

“Finding light in so much darkness”: Violence, Youth and (masculine) Subjectivities

Bryan Hogeveen

Department of Sociology,

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta

bryan.hogeveen@ualberta.ca

Caleb: It's all violence, put it that way.

Me: *Your whole life?*

Caleb: It was all violence!

Violence is tragically interwoven into the daily experience of many of Canada's Aboriginal young people. Many strive to escape the ravages of violence only to become its fatality. Aboriginal people are on average younger, less well educated, less likely to be employed, more likely to be homeless and exceedingly likely to be incarcerated than any other group (Statistics Canada, 2006). At the same time, their lives are often overburdened by violence. Aboriginal women, for example, are three times more likely to be victims of domestic violence (Statistics Canada, 2006). Moreover, the homicide rate for Aboriginal peoples grossly exceeds that of other Canadians. Between 1997 and 2000 the Aboriginal homicide rate was seven times that of non-Aboriginal peoples (Statistics Canada 2006). Why is it the case that violence disproportionately affects Aboriginal peoples? How do systemic conditions become embedded in ontological being?

I begin to address these questions through the illuminating and tragic story of a young Aboriginal man I call Caleb.¹ I did not seek him out, but met him while researching the impact of neoliberal restructuring on Canada's inner city. Upon our first meeting he waved me over – I must have appeared severely out of place. He shook my hand with vigor just before taking me on a tour of the facility where he now works as a youth councilor. On meeting Caleb one is immediately struck by his openness, good humour and his love and devotion for his family. But, there is another side to Caleb that is carefully hidden beneath this carefully crafted exterior. You can see there is a past self he guards carefully, but which lurks dangerously close to the surface. That he is well acquainted with violence and – perhaps more so – pain is manifest in his gang tattoos and scarred exterior. After spending time with him it becomes clear that he, like many other Aboriginal youth, continuously struggles to escape once and for all the violence that torments his life.

Interrogating how Caleb's life became saturated with violence allows us to think critically about not only the structural conditions (i.e. colonialism) that are manifested in his abusive behaviour, but the subjective meaning of violence. Investigations of violent lives expose the social processes and structural conditions intrinsic to violent ontologies. As such, Caleb's story affords us lessons in the acquisition of a violent masculinity that is cloaked in power, control and dominance

¹ To protect the identity of my research subjects all names have been changed.

(Messerschmidt, 2000; 2004). Perhaps most important, Caleb's experience is also instructive for what it reveals about exiting a violent ontology. Much of Caleb's life today is antithetical to his former violent self. Shaking the dark cloud of violence was, however, grueling. Although he would like nothing more than to render his former self a stranger, his past self continues to haunt his present being. The ghostly echo of his violent past returns again and again to remind him of the uncomfortable truth of his earlier self. In many ways, Caleb remains trapped in a violent ontology. Simply, escape is never a complete and absolute break from an undesirable past.

Caleb's story reveals how a violent self is situated within an ethos of intertwining structural and micro conditions that are folded into the individual and manifested in violence. I suggest that his life was contoured by violent masculinity, poverty, racism, alcohol and drug abuse, misogyny and intergenerational violence. More important, I argue that these problems are fundamentally and (almost) irrevocably the product of a violent colonial past. Before moving to this discussion it is important that I provide some background that will help frame the discussion and provide necessary context.

Alberta and Edmonton

Alberta is a Western Canadian province boasting a population of 3.4 million people who are mostly located in the narrow corridor extending from Edmonton to Calgary. It is sandwiched between the Rocky Mountains on the West and the prairies on the East. It is well known for its oil production, Calgary Stampede, hockey prowess, and conservative government with a decidedly neoliberal bent (Laxer and Harrison, 1995).

Bolstered by natural gas and oil revenues, Alberta has emerged as Canada's most affluent province. Despite provincial coffers busting at the seams, the social welfare net that caught and propped up the downtrodden throughout most of the 20th century was seriously eroded as the economy gained pace. Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s sweeping, indeed draconian, welfare cuts targeted the poor, but sadly have not as dramatically reversed course in more affluent times. Today, Canada's richest province now boasts some of the lowest social assistance rates in the country (Bergman, 2004). Indeed, between 1986 and 1996 – as measured in constant dollars – Alberta welfare benefits for a single individual deemed employable were slashed by 42.5%, while single parents with a child saw their benefits erode by 23.6% (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2004). Success by 6, a United Way sponsored prevention initiative dedicated to improving children's lives, revealed a familiar neoliberal pattern: while the richest segments of society benefit significantly from the current economic boom, the poorest segments face inimical

conditions (Success by 6, 2002).

