

# “Why do They Treat us This Way?”\* Supervised Consumption Sites, Racialized Geographies, and Notions of Belonging in Southern Alberta

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## Introduction

ON A COLD NIGHT IN NOVEMBER 2020, when I was acting as a volunteer with the Lethbridge Overdose Prevention Society (LOPS), we arrived at the Galt Gardens to hand out food, warm clothes, and harm reduction supplies, only to be met with protestors, who had been there long before our arrival. LOPS, which was operating an unsanctioned, pop-up supervised consumption site (SCS) in a tent erected in the park, had been started that September after the city’s previous supervised consumption site, ARCHES, had lost funding from the Alberta Government and been permanently closed. Under normal circumstances, the tent was meant to be a place where people could use drugs, with designated volunteers nearby to observe clients for signs of an overdose and administer naloxone if needed. The bright orange tent also acted as a contact point for people in the downtown core in need of food, warm clothes, and harm reduction supplies, which were my job to hand out. The volunteers I worked with, some of them former employees of ARCHES, had started the organization out of fear that the former site’s closure would lead to more deaths in the opioid crisis that Alberta had been facing since 2016. For some, who had been homeless themselves, struggled with substance use, or lost loved ones to drug use, this fear was all too real. Not everyone supported LOPS’ presence in the park, however; protestors had been showing up every night that the tent was set up, and tensions were escalating.

On this particular night, there was a change of plans; due to severe wind warnings, our Team Leads had decided that we would not set up the tent, and instead, would walk around the downtown core handing out supplies. Although no one expressed this, I suspected this decision also had something to do with the heightened presence of protestors over the last few weeks, which had at times involved police. Despite not setting up the tent as usual, we still stopped in at the Galt Gardens later in the evening. Like most nights, a group of people who slept in the park were lying on the concrete against the brick wall of the amphitheatre washrooms, wrapped in blankets and jackets to keep warm. I had been told that many of these people were scared to stay in the local shelter due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that women, specifically, did not feel safe there; they chose instead to sleep in park. Forty feet away from them were the protestors, dressed in warm jackets, mittens, and boots, some drinking hot coffee. The imagery was unsettling. The protestors carried no signs, and remained relatively quiet that night, interjecting the odd comment, but mostly keeping their distance. Yet, that they had presumably been in the park for almost an hour before our arrival—around the time the tent would typically be set up—and had remained despite no

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\*This was said to me through tears by a client of LOPS who I met while volunteering with the organization. They were recounting an experience from earlier that day with a local security guard who had acted with an unnecessary amount of force, which the client seemed to suggest had been motivated by their race or identity as a person experiencing homelessness.

tent being in place, was deeply troubling to me. It became clear that while these individuals may disagree with the idea of a pop-up supervised consumption site in their city, their objection didn't end there. That people slept in the Galt Gardens, and that we gave them food, winter clothing, sterile injection supplies, and otherwise supported their staying there, was also unsettling to them.

It is worth noting that this tension existed in the downtown core long before LOPS set up their tent, often with racial undertones, as many of those sleeping in the park that night were Indigenous. Before moving to Lethbridge the year before, I had been warned, more than once, to avoid the downtown, and by extension, the people who congregated there. Only a month before I began volunteering with LOPS, a co-worker had warned me, in hushed tones, about “the natives” in the city, and urged me to be careful. This is not an uncommon experience; in a 2016 documentary examining homelessness in Lethbridge, Martin Heavy Head shares how in conversations with undergraduate students at the University of Lethbridge, he learned that they too had received similar warnings before moving to the city<sup>1</sup>. This tension between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Lethbridge citizens, the depiction of Indigenous people as homeless, dangerous, and prone to addiction, and the characterization of the downtown core as the focal point of this danger, are prominent ideas that reach beyond the city limits. These characterisations are “common sense” among some Lethbridge residents, despite the fact that homeless counts for Lethbridge, as well as statistics released by ARCHES, have demonstrated clearly that these issues are not unique or limited to Indigenous people.

These long-standing tensions, pointed to by the presence of protestors in the Galt Gardens that evening despite the absence of the LOPS tent, suggest an uneasiness felt by some Lethbridge residents when perceived social boundaries are transgressed. In her 1966 work on the symbolic interpretations of pollution and taboo, Mary Douglas argues that ideas of pollution (analogous to disorder or dirt) are used to express a society's view of social order, and that this order is maintained by avoiding contact with items deemed to challenge it—and therefore, understood as polluting in nature<sup>2</sup>. It is my argument that this pop-up supervised consumption site served as a tension point that challenged dominant conceptions of social order, embedded in local understandings of proper citizenship, by being seen to enable drug use by Indigenous people in the urban core. Their use of this space, often characterized as disorderly, and in the context of the pop-up site, criminal, was additionally felt to violate a separation that exists in the form of a racialized geography in Southern Alberta. This boundary serves to separate an unmarked category of Lethbridge residents as racially white and belonging to the city, and a marked category of Indigenous people, felt to belong to nearby reserves. That the location of the pop-up site was the Galt Gardens, a park that has historically been a place of high Indigenous visibility in the city, further served to naturalized racist stereotypes of Indigenous people as homeless and drug addicted<sup>3</sup>. While it was not clear that all the Indigenous people in the park that night use drugs, because of these stereotypes, as well as local understandings of how this park is used, race and space operated in a dialectic fashion<sup>4</sup>, criminalizing both person and place. The presence of LOPS clients in the park that night, then, was felt by protestors to violate both notions of who should access this space, as well as what behaviours are acceptable within its boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup>“Where is Home? (2016) Documentary on Homelessness & Residential School Effects in Canada (Full Film),” posted by Dan Berdusco, December 24, 2016, video, 1:14:22, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=no\\_JtIopkA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=no_JtIopkA).

