decision to hold an inquest made, the coroner ordered the sheriff to summon a jury who he then took to view the body. After showing the jurors the body, the coroner directed the calling and questioning of witnesses. He then recorded the findings of the jury. Having held the inquest, the Coroner's Act required him to deposit all inquisitions and the evidence heard with the Attorney General. As well, the Act required him, annually, to compile and send a list of all inquests and verdicts to the Provincial Secretary for registration.⁴¹ Acting as judge and administrator of his district's violent deaths, in theory, the coroner was an agent of the state, subject to an Act which standardized the treatment of every sudden violent death across the province.

State interests often matched those of Anglo-Canadians at the local level. The inquest provided an opportunity for the community to voice concerns regarding the sexual and moral behaviour of some residents. As well, through the coroner's investigations, the local community could define itself by identifying bodies as those of residents or strangers, and by classifying sudden deaths into categories such as natural and unnatural.⁴² In practice, the coroner was not only a provincial officer, he also belonged to the local community, shared the same attitudes to the deceased as other members, and was sensitive to the constitution of the community and its needs.

This dual identity not only permitted the coroner to serve as an unofficial arbiter of community morals but legitimated the values of his particular class and ethnic group. In one rather bizarre instance, the coroner took the jurors, with press in tow, to view the body of a young woman at the house where she had died. The press dutifully described how the body was laid out and commented on the pool of blood on the floor. No matter what the cause of death, Coroner Jackson would not have dreamed of invading the privacy of a respectable family in this way nor would he have prevented them from cleaning the house after the police had concluded their investigation.⁴³ Jurors viewed most bodies at the hospital, police station or undertaker's parlour, then either held the inquest in a separate room of the same building or moved to some other public building. The coroner, in this instance, was acting as a morally outraged member of a community rather than as the local administrator of the Coroner's Act.

Indeed, the coroner could serve his community's needs even when acting as a supposedly neutral officer of the government. One coroner alerted the Attorney General to a case which he hoped would lead to criminal prosecution of members of the Chinese community. Before holding the inquest on a woman who had died in a Chinese

requiring investigation should be neglected."

41. Section 13, "An Act Respecting Coroners" (1879).

42. See GR432, Inquisitions Register, Vol. I, II.

43. GR1327, Reel B2373, 1889/3. "One More Unfortunate," *Victoria Daily Times*, 24 June 1889. This is the only case of female suicide in which this sort of intimidation occurred. Not only would the parading of the jury and press through the house be humiliating, the presence of the body would have been incredibly bad for business. I can only assume that the coroner's intentions were punitive.

“den,” Coroner Reddick sent a telegram to the Attorney General’s Department suggesting that crown counsel attend the inquest.⁴⁴ As well, by questioning witnesses, the coroner could direct the attention of the jurors to certain evidence or suggest that the testimony of some witnesses was more believable than that of others. After repeating several times that he “did not throw her in the river,” one witness, desperate to be believed by the coroner, summoned up the spectre of the wages of sin by claiming that “she said she was tired of that way of life.”⁴⁵ That the coroner could believe, and the case was judged a suicide. In practice, then, the coroner often voiced his own beliefs and permitted witnesses and jurors to voice theirs. By legally recording these opinions, he legitimated the surveillance and exclusion of those who did not live up to his standards of respectability. In so doing, he reconciled the needs of the local community with those of the state.⁴⁶

While the male coroner occupied a middle ground between state and community, the male jurors represented a specific section of the local community. As farmers, tradesmen, clerks, or craftsmen, most jurors represented the “respectable” white Anglo-Canadian male working class. With no occupational or regulatory ties to any level of government, they were free to apply their own beliefs and standards of behaviour to the testimony they heard. At many inquests, jurors were neighbours or friends of the suicide completer’s family and often felt obligated to find explanations for these deaths which would compromise neither the family nor the community.⁴⁷ Verdicts on the deaths of respectable women focused, then, on the mental illness of the deceased or on the effects of grief or physical illness on the mental state of the woman. These considerations did not apply when male jurors were asked to judge women of whom they disapproved.