But this condition seems contradictory. If wealth is increasing within a province, then it logically follows that all should benefit in one way or another. But this simply has not been born out. Instead, our's is an era of extreme opulence for the wealthy and severe marginalization for the poor. Rather than attempting to reverse or alter this regrettable course in more robust economic times the provincial government has anchored it. Alleviating or, at the very least, lessening the pains of poverty seems beyond this government's purview. Any and all programmes are expendable to a government more intent on the proverbial bottom line than social justice. An inherent and offensive contradiction here is that at a time when numbers of homeless and those otherwise living in abject poverty are swelling, this affluent province has continued to cut funding for social programmes that hold potential to lessen poverty's impact. On 7 April 2009, in its infinite neoliberal wisdom, the provincial government axed its "Wild Rose Foundation" - a group who, for 25 years, allocated lottery funds of about \$8 million to social service agencies. Community service groups such as food banks, women's shelters and inner city children's programmes depended on the grants of up to \$50,000 to fund their basic operations.

Aboriginal peoples are the most affected. They are more likely to be homeless, to be in dire need of social assistance, to live in abject poverty and to fall victim to many forms of violence (Indian and North Affairs, 2001; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Why should this be the case? What happened to condition such a tragic state of affairs? In a word, colonialism. During five centuries of European occupation the Indigenous peoples of Canada have been ravaged by invading armies almost to the point of extinction, had their spiritual beliefs and religious systems disrupted and devalued by missionaries, been forcibly removed from land they inhabited for millennia, and had their languages obfuscated by cultural imperialists. Residential schools, the reserve system and intrusive state interventions are at the heart of the issue (Miller, 1996; Hogeveen, 1999). Clearly, centuries old injustices continue to haunt Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2003) argues in their report on domestic violence that: "The legacy of the residential school experience has been well documented and is clearly linked to symptoms of post traumatic-stress disorder, as well as to a wide range of social problems, including addiction and physical and sexual abuse. In general, this body of research, theories and models all point to the same general conclusion – family violence and abuse in Aboriginal communities has its roots, at least in part, in historical trauma and in the social realities created by

those historical processes.” It is into this ethos of violence conditioned by a dismal colonial heritage that Caleb was born.

Caleb’s Story: Violent Masculinity

Violence is central to Caleb’s life, to his identity and to his ontological being. In many ways, as the opening quotation suggests, it IS his life. Was this always the case? For as long as he can remember there has been violence. Remembering a time when his life was not disrupted by fighting and abuse is difficult for the 27 year old. Although his father has never taken an active role in his life, his relationship with his mother largely shaped his childhood experience. While she is and has been a presence, it is through her that he first became acquainted with violence.

From the time he was 6 he was charged with the care of his brother and sister. No matter what manner of tantrum he pulled, his mother would escape to drink at the local pub. Caleb recalls that:

...she wouldn’t come home all night. Sometimes, I’d put my siblings to bed, and you know, I remember sitting in front of the window looking up at the nearby office tower for hours and hours, wondering if she was ok. Sometimes I’d fall asleep. Sometimes she’d come home and be pissed out of her tree [intoxicated] and stuff like that.

Caleb cared for his mother deeply. Forced into a caretaker role very early in his life he became responsible for not only his siblings, but also for his mother. For fear she may die of a drug overdose or alcohol poisoning Caleb spent many restless nights sleeping beside his mother. On one occasion:

I remember one time she came home and her shirt was all bloody. She finally passed out in her bedroom and I sat by her bed all night because her nose was all messed up, eh? I don’t know if I found out what had happened at that age or if it was somewhere down the road that I found out that my cousin punched her out. My cousin weights between 350 and 400 hundred pounds. This was all because she wouldn’t buy any more beer at the bar. So he broke her nose. She couldn’t really breathe, so I stayed up with her all night, sitting by her bed, wondering if she would be ok...

Violence coloured Caleb’s childhood. His mother, like many other Aboriginal women in Canada, suffered at the hands of her male partners. Aboriginal women are all too often the tragic victims of violence. Not only are they three times more likely than non-indigenous women to suffer

domestic violence, but 90% of federally sentenced Aboriginal women report having been sexually abused (Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, 2006; Amnesty International, 2004). Further, the past two decades have witnessed over 500 Aboriginal women go missing. Most are presumed dead.