<sup>2</sup>Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1966).

<sup>3</sup>I have made an effort in this work to avoid using the term “addict”, in line with the current push to use person-first language, as well as to avoid using language that is considered stigmatizing. Where this term does appear, it is used intentionally to draw attention to the language typically used by residents whose comments I analyzed, or in line with works I am citing.

<sup>4</sup>Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura, “Social Geographies of Race: Connecting Race and Space,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 1 (November 2011), doi:10.1080/01419870.2011.559262.

With this social separation in mind, I approached this work with considerations of how notions of race and space came to interact in the controversy surrounding supervised consumption services in Lethbridge. The overrepresentation of Indigenous people who use drugs or experience homelessness in the Galt Gardens, coupled with their contested presence by (white) protestors and police officers, are what led me down this path of inquiry. Using the notion of racialized geographies and drawing from work by Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura, as well as Mary Weismantel, I analyzed Facebook comments that took a negative stance towards supervised consumption sites in Lethbridge to determine how racialized geographies are discursively mapped in the city<sup>5</sup>. After reading broadly on the controversy from a number of news sites, I chose to focus my analysis on a local, free paper that I felt would assure me some degree of local (rather than province-wide) engagement<sup>6</sup>. The overwhelming number of comments available in response to these articles prompted me to narrow my analysis, focusing on three news articles which all touched on different moments in the supervised consumption site controversy. Due to the sheer volume of articles and corresponding comments, however, it must be noted that it was not possible to give each full attention within the scope of this project. The topics of the articles selected included the defeat of a local councillor's motion to request that ARCHES cease needle distribution (July 2018), an announcement that Premier Jason Kenney's government may close or relocate supervised consumption sites in Alberta (January 2020), and an article detailing the opening of LOPS (September 2020).

My analysis was supported by research on the history of the reserve and pass systems in Southern Alberta, as well as the relationship between nearby reserves and the city of Lethbridge. This revealed a long history of tension that I take as evidence of a racialized geography in this region, serving to race Lethbridge as white and nearby reserves as Indigenous. I used the framework proposed by Neely and Samura<sup>7</sup> to further develop the concept of racialized geographies, and argue that Indigenous uses of space, particularly the presence of Indigenous people in Galt Gardens, at times present a challenge to the neoliberal and white supremacist notions that uphold settler-colonialism. This follows too from work by Catherine Kingfisher<sup>8,9</sup>, on the controversy surrounding the new location of a homeless shelter in a small Southern Alberta town, in which she argues that an "unofficial" but everyday discourse posited homeless individuals as a homogenous category comprised of Indigenous men experiencing addiction<sup>10</sup>. The presence of this particular "identity" of homeless individual was made salient by the men's regular presence in a local park, their use of which was seen as a violation of neoliberal values, as well as a blurring of the public/private dichotomy<sup>11</sup>. Drawing from these two works then, Indigenous people's presence in the Galt Gardens, particularly in the context of the pop-up tent, prompted protest both because it was argued to threaten the safety of City residents, which I have explored in other unpublished work, and because it was seen as a transgression of racialized boundaries—in short, following Mary Douglas<sup>12</sup>, because Indigenous people are "out of place" in this urban setting.

In analyzing Facebook comments, I discovered that the uneasiness felt by some residents when

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<sup>5</sup>Neely and Samura, "Social Geographies of Race"; Mary Weismantel, *Cholas and Pishtacos: Stories of Race and Sex in the Andes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup>I have chosen to not name this news site, cite comments directly, or cite the video recording of a local public hearing (discussed in a later section) in order to afford commentators and speakers a degree of anonymity.

<sup>7</sup>Neely and Samura, "Social Geographies of Race."

<sup>8</sup>Catherine Kingfisher, "Discursive Constructions of Homelessness in a Small City in the Canadian Prairies: Notes on Destructuration, Individualization, and the Production of (Raced and Gendered) Unmarked Categories," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (February 2007): 93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4496787>.

<sup>9</sup>Catherine Kingfisher, "Spatializing Neoliberalism: Articulations, Recapitulations, and (a Very few) Alternatives," in *Neoliberalization: States, Networks, and Peoples*, ed. Kim England and Kevin Ward (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2007).

<sup>10</sup>Kingfisher, "Discursive Constructions of Homelessness," 93.

<sup>11</sup>Kingfisher, "Spatializing Neoliberalism."