Jurors tended to disregard the testimony of women witnesses in the deaths of prostitutes and to ignore their discourse of respectability. Verdicts did not incorporate

44. BCARS, GR429, British Columbia Attorney General, Correspondence Inward 1872-1937 (GR429), Box 5, File 5, 990/01, R. Reddick to Deputy Attorney General, 21 March 1901.

45. GR1327, Reel B2377, 1899/7, testimony of R.G.

46. The coroner’s authority to record and legitimate the local community’s interpretation of the death can be found in section 12 of “An Act Respecting Coroners.” (1879) which did not permit a jury’s findings or “judgment . . . [to] be quashed, stayed, or reversed.”

47. For a discussion on the vested interest of coroners and jurors see Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident and Murder in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (Cambridge and London, 1979), 15. For the role of the jurors in suicide inquests see also Michael MacDonald, “The Secularization of Suicide in England, 1660-1800,” *Past and Present* III (1986): 65; Michael MacDonald, “The Medicalization of Suicide in England: Laymen, Physicians, and Cultural Change, 1500-1870,” *Milbank Quarterly* 67, Suppl. 1 (1989): 70. My earlier examination of suicide indicated that jurors tried hard to spare the feelings of respectable families by finding verdicts which either left the verdict open or which explained away the act of suicide as “temporary insanity.” See Susan J. Johnston, “‘To Be Happy You Must Be Good’: British Columbia Women’s Response to Nineteenth-Century Social Conventions—Suicide,” (University of Victoria, BA Honours Essay, 1989), 43-51.

any aspect of the women's evidence as to the physical or mental health of the deceased. The testimony of immoral women simply could not be believed.⁴⁸ While jurors more readily believed male witnesses in such cases, they recognized that the client/lover's narrative existed to dispel suspicions that these men had killed the women. Accordingly, their narratives created little weight. Instead jurors relied on their own reading of the body bolstered by the testimony of "expert" witnesses who projected a comfortable respectability and utilized a scientific and objective manner. Like the male "experts," jurors employed an objective tone, creating an understated narrative of concerned citizenry discernable in their written verdicts.

From the initial examination of the body to the signing of the verdict, jurors viewed each case from the privileged position of the Anglo-Canadian male. This male gaze directed itself at the body of the dead woman and at those who testified at the inquest, and then inscribed itself in riders attached to verdicts. Jurors demanded that "hop joints" be abolished, that pharmaceutical regulations be enforced, that brothels outside of "restricted districts" be removed.⁴⁹ The emphasis on official intervention found in the riders and in the correspondence directed to the Attorney General suggests that coroners and jurors used the inquest as a channel through which they could, first, voice their fears of uncontrolled sexual behaviour and interracial contact and, second, suggest solutions which would exclude the women and men who embodied these fears.

Within this discourse, class conflict between Anglo-Canadians played little part. Jurors and coroners seemed to identify themselves as integral members of a society founded on a common ethnic origin and shared expectations of behaviour. Occupation played no real role in this construction. That most of the prostitutes and their friends, lovers, and clients shared the same cultural background must have led to some discomfort.⁵⁰ While jurors felt comfortable in using the verdict rider to punish members

48. Karen Dubinsky has noted the lack of credibility afforded to "bad" women at rape trials held in Ontario. See Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*, 16.

49. See "Jury Gives an Open Verdict," *Rossland Miner*, 23 March 1901. GR429, Box 6, File 5, Item 1053/01, M.B. Abbott, Rossland to D.M. Eberts, Attorney General, 23 March 1901 for discussion on the jury rider on Chinese opium dens. GR1327, Reel B2380, 1904/8 for the rider requesting that "the proper officials in future do see that the Act regarding Sale of Poisons be vigorously enforced." GR1327, Reel B2389, 1912/13 for the rider which the coroner understood as a demand that prostitution be confined to Vancouver's restricted area but which the jurors actually generalized as "that this matter should be brought to the attention of the Police Commissioners." The Coroner reported to the Attorney General's department that "as requested by Jury" he had forwarded a copy of the Inquisition to the Police Commissioner. See, GR1323, Reel B2081, Item 5931-7-12, Thomas W. Jeffs to J.P. McLeod, 21 July 1912.