The topology of indigenous life is too often contoured by violence. It is in their homes and at a horrendously young age that many aboriginal youth witness and experience violence first hand. The parade of men his mother brought through the home abused Caleb physically, emotionally and sexually. On one occasion his mother left him with one of her suitors as she headed out to the bar. Shortly after her mother's departure the male began "doing shit." The memory was far too painful for him to continue on this topic, but suffice it to say that Caleb was deeply scarred by the sexual abuse he endured.

Males that came into and out of his life taught him many lessons in violence. He vividly recalls how "fuck you, you little bastard" was the first thing one of his mother's boyfriends uttered to him. They would get into particularly violent arguments, "he'd punch my mom around and stuff like that." He was 11 when he first witnessed a weapon used in an argument. This particular boyfriend,

... was drunk and my mom was out at the bar. He kicked me and my brother out of the house and locked the door on us and wouldn't let us come back in. It was Fall time and we sat outside. My mom pulled up in a cab and we told her what was going on and she kicked open the door and sliced him straight open with a butcher's knife. I think it was about a 7 inch cut to his face. Blood started squirting all over the place and all over me ...

Lessons in violence were omnipresent. Consider, for instance, the times Caleb was forced to listen while his mother was being sexually assaulted. On these occasions he would be watching over his mother while she slept off a heavy night of drinking.

I remember times where him and my mom would be in the bed. My mom would be sleeping and he would rape her while she was passed out. I didn't say anything cause I was just young, right? You know, I had to sit there and listen to it because I was too scared to get up?

The effect on Caleb was dramatic. Not only were these occasions psychologically traumatic, he was once again being afforded lessons in appropriate ways of being a man in the world. He was learning first hand that conflict could be won through violence and women who didn't comply

could be beaten into submission. He was becoming intimately aware that power, control and intimidation could all be won through violence.

That violence became central to Caleb's ontological being is not unanticipated. Countless studies have demonstrated the damaging effects witnessing domestic violence has on children and youth (Zerk and Proeve, 2009; Meltzer et. al. 2009; Stiles 2002). The young who encounter violence in the home are more likely to suffer from internalized disorders such as depression and anxiety (Jaffe, Hurley, and Wolfe, 1990). They are also much more likely to manifest their inner turmoil through cheating, bullying and fighting (Rhea et. al. 1996; Edleson, 1999). They are also more likely to reconcile conflicts through violence. When confronted with blocked ends or with non-compliance child witnesses frequently signal greater willingness to employ violence (Jaffe et. al. 1986).

It is not, then, unexpected that Caleb responded to the almost constant abuse of his mother in the only way he had been taught by her thuggish suitors. To protect the woman he loved dearly he turned to the only resource seemingly available – violence. He states: “I always thought to myself, one day I’m going to take care of things, one way, somehow.” For him, this meant fighting back. Two incidents are particularly illustrative. First, “I remember [one of my mom’s boyfriends] was freaking on my mom again and trying to hit her and stuff like that. I remember picking up a coffee mug and I threw it and it just so happened to hit him square dead between the eyes and split his head open.” Caleb felt empowered by this incident. He was getting older, stronger and increasingly convinced that it was his responsibility to defend his mother.

A second example (among many) occurred when Caleb’s mother barred her boyfriend from entering the family home.

... he came to the door and tried to get in, but mom didn’t let him and didn’t want him inside. So he took a shovel and hit my mom on the head with that shovel. So I jumped up right away and went running outside in my work boots, shorts and a muscle shirt. He happened to come to the house with two guys that he knew. As he was walking towards that truck to get back into it I ran up behind him and I kicked him in the back of the head and he fell down. As he fell down I started jumping on his head and his head kept bouncing off the ice and hitting my boot. Fuckin’ whatever, right? And the last stomp I gave him, his head hit the ground so hard he started snoring with his eyes open and his friends were yelling at me, “leave him alone, leave him alone, you’re going to kill him” and stuff like that. I had no regard for what they were saying...

Wanting to escape the violence that was increasingly taking over his life and end his mother's abuse, Caleb turned to the very thing he, at this time, abhorred. In the end, he had few opportunities and resources to act otherwise. He comments, that "at 13 I began to lash out, because I was old enough, I thought, to fight men." Fighting was what he knew. It was central to his being in the world and interwoven with his subjective understanding of conflict management. To be a man was to fight men and conducting himself thus empowered him to protect the woman he loved dearly. Protection and love meant violence and violence meant doing his duty as a man.

Violence was intrinsically bound up with his understanding of manliness. All the males in his life inculcated lessons in violent masculinity. For their part, his uncles would "basically tell us, you can't be a pussy. My uncles were all in the penitentiary and they'd come out and talk about how you had to be tough, men were tough, and you didn't let anybody punk you off or anything like that." Being a "real man" for Caleb meant being physically capable of protecting the women in his life and taking care of himself often through very violent means.