<sup>12</sup>Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

these boundaries are transgressed is often reflected directly in their arguments against supervised consumption sites and implicit in what may appear to be benign statements. It appears that when a geographic separation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals cannot be maintained, this is accomplished by Lethbridge citizens discursively. This led to uncovering a number of repeated concerns voiced by commentators which I will present in the following sections. While these concerns address a wide range of topics, I have chosen in this work to draw particular attention to two emergent themes, which include dialectic expressions of race and space, as well as shared (and contested) notions of citizenship and belonging. I will begin first by situating my research historically and by presenting a brief overview of the supervised consumption site controversy in the city. I will then finish with an analysis of the comments made in opposition to supervised consumption sites in Lethbridge. It is my goal to problematize simple explanations of the debate as one that is dichotomous in nature, suggesting instead that this issue cannot be examined without both taking a historical perspective and recognizing the unique relationship between race and space in Southern Alberta.

## I The Setting and Controversy

It is no mistake that the Galt Gardens, a square block comprised of green space, a pavilion, and a local art gallery in the centre of downtown, is a location of heightened Indigenous visibility in the city of Lethbridge; the park has historical significance for Blackfoot people. Belinda Crowson, City Councillor and President of the Lethbridge Historical Society, informed me of an area that was historically considered “safe” by Indigenous people as early as the 1950s, which was described to her by local Blackfoot Elders. This area is outlined by 3 Avenue South and the railway (located at the time at 1 Avenue South), and extends from the coulees to 8 Street South, encompassing the Galt Gardens. The park itself has specifically been considered a safe gathering place among Blackfoot people since the 1940s, and the boundaries of this area marked a space where Indigenous people were able to shop, dine, and obtain employment. Previous to this safe area, these same streets made up the city’s red-light district, home to marginalized groups and lined with Jewish shops<sup>13</sup>. These are groups of people whose belonging in the city, like that of Indigenous people even today, would be questioned, their presence in Lethbridge considered by some to be an incursion into white settler space.

While this sharp racial divide is perhaps less pronounced in Lethbridge today, there remains a decided separation between the city and nearby reserve, and the Galt Gardens continues to be recognized as a public space often utilized by Indigenous people. Lethbridge is located on the traditional territory of the Blackfoot (Niitsitapi), bordered to the southwest by Blood Reserve no. 148, which is the largest reserve in the country and third most populous with 4,570 residents<sup>14</sup>. Treaty 7, which provisioned the reserve, was signed in 1877, and had a significant impact on the movement of its signatories. Before the creation of reserves, Blackfoot people were nomadic, and traveled throughout the Southern Alberta region and beyond on a yearly cycle, often following the buffalo<sup>15</sup>. Upon the implementation of the reserve system, the movement of Blackfoot people fell under the authority of government Indian Agents, who could grant or deny a pass to leave

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<sup>13</sup>Belinda Crowson, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2021.

<sup>14</sup>Canada, Alberta, City of Lethbridge, Community Social Development, Lethbridge Community Wellbeing Needs Assessment Report (Lethbridge: 2019): 9, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.lethbridge.ca/livinghere/OurCommunity/Documents/Lethbridge%20Community%20Wellbeing%20Needs%20Assessment%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup>“Kítá’ahsinnooni: Blackfoot Territory with Rebecca Many Grey Horses,” posted by The Galt Museum & Archives, June 15, 2020, video, 29:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe8oS4stJhg>.

the reserve and enter nearby cities such as Lethbridge as they saw fit<sup>16</sup>. The pass system, which was never an official law, but was practiced in Lethbridge, was created out of fear of Indigenous reprisal against the government and out of a belief that “large congregations of Indigenous people threatened the peace and stability of white settlements”<sup>17</sup>.

The implementation of both the reserve and pass systems established a racial divide that is still apparent within Lethbridge today and that is highlighted in the supervised consumption site controversy. The growing tension associated with these sites, however, cannot be discussed without placing it in the context of the opioid crisis, of which mentions first appeared in 2016, when the Government of Alberta began releasing quarterly reports on the number of fentanyl and other opioid-related deaths in the province<sup>18</sup>. Province wide, the rate of apparent unintentional opioid poisoning deaths (per 100,000) rose from 11.5 in the first quarter of 2016 to 27.0 in the second quarter of 2020<sup>19</sup>. While Calgary and Edmonton had the highest counts of apparent unintentional drug poisoning deaths related to fentanyl in the province from January 1 to June 30, 2020, Lethbridge had the highest per capita rate of 42.4 for the same time period, compared to 21.4 and 26.0 for the two larger cities<sup>20,21</sup>.

Operating under the premise of a harm reduction principle, defined briefly as “a set of compassionate and pragmatic approaches for reducing harm associated with high-risk behaviours and improving quality of life,”<sup>22</sup> Lethbridge opened its first supervised consumption site in February 2018 to address the crisis. It was run by the AIDS Outreach Community Harm Reduction Education Support Society (ARCHES) and was located on 1 Avenue south, near the downtown core. The organization provided a place for people who use drugs to obtain sterile supplies, as well as the supervision of health care workers who could assist in overdose treatment, among other services.