50. I am basing my argument on the ethnicity of prostitutes and witnesses on their names and on the convoluted efforts of the press to suggest that these people came from outside of British Columbia. Names such as Allen, Burns, Burton, Gibson, Gillingham, Stanhope, Wentworth, and Wilson exemplify the ethnicity of non-medical witnesses. For attempts to suggest that Canadian prostitutes were from elsewhere see "An Inquest," *Rossland Miner*, 21 March 1901: "She is stated to have come from the coast, but it is not absolutely certain that she was therefore

of racial minorities, in most cases ethnicity and race could not be used as a distinguishing and distancing motif. Despite a shared background, however, jurors did find ways to exclude members of their own ethnic group from their definition of community. Three women were known to come from the United States and so could be viewed as non-British. For the others, the discourse of respectability permitted class distinctions between jurors and the objects of their gaze to be reframed as the moral laxity of a classless group of outcasts. This refashioning of ethnic and class identity permitted jurors to exclude these women and their men from the Anglo-ethnic community to which the jurors themselves belonged, by birth and culture. Consequently, the inquest became a way of consolidating and affirming the hegemony of a particular self-defined, respectable, Anglo-Canadian group and of informing the living of the roles and behaviour expected of them.

While jurors directed their politics of exclusion toward the living, through verdict riders and the disbelief of some witnesses, the dead were excluded by the verdict itself. When faced with judging the actual death of prostitutes, jurors and coroners did not separate representations of prostitution from the individual's lived experience. These women had fulfilled and exemplified the prescriptive canon that justified suicide as a proper end to a life of shame and degradation, the logical consequence of an "irregular life."⁵¹ Yet death alone did not excuse a life of sexual disorder. A prostitute's suicide had still to be differentiated from those of respectable women. She had to be excluded from the community of the respectable dead just as her living colleagues were excluded from the community of the respectable living.

British Columbia jurors seldom used the traditional British verdict of exclusion, *felo de se* (self murder), to label any of British Columbia's female suicide completers.⁵² This harsh legal verdict traditionally had sentenced the dead to ritual mutilation and burial outside the confines of the churchyard. Instead, jurors found a middle ground between exiling the felonious dead and verdicts of "temporary insanity" which permitted respectable women to be reintegrated in death with the larger community.⁵³ Verdicts

a British Columbian;" "Cloak of Mystery Surrounds Suicide of Young Woman," *The Sun*, 11 July 1912: "Other than that the girl came from New Westminster several days ago nothing is known of her;" and "One More Unfortunate," *Daily Columbian*, 12 January 1901: "The mortal remains of a young woman, who has been known in her life in this city as . . ."

51. "Interior Topics," *Greenwood Miner*, 11 August 1899.

52. In only 4 out of 158 cases, did the jurors actually use the *felo de se* verdict and the ritual description that accompanied its use. The verdict, which in one case read that the woman "feloniously, wilfully and of her malice aforethought did hang choke suffocate and strangle herself" (GR1327, Reel B2390, 1894/52), is identical to the formal charge of murder set before the Supreme Court. These verdicts were written before 1901 and labelled as felons three aboriginal woman and one Chinese woman.

53. Seventy-five of ninety-eight caucasian women not labelled as prostitutes received either open verdicts such as "found drowned" or had the verdict of suicide softened by "while of unsound mind." The other 23 women shared one characteristic which permitted jurors to ignore testimony which could have pointed to an insanity verdict. Some women were strangers to the

included terms such as “self administered,” “by her own hand,” or “presumptive evidence of suicide” when jurors considered the intent of the act obvious.⁵⁴ In cases where the intent could not be proved, jurors used language which indicated the voluntary nature of the death, then stated that no evidence had come forward to show intent. “From an overdose of morphia but by whom or how the same was administered there is no evidence before these jurors to show” read the verdict in one case; “by drinking carbolic acid, whether accidentally or with suicidal intent we are unable to determine,” read that of another.⁵⁵ While not labelled as murderers, the jurors had no doubts that the deaths were self administered by immoral but sane women.