Caleb equated vulnerability with weakness and feelings of being less of a man. On one occasion he woke to find himself strapped to a hospital bed after a particularly brutal fight with a rival gang. He had been stabbed in the side and was suffering from a punctured lung. When his friends came to visit they informed him that the perpetrator was being treated for similar wounds down the hall.

... so the girl that comes to visit me knows one of the girls that's visiting him and they meet in the hallway. Well girl that is visiting buddy tells the girl that's visiting me, "well you better tell Caleb that he better watch out, cause buddy's boys are in the room with him right now and they're plotting to come into Caleb's room when nobody's around and finish the job." So, she's fucking in hysterics, comes into my room, and says, "oh my God, oh my God, he's gonna kill you ..."

Caleb's response was *nonchalant*: "and I said 'well if it's time to go, it's time to go.'" Unmoved, his girlfriend informed hospital officials of the murderous plot. The hospital's response was to be expected – a security guard was stationed outside his room 24 hours a day. Caleb was upset and to this day considers the response, "one of the worst things that ever happened to me."

Considering this is coming from a man who has been stabbed countless times, been beaten with a baseball bat, and watched his mother battered within an inch of her life, this response is surprising. However, if we shine the light back on our discussion of masculinity we can see that,

for Caleb, real men protect themselves and those they love – no matter what is required to this end. No assistance required.

Caleb was extremely weak and vulnerable in this predicament. By contrast real men are strong and never show signs of weakness. He explains his feelings:

I felt like I had no balls [me: seriously]. Ya, I felt like a pussy, because there's a security guard standing sitting in my room, watching me, to protect me. In my mind that's weakness. That was my most vulnerable point in life.

Vulnerability for Caleb meant weakness and weakness was antithetical to the violent masculine ethos which enveloped his life. Throughout their lives all men struggle to define themselves as men (Connell, 2005). When conventional means are seemingly unavailable and the only role models at hand project a violent being, a violent self is an almost certain outcome. James Messerschmidt (2000) attests that “because of its connection to hegemonic masculinity, for many men violence serves as a suitable resource for constructing masculinity.”

Toward Escape?

Few areas of Caleb's life remained untouched by the cruelty of violence. In his early life and then later on, violence was an imprisonment from which he wanted to break. He was never fully at peace with himself in the life he was leading. Finding ways to break free from what he calls “the darkness that enveloped my life” took several forms that can be loosely broken into retreatist and active strategies. I think of the former as behaviours involving withdrawal from the personal milieu through the assistance of, for example, drugs and/or alcohol. Here the self remains firmly planted in the current ethos with only momentary breaks brought about by intoxication. More active means of escape suggest an I that purposively flees itself through attempts to break the chains of its current ontological being. In contrast with a more permanent aspiration to leave, retreatism involves a temporary and intermittent interruption of being.

Drugs and alcohol were often Caleb's closest companions. From a very young age Caleb learned to medicate his pain through alcohol and drugs which were abundant. His home often played host to a steady stream of partiers who consumed every kind of intoxicant. He claims that “there'd be all night parties in my house and people would come over and there'd be drinking and partying. I would just basically sit around and watch it all night.” He could not help but be deeply influenced by this conduct.

Drugs and alcohol present significant problems for Aboriginal communities. A recent review by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2003) found that colonialism, specifically the residential school system, bears much of the burden. Residential school officials, most often with religious ties, forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their parents and cultural milieu for years at a time while they attempted to indoctrinate Euro-Canadian ideals. The effects were devastating. Removed from their communities and obliged to renounce their former selves in favour of alien values and symbols, residential school survivors never fully recovered. Torn from their parents and elders and forced to live at some distance from their traditional lands, their manner of being in the world was almost completely shaped by residential school officials who were notoriously physically violent and sexually abusive. Aboriginal authors, such as Fournier and Crey (1997), maintain that the intergenerational impact of residential schools, particularly as it relates to sexual and physical abuse, has collectively contributed to not only high rates of alcohol and drug abuse among Aboriginal peoples, but is manifested in other social, health and psychological problems (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2003).

Indigenous peoples, like Caleb, have a long history of medicating or coping with their torment through intoxicants (Waldram, Herring and Young, 1995; Denov and Campbell, 2001).