ARCHES was engulfed in controversy from the start, with Lethbridge citizens raising concerns over needle debris and perceived increased crime, and others disagreeing with the effectiveness of the harm reduction treatment model itself. In June 2018, these concerns took the form of a rally at the foot of City Hall, titled, “Not Another Needle”<sup>23</sup>. Needle distribution would prove to be a continued point of contention throughout the controversy, with a local councillor twice raising a motion to

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<sup>16</sup>Belinda Crowson, e-mail message to author, January 25, 2021.

<sup>17</sup>“Pass system in Canada,” Rob Nestor, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed August 18, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/pass-system-in-canada>.

<sup>18</sup>Canada. Alberta Health. Health Standards, Quality, and Performance. Analytics and Performance Reporting Branch, Opioid and Substances of Misuse Alberta Report: Q3 2016 (Edmonton: Government of Alberta, 2021), accessed September 8, 2021, <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/1cfed7da-2690-42e7-97e9-da175d36f3d5/resource/972243e8-e144-4aa3-8606-6deafb8dd888/download/opioids-substances-misuse-report-2016-q3.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup>Canada, Alberta Health, Analytics and Performance Reporting Branch, COVID-19 Opioid Response Surveillance Report Q2 2020 (Edmonton: Government of Alberta, 2020): 9, accessed September 8, 2021, <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/f4b74c38-88cb-41ed-aa6f-32db93c7c391/resource/e8c44bab-900a-4af4-905a-8b3ef84ebe5f/download/health-alberta-covid-19-opioid-response-surveillance-report-2020-q2.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup>Canada, Alberta Health, Analytics and Performance Reporting Branch, COVID-19 Opioid Response Surveillance Report Q2 2020, 11.

<sup>21</sup>The Alberta COVID-19 Opioid Response Surveillance Report Q2 2020 notes on page 19 that “some drug poisoning deaths in 2019 and 2020 are currently under review by the Office of the Chief medical Examiner and have not been confirmed. Therefore, upon completion of all cases, the final number of total drug poisoning deaths in 2019 and 2020 will be higher than the current number.”

<sup>22</sup>Susan E. Collins, Seema L. Clifasefi, Diane E. Logan, Laura S. Samples, Julian M. Somers, and G. Alan Marlatt, “Current Status, Historical Highlights, and Basic Principles of Harm Reduction,” in *Harm Reduction: Pragmatic Strategies for Managing High-Risk Behaviours*, ed. G. Alan Marlatt, Mary E. Larimer, and Katie Witkiewitz (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 5, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uleth/reader.action?docID=819614>.

<sup>23</sup>Lara Fominoff, “‘Not Another Needle’ Rally Takes to Steps of Lethbridge City Hall,” *Lethbridge News Now*, June 15, 2018, <https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2018/06/15/not-another-needle-rally-takes-to-steps-of-lethbridge-city-hall/>.

ask ARCHES to cease needle distribution, first in July 2018 and again in August 2019<sup>24,25</sup>. Both motions were defeated but contributed to raising the profile of the controversy. Other key points in the debate included concerns raised by business owners near the SCS, who described seeing an increase in needle debris, a reduction in business, and employees being fearful of coming into work since the site's opening<sup>26</sup>. While there was both support and opposition for ARCHES, it was not uncommon to hear residents describe being afraid to go downtown, or express concern over the site's location.

In 2019, the controversy took another turn, after an independent audit of ARCHES was conducted and revealed financial mismanagement of \$1.6 million, prompting the organization to close their doors on August 31, 2020, after government funding was ceased<sup>27</sup>. In December 2020, it was announced that no criminal charges would be filled against the organization after an investigation by the Lethbridge Police Service determined that the missing funds had been in official ARCHES accounts "the entire time"<sup>28</sup>. In a statement, the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions suggested ARCHES' use of taxpayer funds had lacked transparency and determined that they would not resume funding for the site<sup>29</sup>. The closure of Lethbridge's first and only supervised consumption site was met with both approval and concern from Lethbridge residents. Some former ARCHES employees and clients, fearing for the lives of the people who accessed the site, formed the Lethbridge Overdose Prevention Society in September 2020, and began setting up the tent in the Galt Gardens, described above, in order to continue providing harm reduction services<sup>30</sup>.

## II Methodology

In this research, I turned to the Facebook comment sections of a local news outlet to examine if and how the broader arguments against SCSs in the city could be understood by examining commentators' presumptions about those who access the sites, and in turn, if those presumptions are linked to notions of race and space, or more generally questions of belonging. My work took a discourse-centered approach, and involved coding comments individually based on emergent themes.

An important aspect of my methodology to consider is how my data set was affected by comment moderation policies. I inquired about this process and was told by the site's News Director that Facebook comments are not subject to immediate moderation, and rather are removed if they violate the news site's policy only when staff see them, who monitor the page every 15-20 minutes. While I was told that comments that included veiled, rather than blatant racism would also be removed, it was made clear to me that comments of this nature were almost always "outright", particularly

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<sup>24</sup>Aaron Mahoney, "City Council Defeats Needle Distribution Motion on 5-4 Vote," Lethbridge News Now, June 2018, <https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2018/07/24/city-council-defeats-needle-distribution-motion-on-5-4-vote/>.