If bad but not mad characterizes the jurors’ response to the deaths of prostitutes, the two insanity verdicts handed out, one in 1901 the other in 1913, seem at first incongruous. A closer reading suggests, however, that the jurors in these cases considered these two women to be quite unlike their colleagues. The 1901 verdict, “by taking carbolic acid while temporarily insane” rewarded a woman whose past history of prostitution the jurors may not have known:⁵⁶ press reports alluding to her past were published only after the jury had written its verdict.⁵⁷ The other verdict went to a woman with a bizarre and convoluted past. Faced with multiple aliases, tales of drug addiction and murder, and, worst of all, the spectre of a white woman choosing to marry a Chinese man, the jurors capitulated.⁵⁸ Mrs. Ping’s behaviour was excused as that of a mad woman.

Verdicts which excluded prostitutes from their respectable, patriarchal community were affirmed by the local press. Like the jurors, the press used the deaths of prostitutes to explore fears of uncontrollable women and interracial sexual contact.⁵⁹ Unlike the dry

local community, travellers passing through the area. A few were alcoholics. Others — widows, deserted wives, single women working as nurses — lived apart from their families. Jurors viewed all these women as undeserving of the verdict accorded to the “respectable” daughters, wives, and mothers who lived and died under the control of male relatives.

54. See GR1327, Reel B2373, 1889/3; Reel B2377, 1899/7; Reel B2380, 1904/8; Reel B2383, 1908/9.

55. GR1327, Reel B2378, 1901/2; Reel B2389, 1912/13.

56. GR1327, Reel B2378, 1901/6.

57. The standard headline identifying the suicide as that of a prostitute—“One More Unfortunate”—and the veiled allusions to her past, “where the woman has lived a quiet life for that time, at any rate,” appeared shortly after the inquest was held. See “One More Unfortunate,” *Daily Columbian*, 12 January 1901. See also “Westminster News,” *Daily News-Advertiser*, 13 January 1901: “Death had resulted from carbolic acid poisoning, the woman having deliberately taken the fatal draught.”

58. GR1327, Reel B2391, 1913/11.

59. Since the mid 1980s, historians and literary critics have increasingly problematized the role of the press as the disseminator of information. The print media’s role as the producer rather than recorder of meaning about and to a culture is now an integral part of many analyses of both sexuality and suicide. See, for example, Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*, 93-95; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, 317-322; Angus McLaren, “Illegal Operations,” 809-810; Walkowitz, *City of Deadly Delight*, chapter three. For a recent purulent and

verdicts and riders written by jurors, however, the press produced morality plays written in two quite separate literary styles. The first genre, that of the objective reporter of observable facts, utilized a dry unemotional tone, scientific language, and plenty of numbers to give the effect of objectivity and accuracy. This “proved” that the deaths of prostitutes were inevitable. The second genre, a combination of melodrama and sermon, presented every stereotype ever applied to prostitutes and exaggerated the circumstances surrounding the deaths. This style evoked the image of a father outraged over the immoral behaviour of his young. These genres were not incompatible with each other. Both styles often appeared in the same issue, occasionally in the same piece.⁶⁰

If the styles differed, however, the message did not. Compare, for example, press reports of two deaths that involved interracial social contact. Press coverage of the death of a prostitute in Rossland employed the objective genre, the reporter reproducing the evidence given at the inquest almost exactly as he had heard it. He began with the empanelling of the jury, then led his readers through the testimony and questioning of the witnesses. His report finished with the reading of the verdict.⁶¹ To his narrative the reporter added information he thought might be of use to his readers. The “colored” racial identity of two male friends of the deceased, for instance, was skilfully incorporated into a description of the swearing in of witnesses.⁶²