Witnessing the abuse of his mother tore at Caleb's soul. At 10 he began using pills as a means of escape. Recall that he was forced to remain quiet while his mother was being sexually assaulted. Incidents such as these wore on his resolve. He felt he could not endure the pain any longer. His mother was being abused, assaulted sexually and when present she was so drunk or stoned that taking care of her children proved almost impossible. Pills and alcohol eased the pain. Caleb maintains that the release intoxicants provided was temporary, however. With the wearing off of the intoxicant's high came the realization that the violence and abuse remained.

School permitted regular escape from his abusive home. Caleb maintains that despite being teased by older children, "it was an escape to go to school, because it got me away from the bitterness and the dark cloud that hung over where we lived." For a time, the school day provided a haven in a "bitter" and "dark" world. But even here, he confronted racism and disrespect from adults. On one occasion, Caleb was playing with a mushroom while waiting for his turn at bat during a baseball game. The teacher "took it away from me, and put it on the top of my head and squished it on the top of my head...He disrespected me and at that time I knew what respect was and I wanted it."

When he was in 7th grade Caleb's teacher scoffed, "you're a waste of life, you're never gonna amount to nothing, you're just a stupid Indian kid and you'll never amount to anything." Such

overt racism directly so squarely at his identity as a young Aboriginal person had a dramatic impact. School was no longer a sanctuary or reprieve from violence at home. It, too, became a cruel space that finally shattered his already withered self. Caleb was beginning to accept that his teacher's admonishments of his nothingness were fundamentally accurate. It seemed, for him, that the straight world, as he calls it, had little use for an Aboriginal young person who could never seem to fit in with his Caucasian contemporaries.

His worst fears – that he was actually little more than a drug user with little more to contribute than a violent self – were confirmed at 13 when he was incarcerated after a school yard fight resulted in his opponent being carted away to the hospital. As long as he can remember it had been drilled into his head that “...you're never going to amount to nothing. You're gonna be like your uncles, picking butts and drinking Lysol on the street.” For Caleb, the worst part was that it was the voice of his mother's boyfriend that he heard in his head. He continues: “when you hear it enough you start to believe it and I started to believe it. When I went to jail the first thing I thought about when I got locked in my cell was, he was right. He was right. Here I am in jail. I'm not even 16 yet. I'm in here and here we go. This is where it begins.”

With the narrative of imminent failure finally confirmed, Caleb descended further into violence and criminality. His road to a violent gang life was thus paved. What chance did he have? Politicians and media officials often pass-off violence as simply being the result of bad individual choices made in isolated contexts. Rather than being a simple *choice* whether to employ violence, to be or not be violent, Caleb's ontological being was shaped almost from infancy by his immersion in a regrettably violent milieu (Minaker and Hogeveen, 2009). He had been witness to and participant in violence, fighting, drug use, alcohol abuse, sexual violence and crime since he is able to recall. Almost all the significant adults in his life embarrassed, abused, disrespected and gave up on him. Exposed to only violent lessons in the meaning of manhood Caleb found very few opportunities to lead an existence wholly in accordance with societal ideals.

By the time he was 14 his teachers had completely given up hope. They were convinced Caleb lacked the necessary resources to find a life in the conventional world and refused to offer the kind of assistance necessary toward this end. Fights in and out of school were a daily occurrence. The result being that by grade 8 he was forcibly divided from almost all of the other students. He recounts:

I tasted my first experience with segregation in grade 8. In the school they had two time out rooms side by side. Me and Jason pretty much spent the whole year of grade 8 inside

those rooms. Everyday, all day long, the only time we came out was at lunch time and then after school. So we sat in there every day. We would sleep, sit around, draw on the walls, draw on the desk, we sat in there so long we drilled a hole in between the two rooms. [me: Did they teach you anything or it was just a place to put you?] Just basically put us in there and walked away

The message was clear: he was an outcast who was out of place and unworthy of time and teachers' precious resources. Alienated from an increasingly hostile world he sought out others who were much like himself – young, Aboriginal and angry. Cast out of mainstream society Caleb sought refuge in the gang. Transitioning to gang life seemed natural. Set adrift from conformity once and for all he began “hitting the Ave. and meeting up with people who were into this, who were into the gang life, and started hanging out with a crew of all older guys. I started learning about this, starting learning about that, started selling drugs and started hurting people even more.” Progression to embracing an even more violent being was logical and, for him, nothing out of the ordinary. He maintains that when situated in the nexus of his life history, gang life “was the path that I was on, it became natural ... that was normal.”