<sup>25</sup>Danica Ferris, "Lethbridge City Council Defeats Controversial Supervised Consumption Site Motion," Global News, August 19, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/news/5786889/lethbridge-city-council-defeats-supervised-consumption-site-motion/>.

<sup>26</sup>Lara Fominoff, "Businesses Near Supervised Consumption Site Say They're Suffering," Lethbridge News Now, July 18, 2018, <https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2018/07/18/businesses-near-supervised-consumption-site-say-theyre-suffering/>.

<sup>27</sup>David Opinko, "BREAKING: ARCHES Announces Closure of Lethbridge's Supervised Consumption Site," Lethbridge News Now, August 12, 2020, <https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2020/08/12/breaking-arches-announces-closure-of-lethbridges-supervised-consumption-site/>.

<sup>28</sup>Justin Goulet and David Opinko, "No Criminal Charges Against ARCHES, but Province Won't Resume Funding for SCS," Lethbridge News Now, December 22, 2020, <https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2020/12/22/no-criminal-charges-against-arches-but-province-wont-resume-funding-for-scs/>.

<sup>29</sup>Goulet and Opinko, "No Criminal Charges Against ARCHES."

<sup>30</sup>"SACPA Online Session - Lethbridge Overdose Prevention Society: Radical Love at the Boundary of Law," University of Lethbridge Notice Board, accessed March 29, 2021, <https://www.uleth.ca/notice/events/sacpa-online-session-lethbridge-overdose-prevention-society-radical-love-boundary-law#.YDIA7F1KjFY>.

when they targeted Indigenous people. This moderation process warrants consideration for two reasons. First, it is likely that the data I worked with was incomplete due to deletion, or otherwise more moderate in tone to avoid this. Additionally, there was no way to account for individual staff decisions as to which comments violate policy, and how this could have affected the overall perception of support for or opposition to SCSs in these comments.

### III Racialized Geographies in Southern Alberta

That Indigenous people historically identified a “safe” space within the city of Lethbridge reveals an unsettling truth: the city has been (and arguably still is) dangerous for Indigenous people. This danger speaks to a tension that has a historical basis in the reserve and pass systems and is evidence of powerful racialized geographies in Southern Alberta. It is also important to note, as Belinda Crowson did, that this historic safe area was still a location where Indigenous people faced discrimination from white citizens. Indigenous pedestrians were, for example, expected to step out of the way of other shoppers they passed on the sidewalk, sometimes being forced to step into the street. Violence in this area, sometimes resulting in death, was also not unheard of. After 1970, the boundaries of the safe area began to open up, but a decided racial division still remained. Indigenous people were often monitored in larger box stores for shoplifting and sometimes refused service at local restaurants<sup>31</sup>. That an invisible mapped area held so much weight in everyday life is a testament to the power of felt racialized geographies in Southern Alberta, mirroring the sentiments that underly the reserve system, and in many ways, Lethbridge residents’ “NIMBY” (Not in My Backyard) view of supervised consumption sites. The starkness of this racial separation becomes especially apparent in the SCS controversy, as it is clear that this debate has become racialized in the eyes of some Lethbridge residents:

Based on the zombies walking my back lane regularly, it’s a particular class of person who uses that site. It’s the same class of person that is noted as being responsible for most of the B&E/thefts based on published last names. There also happens to be a certain classification of land near here where a lot of these people may feel at home. Why not send it all there and let the problems stay there too?

The preceding comment was written in response to an article posted on the news site’s Facebook page in January 2020, reporting on Premier Jason Kenney’s announcement that the provincial government was considering closing or relocating supervised consumption sites in Alberta. It is one of over 300 comments written in response to this post. What is notable about this comment in particular is the author’s care in cluing in readers to the group of people they address, while managing to avoid naming them directly; it is likely that this use of veiled language was adopted in an attempt to avoid having this comment removed through moderation. Despite the writer’s indirect approach, their specific reference to last names acts as a subtle yet effective allusion to Indigenous people when taken in the full context of the comment, as Blackfoot people often have last names that mark their Indigenous identity. This allusion becomes more obvious as the comment continues: the “classification of land” where these individuals are said to “feel at home” is a clear reference to reserves near the city, as this term is rarely heard outside the context of reserve lands. Specifying the close proximity of this location to Lethbridge further helps to reveal the true target of the comment, the Blood Reserve being directly beyond city limits.

While this comment is unique in how successfully it alluded to a common misconception that Indigenous people are the primary clients of SCS services in the city, it was not the only one to do so. When analyzed, other comments in response to the three articles I selected appeared

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<sup>31</sup>Belinda Crowson, e-mail message to author, January 25, 2021.

to make veiled references to Indigenous people, betraying at times how categories of Indigenous, homeless, and addicted are (falsely) merged<sup>32</sup>. While the moderation process is likely to have led to more veiled racist statements, making it unclear at times if race was being invoked at all, arguments against the supervised consumption sites seemed to, overall, embody a logic of separation between Lethbridge residents and those who use drugs, which occasionally mapped clearly onto non-Indigenous and Indigenous identities respectively (as in the comment above). This comment additionally presents many repeated concerns prominent in the online and everyday discourse surrounding SCSs in Lethbridge, positing Indigenous people as those who use drugs and who belong to the reserve rather than the city, and suggesting that their presence in Lethbridge is the root of the “problems” associated with the site. The sentiment that ARCHES and the organization’s clients had “brought” new problems such as crime and needle debris to Lethbridge was a common thread throughout comments and everyday discourse.