Besides reporting “factually” on the inquest, the reporter affected a distanced and objective tone which established a sociological rather than prurient interest in the object of his gaze. “The finger nails of the deceased were long and trimmed in the Chinese fashion, which would tend to show that she had some knowledge of the ways of Chinamen,” was one comment.⁶³ Such descriptions established the danger of social or sexual contact with other races without belabouring the point. The juxtaposition of uncontrolled female sexuality and extraracial identity signified a racialized as well as gendered perception of respectability.⁶⁴ While hidden in a distanced and objective report the warning to all women was quite clear. Caucasian women who had social or sexual contact with African-American or Asian men died.

unproblematic use of the press as a source for the examination of prostitution, see Richard F. Selcer, “Fort Worth and the Fraternity of Strange Women,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 96 (1992): 77-79.

60. See, for example, “Some Statistics,” laid out beside an editorial, “The Suicide,” which used melodrama to examine “the misery of her inner life.” *Daily Colonist*, 25 June 1889.
61. “Probably Suicided,” *Rossland Miner*, 22 March 1901; “Jury Gives an Open Verdict,” *Rossland Miner*, 23 March 1901.
62. Identification by race does not appear in the correspondence between Coroner and Attorney General. See GR429, Box 6, File 5, 1038/01, M.B. Abbott to D.M. Eberts, Attorney General, 22 March 1901, and 1053/01, Abbott to Eberts, 23 March 1901.
63. “An Inquest,” *Rossland Miner*, 21 March 1901.
64. For discussion on the conflation of race and sexuality see Mariana Valverde, “‘When the Mother of the Race is Free’: Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism,” in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (eds.), *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History* (Toronto, 1992), 14.

The death of the “Queen of the Chinese” exemplifies the use of melodrama to produce the same warning.⁶⁵ Her “mixed Italian and Chinese blood” played on fears of racial conflict and, in a fanciful interpretation of evidence provided by the housekeeper of the Winnipeg Rooms, the reporter wrote that “she was one of the most powerful influences in the affairs of the underworld on the Pacific Coast, being connected, it is believed, with the Black Hand or Mafia, the dreaded Italian society; as well as one of the few women members of the Chinese Masons.”⁶⁶ An elopement with a “Holy Roller” minister at the age of “scarcely fifteen” suggested a relationship between sexual and religious fervour, implying at the same time that no staid Anglican or Presbyterian minister would have behaved in such a way. The shooting of the older, respectable brother who thought her too young to marry exemplified the menace of the uncontrolled female.⁶⁷ The young woman “drew a gun of her own and before the officers who were holding her could prevent the crime, shot him three times.”⁶⁸ Her superhuman strength must finally have failed her; in a “pitiful state of terror,” the young woman succumbed to the “deadly fumes” of an otherwise innocuous gas stove.⁶⁹ That none of this, except the death by gas poisoning, turned out to be true did not faze the reporters who repeated all the previous tales while enthusiastically praising the new fingerprinting system responsible for finally identifying the dead woman.⁷⁰ She turned out to be a young woman of British descent, born in the United States, who had spent most of her life in Victoria and Vancouver.⁷¹

In the reports on the death of this woman, physical decay — envisioned as “the deadly ravages of tuberculosis” — bolstered representations of social disorder.⁷² Surprisingly, the ravages of decay did not seem to have made much of an impression on the woman’s actual appearance. The press made much of the woman’s beauty and speculated that it was her appearance that had tempted both the Chinese men with whom she lived and the minister who had seduced her. Nevertheless, underneath the surface, the “deadly ravages” were doing their work. The queen of the Chinese was represented as a living corpse.

65. “Gas Fumes Kill Queen of Chinese,” *The Sun*, 6 May 1913.

66. “On Parole for Murder of Brother,” *The Sun*, 07 May 1913. The housekeeper had actually said: “She told me she belonged to the Black Hand and she associated with Italians. One night there was a mark of a knife on her door. She said that was a threat.” The housekeeper went on to state that the suicide was “due to liquor and drugs.” Clearly she did not think the deceased should be believed.

67. “On Parole for Murder of Brother,” *The Sun*, 7 May 1913.