Once in the gang and committed to the lifestyle his being was saturated with violence. Violence was it. He states:

...if I get to sum it all up, I loved violence, like hurting somebody was nothing. There was no remorse. There was no pity. Pity on the street means you become a victim and you get taken out. You show emotion and you're done. There was no emotion. I didn't care how bad I hurt somebody. When I hurt somebody all I thought in my head was “we'll teach you to fuck around next time.”

Before he was legally eligible to drive a car Caleb's identity was fully bounded by violence.

Caleb's resources and opportunities were severely limited by his structural position in the social hierarchy, his unfortunate upbringing and lack of conventional resources. Gang life and violence were seemingly natural outcomes. Please don't be fooled, he desired all the resources and goods conventional society put on offer. He states that “I wanted that money, I wanted that respect, I wanted that power.” In this way he was no different from more conforming individuals who achieve power, respect and financial rewards through conventional means (i.e. education and employment). Caleb, however, lacked the necessary resources and opportunities to achieve these ends. His capacity for violence and willingness to employ it substituted education and employment as means to conventional ends (money, power, respect).

Given his unique skill set and dearth of conventional opportunities few options remained. His life chances were determined early in his life by his role models. His mother's boyfriends, his uncles, his teachers and a wider culture that glamorizes violence all afforded him lessons in masculinity, violence and general disregard for human life.

Exiting: Making a Break

When Caleb decided there was more to life than what violence had in store he went in search of a "light in so much darkness." Venturing toward the unknown proved precarious. However, a series of incidents that rocked his confidence and faith in the violent gang world made him resolute. He was 21 when he fully committed to breaking the fetters that bound him to the darkness. He maintains that, "if I could commit to something as negative as the gang then I could commit to something that would benefit me and others in the long run." Escape was the quest for *something* other that would help break him away from his servitude to violence.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Messages Caleb was hearing from his so-called gang brothers were increasingly inconsistent and contradictory. Upon joining the gang his "brothers" vowed to "back his play" (support him). They promised that should he ever find himself in prison they would be following close behind to bail him out. If he needed money or drugs, the gang committed to providing it. If he found himself in a fight, they pledged to stand behind him. Caleb slowly, but painfully, became aware that little of what he was initially sold proved true. He spent 14 months in prison after being arrested for aggravated assault. His mother could not possibly afford to post his bail, nor did any of his gang "brothers" come forward. Although his confidence in the gang had been somewhat shaken, once out of prison little changed. He went back to dealing drugs and fighting whenever violence was seemingly in order.

Shortly after being released from jail he was drinking with his gang friends at a local pub. They were playing pool when one of the patrons who also happened to have gang ties felt Caleb and his friends had disrespected him. Insulted, the rival gang member left to solicit support. When Caleb opened the front door to the pub he found the parking lot full of rivals. For Caleb, there was only one choice. He and one other friend:

... jumped into the middle of the crowd with two blades [knives] open. So we start scrapping and ducking blades and ducking broad swords. My buddy Northface got chopped in the back of the head with a sword and I got stabbed in the arm. When everything was said and done, basically we made it out of there alive. Everybody else got

stabbed up including us, but we came out on top – I guess ... Northface went to the hospital.

Once back at their apartment, Caleb and Northface could not help but notice none of their gang brothers who were drinking at the bar that night had “backed their play.” He states: “Northface came back [from the hospital] and we were sitting there smoking a couple joints and we basically asked what are we doing this for? We’re wasting time. It’s giving us a longer criminal record and nobody backed our play.” No one had supported them when they were at their most vulnerable and their lives were on the line. Evidently the rhetoric of brotherhood spewed by his gang was proving meaningless.

That he had no money to his name and very little power beyond what he could muster with his fists, added to his disappointment with his life’s trajectory. He wanted out. It was not just a matter of getting out, but of going somewhere (Levinas, 1935). At first, escape was Caleb’s sole destination. As a result of his aimless desire he slipped a number of times going back to the gang lifestyle. It was what he knew, what was comfortable and what he was good at. Violence, the gang and drugs were imprisonments from which he so badly wanted parole. But leaving and moving out of the darkness required a radical break with his current being in the world: a break with current time and the creation of something other.

As mentioned already, Caleb’s resources to this end were severely circumscribed. He lacked education and violence was his only viable skill – which is of very little use in the world of wage labour. What he desperately needed was an opportunity that would help him transcend his gang self. Fortunately such an opening entered his life at the very moment he needed it most. After emerging from the haze brought about his crack-cocaine high, which by this point was no longer a temporary escape from the pains of a violent life but part of the problem, he knew he needed help. Such assistance arrived in the form of a gang intervention program that helps gang members get off the street by putting them to work, first in various menial tasks and then later as social workers who counsel current gang members about the fallacies of the lifestyle. Caleb was one of the program’s first, and most successful, clients. Here he made several meaningful connections with people who lived a more convention and less violent lifestyle. These people believed and truly supported him – finally someone to “back his play.”