While there is a real, physical separation between the city of Lethbridge and Blood Reserve, the concept of a racialized geography further points to how this separation is lived and felt deeply by residents of Southern Alberta. As I have shown, the perception of some Lethbridge residents that Indigenous people do not belong in the city was not born out of the ARCHES controversy, but rather has a historical basis in the implementation of the reserve and pass systems that must not go unacknowledged. In the 1960s, for example, some Blackfoot people lived in camps along Lethbridge’s riverbed, and their presence was carefully monitored by the RCMP, who would maintain a record of their stay and verify their pass paperwork<sup>33</sup>. Neely and Samura draw attention to this relationship between colonialism and the use of space in their 2011 work, which examines interdisciplinary work connecting spatial and racial processes<sup>34</sup>. Drawing on Winant<sup>35</sup>, they note in particular how a “racializ[ation of] bodies” through imperialism “has always been linked to the theft of land and the control of space”<sup>36</sup>. I extend this mention of imperialism to argue that colonialism, particularly settler-colonialism, has had the same effect in Southern Alberta, being linked directly to the displacement of Indigenous people, and leading to a dialectic racialization of both individual and space. Settler colonialism is a distinct iteration of colonialism, and has the goal of replacing Indigenous populations with a new settler society<sup>37</sup>. Through the implementation of the reserve system, Blackfoot people were relocated to a distinct area, which included only a portion of the traditional territory they had occupied, and the land on which Lethbridge sits was instead occupied by settlers. A characteristic of space and race being that they are both “relational and interactional”<sup>38</sup>, this “making of space” is fundamentally linked to a “making of race”, and in a dialectic fashion, the reverse is also true<sup>39</sup>. The result of the reserve system is that Lethbridge came to be associated with whiteness, and the Blood Reserve with racialized Indianness<sup>40</sup>, much like Weismantel argues is the case with the city and countryside in the Andes<sup>41</sup>.

While an individual’s presence in their “anticipated” space serves to naturalize these racial geographies, this also establishes a firm boundary between them, which causes tensions to rise when transgressions occur. Indigenous people accessing the LOPS tent in the Galt Gardens were

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<sup>32</sup>Kingfisher, “Discursive Constructions of Homelessness.”

<sup>33</sup>Belinda Crowson, e-mail message to author, January 25, 2021.

<sup>34</sup>Neely and Samura, “Social Geographies of Race.”

<sup>35</sup>Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>36</sup>Neely and Samura, “Social Geographies of Race,” 1934.

<sup>37</sup>Heather Dorries, “‘Welcome to Winnipeg’: Making Settler Colonial Urban Space in ‘Canada’s most racist city,’” in *Settler City Limits: Indigenous Resurgence and Colonial Violence in the Urban Prairie West*, ed. Heather Dorries, Robert Henry, David Hugill, Tyler McCreary, and Julie Tomiak (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019).

<sup>38</sup>Neely and Samura, “Social Geographies of Race,” 1944.

<sup>39</sup>Neely and Samura, “Social Geographies of Race,” 1934.

<sup>40</sup>I have used this term to draw attention to how certain geographies become raced, and in keeping with Mary Weismantel’s choice to use the term Indian, rather than Indigenous, in her work. See Cholas and Pishtacos, xxxii.

<sup>41</sup>Weismantel, Cholas and Pishtacos.

seen by protesters as not only transgressing a racialized geography, but also, as bringing issues such as homelessness, substance abuse, and crime to Lethbridge, traits which, as Kingfisher discusses, are often falsely prescribed to Indigenous people<sup>42</sup>. These traits are also understood to be in stark contrast to those of the typical Lethbridge citizen, as I will explore below, serving to deepen the social divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents.

The existence of this racialized geography, and the tensions that result when it is transgressed, appear to have been described by Blackfoot people experiencing homelessness in Lethbridge. In analyzing the life narratives of five chronically homeless Blackfoot individuals accessing a Lethbridge shelter, Gabrielle Weasel Head noted a predominate theme of racism, and described participants as noting in particular “[a] racial divide present in the local, urban community”<sup>43</sup> and “a border evident between reserve and city space”<sup>44</sup>. Most clearly, one participant, Angela, described having not felt the effects of racism until moving to Lethbridge<sup>45</sup>, sentiments echoed by Indigenous paramedic Shane Whiteford, featured in the 2016 documentary, *Where is Home?*, who also says he had never experienced racism before moving to the city for work<sup>46</sup>. This suggests again that the unique history of interaction between Indigenous people and Lethbridge settlers produced an incredibly distinct racial divide, so that whether they are from the reserve or not, Indigenous people, when seen in the city, are felt by some residents to be intruding on a space in which they do not belong.