68. “On Parole for Murder of Brother,” *The Sun*, 7 May 1913.

69. “On Parole for Murder of Brother,” *The Sun*, 7 May 1913.

70. “She posed as Slayer for Years,” *The Sun*, 8 May 1913. “American Girl’s Suicide,” *Daily News-Advertiser*, 8 May 1913. “Not Esther Mitchell,” *Daily Province*, 7 May 1913.

71. Convicted under several different names for prostitution, theft, and drug-related charges, she had successfully impersonated the American murderer for some years and had been convicted under that name in 1909. See, GR429, Box 17, File 1, 3547/09, F.S. Hussey, Superintendent of Provincial Police, to W.J. Bowser, Attorney General, 21 August 1909.

72. “Gas Fumes Kill Queen of Chinese,” *The Sun*, 6 May 1913.

In another case, one not involving racial “intermingling,” moral decay — described as the “corroding unhappiness which they are almost continually suffering” — provided the same analogy. The editor stressed that “her cheerfulness was only on the surface A fallen woman is in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand an utter wreck.”⁷³ Respectable citizens “did not dream of the misery of her inner life”⁷⁴ For the Anglo-Canadian press, then, uncontrolled female sexuality embodied in the body of the prostitute became the horror of racial miscegenation and of social and moral disorder, symbolized by this hidden decay. Press narratives served the same purpose as those produced by the jurors. They evoked a sense of community by excluding those who did not fit its parameters.

Moreover, the press expropriated the lives and deaths of these women. The reporters’ gaze at times seems somewhat pornographic as if, in death, the prostitute was forced to service every member of the community, not just those who had contracted for her services in life. The difference was, of course, that the reporters rather than the prostitute controlled the exchange. Through the melodramas and objective reports, the press explored and exploited intimate details of the lives of these “brazen” women. They directed their readers to turn their gaze onto the “body of the dead girl lying on a bed with her hands across her breast. In her hands were a few beautiful flowers”⁷⁵ Descriptions of the dead woman, in another case described as “judging from her appearance after death . . . very handsome,” were interspersed with descriptions of bizarre behaviour in life.⁷⁶ A reporter informed his readers that one woman had often been found “lying prostrate over [a] young man’s grave at the Cemetery.”⁷⁷ The *Victoria Daily Colonist* always stressed the details of the supposed initial seduction that led a woman to a life of sin.⁷⁸ It seems that in order to exclude these women, the press first had to control their bodies and reorder their lives.

While juries and the press used the inquest process to create a sense of community through exclusion, their narrative was distanced — they viewed rather than touched the body. Nor did these male voyeurs separate fictional representations of the prostitute from the reality of these women’s individual lives, discernable mainly in the testimony of the woman with whom they lived and worked. Instead, they used the prostitute to symbolize sexual and racial danger, and to delimit a respectable Anglo-Canadian identity.

Perhaps the politics of exclusion espoused by the jurors and press worked only too well for, by 1914, this provincial identity seemed truly ensconced. Many British Columbians had learned to see themselves as members of a group who shared the same

73. “The Suicide,” *Daily Colonist*, 25 June 1889.

74. “The Suicide,” *Daily Colonist*, 25 June 1889.

75. “One More Unfortunate,” *Victoria Daily Times*, 24 June 1889.

76. “Death Under Suspicious Circumstances,” *Daily British Colonist*, 09 May 1885.

77. “Drank Poison to Drown Memory of a Friend,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, 01 June 1904.

78. See for example, “A Sunday Tragedy,” *Daily Colonist*, 25 June 1889. “The Suicide,” *Daily British Colonist*, 10 May 1885.

values and beliefs regardless of where they resided. Examining heterosexual conflict in Ontario, Karen Dubinsky argues that the isolated communities in the north slowly learned to accept the state, rather than the community, as the regulator and arbiter of morality.⁷⁹ Inquest testimony and press reports on death suggest that this process also took place in British Columbia and, in its turn, effected the community response to suicide. The overt use of the dead body of the prostitute as a symbol of social decay did not survive World War I.