A fundamental part of his job was speaking to young males about the perils of gang involvement. It proved to be a turning point in his journey. Through the medium of his life story, he has guided

young Aboriginal boys and girls to follow other paths – this is a message he wishes he could have received at a young age.

Caleb's former self now seems a stranger from whom he so badly wanted separation. Yet, we never fully escape our former selves. They always return to haunt our present. In many ways, while we seek out new beginnings, we are doomed to remain with a foothold in the past. For Caleb the opportunity granted him to escape became dialectical. On the one hand, speaking to young Aboriginal youth about his gang involvement was the break he needed to assist in extricating himself from a life of violence. On the other, by speaking to audiences and becoming known as a "former gang member" his identity remained bound to what he hoped would be his former self. His opportunity to escape became an albatross that imprisoned him in a self from whom he was attempting to break. This tension, this dialectic, continues to agitate Caleb's present sense of self.

Fully moving on to some way of being other to his gang self is proving difficult, but onward Caleb struggles. One of the problems he continuously encounters as he struggles for and toward conformity is how tightly tethered his former self remains to his present. That is, his violent masculine self resides uncomfortably close to the surface of his skin. He maintains that: "the hardest thing I've had to deal with since I've straightened out is people's mentalities and personalities. I can stay I still have traits of a gang member, or a person from the street. I know for a fact I still carry it around." Despite his break from the gang he remains trapped in this mentality of being. His subjective self and interactions in the world are contoured by a life plagued by violence. This former self sometimes bubbles up to the surface. On the occasion of his Uncle's funeral, who had been supportive of Caleb's escape, two family members were outside the church smoking crack-cocaine. He felt this disrespected him and his Uncle's memory.

I just kinda snapped. I said, "look guys, I'm asking you nicely, can you just move along, you know, go where ever you want to go, just not right here." One of the guys stood up and said, "what the fuck are you going to do about it?" His buddy then stood up and said, "ya what are you gonna do about it?" So I fucking punched one guy and punched the other guy and they were both out. Eventually they staggered up and I took off my jacket. I'm just standing there yelling, "come on," "come on." My wife grabbed me and said, "what are you doing, what are you doing?"

Escaping a violent self is beset by pitfalls and perils. It is not a facile route to someone completely other. We can never fully disburden ourselves because the former self is revenant.

Reminders of Caleb's former self not only reside close to the surface, but on his skin. His body is covered in tattoos that serve as constant reminders. His violent self is inscribed on his body, not only in ink, but also in flesh. Scars from violent battles with rival gang members often jog his memory about a life that remains uncomfortably close at hand.

No escape can completely break from that which is being exited. Nevertheless, a necessary liberation from that former self takes root when we resist (Derrida, 1976). Reconciling one's being and, in Jean-Paul Sartre's words, to 'make something of what we were made into' is the challenge. Caleb struggles daily toward this end.

Conclusion

Far too many Aboriginal young people struggle to find their way in the world only to be thwarted by poverty, racism, alcohol and drug abuse, misogyny and intergenerational violence (Bennett and Blackstock, 2007; Baskin, 2007). Throughout this paper I have connected elements of Caleb's existence to the tragedies of colonialism. That being said, almost incomprehensibly Prime Minister Stephen Harper recently informed an international audience that Canada has "no history of colonialism" (Ljunggren, 2009). While it may be convenient for our Prime Minister to dismiss Canada's violent and brutish past, young people like Caleb are forced to endure its legacy. Caleb's story reminds us that colonialism is not relegated to the dustbin of history. Homelessness, violence, gross over-incarceration and extreme poverty have followed in its aftermath. Caleb's violent masculine being-in-the-world was the consequence of his immersion in regrettable and tragic social structural conditions stemming largely from Canada's colonial legacy.

There is much to be gained epistemologically from studying individual lives in vivid detail. On their own, individual lives, such as Caleb's, provide rich detail about subjective meanings of violence. Stopping at this point would, however, be premature. It is imperative that alongside and within these intense narratives the structural conditions intrinsic to the ontological being of our subjects are interrogated and fleshed out. I maintain that structural conditions, such as colonialism, float around and outside of the individual only to become folded into them. As such, they must be scrutinized.