## IV Citizens and Separations

When attention is paid to both the everyday dialogue in Lethbridge as well as the online comments of some residents, it becomes clear that many (perhaps simply the most vocal) falsely understand Indigenous people to be the primary group of people experiencing addiction in the city. Further, a common assertion of these same residents is that the ARCHES supervised consumption site drew people who use drugs to the city, resulting in the introduction of negative social behaviours and crime. Indigenous people, whose presence in the very public Galt Gardens made their experiences with homelessness and drug use highly salient, were viewed by commentators as transgressing rules surrounding appropriate public behaviour and citizenship steeped in neoliberal ideology<sup>47</sup>. The notion of citizenship was often invoked by commentators when articulating who they felt belonged to the city, as well as when asserting what this designation afforded an individual. In many cases, however, when referring to themselves as “citizens of Lethbridge”, it was clear that commentators were referencing more than the term’s simple definition, the term “citizen” reflecting instead an unspoken racialized geography and notion of citizenship informed by a particular idea of acceptable behaviour, serving to distinguish between those who access SCS services and those who do not. That this distinction exists appeared to be taken as common sense; commentators would often address both citizens and people who use drugs in the same sentence —seeming to suggest the two categories are incompatible—and the logic behind this separation was never questioned by others. This is despite the fact that Lethbridge residents are of many different ethnic backgrounds, with Indigenous people making up 6% of the population in a 2016 census<sup>48</sup>. Because the term “citizen” was used in a very specific way, I chose to employ an alternate spelling and develop the

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<sup>42</sup>Kingfisher, “Discursive Constructions of Homelessness,” 93.

<sup>43</sup>Gabrielle Weasel Head, “‘All We Need is our Land’: An Exploration of Urban Aboriginal Homelessness.” (Master’s diss., University of Lethbridge, 2007), 117, <https://opus.uleth.ca/handle/10133/2579>.

<sup>44</sup>Weasel Head, “All We Need is our Land,” 119.

<sup>45</sup>Weasel Head, “All We Need is our Land,” 118.

<sup>46</sup>“Where is Home?,” Berdusco.

<sup>47</sup>Kingfisher, “Spatializing Neoliberalism.”

<sup>48</sup>Canada, Alberta, City of Lethbridge, Community Social Development, Lethbridge Community Wellbeing Needs Assessment Report, 10.

term “cityzen” in its place. This is used to highlight the specific and hegemonic use of the term as it appeared in comments, as well as an identification with the city of Lethbridge.

The invocation of citizenship was additionally used to suggest that people who accessed the supervised consumption site were not citizens by way of othering. Commentors achieved a distinction between cityzens and people who use drugs by using terms such as “taxpayers”, “honest people of Lethbridge”, “general public”, “upstanding citizens”, “innocent people”, “residents of the city”, and phrases such as, “a normal citizen like me and you”. This use of language to imply race is explored in Mary Weismantel’s work in the Andes, which examines the concept of racialized geographies, as well as the intersections of race, sex, and class<sup>49</sup>. Describing how “whiteness” as a category of superiority in the Andes is rarely labeled explicitly, Weismantel notes how terms such as “educated”, “civilized”, and “good people”, are used in its place, echoing similar patterns in Lethbridge cityzens’ comments<sup>50</sup>. A separation was further achieved through the use of language serving to dehumanize people who use drugs by the use of terms such as “transients” and “junkies”, as well as assertions such as, “[their] lives [are] not worth saving”, “no one cares if they die”, and “maybe its [sic] time to thin the herd”. A shared assumption stemming from these drastically opposed categories was that these sites, and their locations in particular, should not “negatively affect businesses or citizens. They come first. Not junkies and deadbeats.”

It is worth noting here the parallel in the use of language between people who use drugs and Indigenous people, and how this maps onto the image of the ignoble savage. Those accessing the supervised consumption site were often understood to be lacking responsibility and drive, ideas reminiscent of this trope, which, among other qualities, often posits Indigenous people as “drunken”, “inferior”, and “lazy”<sup>51</sup>. These qualities are in obvious contrast to the neoliberal, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” values Kingfisher argues are dominant in Southern Alberta. The News Director of the site I examined also noted to me that comments describing Indigenous people as lazy were typical of those deleted for their racist nature. Speaking to the sentiments of neoliberal “prairie notions of rugged individualism”<sup>52</sup>, which see individuals who access these sites as lacking responsibility and self-reliance, one commentor noted:

. . . they need to shut the tap off and let the addicts and people that are abusing this program fend for themselves to find there [sic] own way and pay for there [sic] stuff like the rest of us hardworking Albertans that are funding this bs.

This positioning of people who use drugs against “hardworking Albertans” appears to speak to a common sentiment that supervised consumption sites enable addiction and allow people to avoid responsibility, an argument present across all three articles. These comments can be understood not only as a critique of a harm reduction approach in general, but more contextually, as a critique of an individual’s inability to conform to cultural expectations of self-sufficiency—or as Mary Douglas suggests, a social order. While some commentors did appear to simply disagree with the efficacy of a harm reduction approach, for instance, stating: “if a loved one is an addict you don’t enable them, you get them help”, others argued against this inability to conform, calling for those accessing the site to become “accountable for their actions”. It was also implied that the enabling nature of these sites had resulted in more drug use in the city, one commentor noting: “these ‘safe’ sites just encourage more people they can go shoot up or smoke it in a place they won’t get in trouble” (error in original). Considered together, these emerging concerns seemed to suggest that Lethbridge

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<sup>49</sup>Weismantel, *Cholas and Pishtacos*.