Two factors seem to have contributed to the demise of the prostitute as symbol. First, by 1910, directions from the Attorney General, which limited the discretionary powers of the coroner in fact if not in law, fundamentally changed the nature of the inquest and the response to prostitute's deaths. Coroners' decisions increasingly reflected provincial priorities rather than those of the local community.⁸⁰ Inquests important only to the local community, such as those conducted to identify the bodies of unknown men and women or those which addressed local morality, were discontinued.⁸¹ As a result, the deaths of every individual no longer demanded community scrutiny, and how prostitutes died became a matter of private rather than public discussion. The Inquest no longer functioned to exclude the dead from the local community, but instead, over the next few decades, became a means of identifying those deaths for which the province or municipality might be held legally responsible.

Second, adding to the impact of these regulatory changes were new anxieties over female sexuality in all classes of society.⁸² As an outcast, the prostitute proved to be a remarkably unstable symbol of social and sexual disorder. In British Columbia, the discovery that all women possessed a sexuality eliminated the prostitute as a meaningful symbol, and over time she was slowly replaced as the representation of uncontrolled female sexuality by the unattached single woman.⁸³ Melodramatic press reports of

79. Dubinsky, *Improper Advances*, 87-89.

80. See, GR1323, Reel B2108, File 35-7-14, E. Weddell to Attorney General, 29 December 1913.

81. GR1323, Reel B2076, File 5415-7-11, Deputy Attorney General to A.P. Diplock, 18 August 1910; Reel B2081, File 5930-7-12, Thos. W. Jeffs to Attorney General, 05 July 1912; Reel B2081, File 35-7-14, E. Weddell to Attorney General, 29 December 1913.

82. See Carolyn Strange, "From Modern Babylon to a City upon a Hill: The Toronto Social Survey Commission of 1915 and the Search for Sexual Order in the City," in Roger Hall, William Westfall, and Laurel Sefton MacDowell (eds.), *Patterns of the Past: Interpreting Ontario's History* (Toronto, 1988), 255-277. Wendy Mitchinson argues that doctors had always recognized, albeit unwillingly, women's sexual feelings. Medical discourse was one of controlling and moderating these feelings to a gendered and socially acceptable expression, i.e. for procreative purposes. Mitchinson, *"The Nature of their Bodies": Women and their Doctors in Victorian Canada* (Toronto, 1991), chapter four. See also Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto, 1988), 87, 163-64.

83. This replacement of the prostitute by all women was not solely a British Columbia phenomenon. See Adler, "Streetwalkers, Degraded Outcasts, and Good-for-Nothing Huzzies," 744-5; A. Cheree Carlson, "Creative Casuistry and Feminist Consciousness: The

prostitutes' suicides disappeared, to be replaced by equally melodramatic accounts of sexually active young women who threw themselves off boats or poisoned themselves when jilted by their lovers. But these cases seemed to happen with the same regularity as the suicides of prostitutes — that is, not very often at all.⁸⁴

When combined with the new regulations to coroners, the new emphasis on controlling the sexuality of all single women meant that the death of a prostitute no longer evoked a community response. The prostitute's body was no longer dissected physically or metaphorically. The amputation of a diseased segment of society through the ritual viewing and physical dismembering of the prostitute at the inquest and post mortem examination ended. On 5 August 1914, the Attorney General received a letter regarding a prostitute's suicide from a coroner in Prince George, W.A. Richardson wrote that the woman "had been despondent over news she had received of the death of her sister, and drank a tumbler full of lysol . . . I did not consider an inquest necessary."⁸⁵ Marginalized and excluded from the community in life, she now was to be ignored in death.

Rhetoric of Moral Reform," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 26; and Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse," *Victorian Studies* 32 (1989): 185.

84. See "Woman Leaps from Boat in Narrows," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 16 June 1914 and "Tragic Discovery at Local Hotel," *The Daily Colonist*, 12 July 1910.

85. GR1323, Reel B2108, File 8528-7-14, W.A. Richardson to Attorney General, 5 August 1914.