Despite obvious lingering effects, Caleb has successfully navigated his way relatively free of a life saturated by violence. Even though he is still haunted by his violent past, he enjoys full-time employment, a busy family life and watching football on television. Judging from incarceration, alcoholism, poverty, homicide and homelessness rates, most Aboriginal young people are not so fortunate. Clearly, much more effort is required to ameliorate these wretched conditions of life.

Denying colonialism's appalling history, as Canada's Prime Minister seems intent on, only contributes to the problems confronting Aboriginal peoples today.

References

Aboriginal Healing Foundation. 2003. Aboriginal Domestic Violence in Canada. Ottawa: Anishinabe Press.

Amnesty International. 2004. Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to discrimination and violence against Indigenous Women in Canada. Toronto: Amnesty International Canada.

Baskin, Cyndy. 2007. "Aboriginal youth talk about structural determinants as the causes of their homelessness." First Peoples Child and Family Review. (3)3: 31-42.

Bennett, Marlyn and Cindy Blackstock. 2007. "The insidious poverty epidemic: considerations for aboriginal children, families, communities and other Indigenous nations. First Peoples Child and Family Review. (3)3: 5-7.

Bergman, Brian. 2004. "Alberta to Retire Debt." Maclean's. September 6.

Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. 1996. Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (3 volumes). Ottawa: Canada Communications Group.

Canadian Council on Social Development. 2004. "Percentage Change in Welfare Benefits in Canada." (December 7, 2004; at http://www.ccsd.ca/factsheet/fs_96wel.htm).

Connell, R.W. 2005. Masculinities (2nd ed.). University of California Press.

Denov, Myriam and Katheryn Campbell. 2002. "Casualties of Aboriginal Displacement in Canada: Children at Risk among the Innu." Refuge. 1 February.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. Of Grammatology. Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press.

Edleson, J. 1999. "Children's Witnessing of adult domestic violence." Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 14: 839-870.

Fournier, S., & Crey, E. 1997. Stolen from our embrace: The abduction of First Nations children and the restoration of Aboriginal communities. Vancouver, British Columbia: Douglas and McIntyre, Inc.

Hogeveen, Bryan. 1999. "An Intrusive and Corrective Government: Political Rationalities and the Governance of Plains Aboriginals 1870-1890," in R. Smandych ed. Governable Places: Readings on Governmentality and Crime Control. Aldershot, U.K.: Dartmouth Publishing.

Indian and Northern Affairs. 2001. Basic Developmental Data. Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Canada.

Jaffe, Peter, Hurley, D. and D. Wolfe, "Children's Observations of Violence." Canadian Journal of Psychiatry. 35: 466-470.

Jaffe, Peter, D. Wolfe and S. Zak. 1986. "Similarities in behavioral and social maladjustment among child victims and witnesses to family violence." American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. 56(1): 142-145.

Meltzer, Howard, Doos, Lucy, Vostanis, Panos, Ford, Tasmin, and Robert Goodman. 2009. "The mental health of children who witness domestic violence." Child & Family Social Work. 14(4): 491-501.

Miller, James. 1996. Singwauk's Vision: A History of Native Industrial Schools. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Minaker, Joanne and Bryan Hogeveen. 2009. Youth, Crime and Society: Issues of Power and Justice. Toronto: Pearson.

Laxer, Gordon and Trevor Harrison. 1995. The Trojan Horse: Alberta and the Future of Canada. Edmonton: Black Rose Books.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1935. *Escape*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ljunggren, David. 2009. "Every G20 nation wants to be Canada, Stephen Harper insists." Reuters news service:
<http://news.globaltv.com/money/Every+nation+wants+Canada+Stephen+Harper+insists/2037877/story.html>

Messerschmidt, James. 2004. Flesh and Blood: Adolescent Gender Diversity and Violence. Boulder: Westview.

Messerschmidt, James. 2000. Nine Lives: Adolescent Masculinities, The body and Violence. Boulder: Westview.

Statistics Canada. 2006. Aboriginal Peoples as Victims and Offenders. Ottawa: Queen's Printer.

Stiles, Melissa. 2002. "Witnessing Domestic Violence: The Effect on Children." American Family Physician. 66(11): 2052-2058.

Success by 6. 2002. Edmonton's Children. Edmonton: United Way.

Waldram, James, Herring, Ann and T. Kue Young, 1995. Aboriginal Health in Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Zerk, Danielle, Mertin, Peter and Michael Proeve. 2009. "Domestic Violence and Maternal Reports of Young Children's Functioning." Journal of Family Violence. 24(7): 423-432.