<sup>50</sup>Weismantel, *Cholas and Pishtacos*, xxx.

<sup>51</sup>John Mihelich, “Smoke or Signals? American Popular Culture and the Challenge to Hegemonic Images of American Indians in Native American Film,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 16, no. 2 (2001): 130, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1409611>.

<sup>52</sup>Kingfisher, “Spatializing Neoliberalism,” 197.

citizens understood the use of the supervised consumption site as wrong, both because of the perceived illegality of drug use, as well the violation of neoliberal values, tied deeply to conceptions of citizenship.

The SCS debate is not the first instance of an Indigenous identity being understood as opposing values of self-sufficiency. These sentiments mirror in some ways past expectations of citizenship under the Indian Act, which addressed sobriety specifically. Under an amendment to the Act, both citizenship and a person's ability to own land in fee simple were associated with the "degree of civilization to which he or she has attained, and the character for integrity, morality, and sobriety which he or she bears"<sup>53</sup> (my emphasis). The sentiment of commentators then, that people who use drugs are distinct from taxpayers due to their lack of work ethic, as was commonly expressed, taken along with the ignoble savage trope, suggests that this specific understanding of citizenship has its roots in Canada's colonial history.

While addressing a host of specific concerns, many of those opposed to SCS services in Lethbridge appear to share a generally negative view of those who access them, understanding their behaviour as being at odds with that of the law-abiding, taxpaying citizen. This distinction is sometimes used to suggest that those accessing the site not only do not "count" as citizens, but are in fact not from Lethbridge. Occasional veiled references to reserves and the countryside, discussed in further sections, served as an allusion to Indigenous people, whose use of these sites was augmented by racist stereotypes and their heightened presence in the Galt Gardens, a location associated with disorderly behaviour, and at one point, the LOPS tent.

## V Tools of Social Order

In this work, I have attempted to show how space and identity interact, and in the case of the SCS controversy, how the effects of the close association between Indigenous people and particular spaces served to increase tensions dramatically, so that often what was at the centre of the debate were not the sites themselves, but concerns related to the maintenance of a particular kind of social order in the city. This dialectic relationship of race and space, which resulted in the promotion of a particular social order, is not a phenomenon unique to Lethbridge. Fiona Wilson has described how the close association of people and place allowed the Peruvian government to pursue a policy of shutting down Indigenous-operated markets under the guise of public health orders in the 19th century, in a move that was largely influenced by the sense of "disorder" caused by Indigenous people living and working in urban areas<sup>54</sup>. This illustrates Mary Douglas' notion of disease, which points to a physically undesirable state, but also the embodiment of this state by individuals who are associated with a given area<sup>55</sup>. Much in the same way, this idea of disease can be used to explain characterizations of Lethbridge's downtown core, particularly the Galt Gardens and ARCHES, as "dangerous" and disorderly.

That Lethbridge citizens operated based on a logic of separation from dangerous people and dangerous spaces was apparent in comments urging supervised consumption sites to close down, or "[be moved] to a fenced in site where no one gets out!" (emphasis in original). Indeed, one of the

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<sup>53</sup>Government of Canada, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, Consolidation of Indian Legislation Volume 11: Indian Acts and Amendments, 1868-1975 (1978): 47, [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2017/aanc-inac/R5-158-2-1978-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2017/aanc-inac/R5-158-2-1978-eng.pdf), quoted in Sarah de Leeuw, Margo Greenwood, and Emilie Cameron, "Deviant Constructions: How Governments Preserve Colonial Narratives of Addictions and Poor Mental Health to Intervene Into the Lives of Indigenous Children and Families in Canada," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 8, no. 2 (June 2009): 288, doi.10.1007/s11469-009-9225-1.

<sup>54</sup>Fiona Wilson, "Citizenship and the Discourse of Hygiene/Disease in Nineteenth-Century Peru," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23, no. 2 (April 2009), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27733635>.

<sup>55</sup>Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

common assertions in everyday discourse was that cityzens were not opposed to the sites themselves, but to their location. Commentors additionally suggested that the SCS should be located “out in the country”, where cityzens would no longer be affected, perhaps a veiled reference to the Blood Reserve, which is located on the outskirts of the city. The idea that a group of individuals should be separated from cityzens in order to maintain their safety notably mirrors the ideology that conceived of the reserve system in Canada. It also clearly demonstrates the perception common among commentors that clients of these sites are out of place in the city, and speaks to the enduring quality of racialized geographies. Despite the fact that Indigenous people have been free to enter the city since the repeal of the pass system in 1951<sup>56</sup>, the ideology undergirding this social divide is still prominent even today.

The city of Lethbridge clearly then, has a social order, an “idea” with which individuals are expected to conform<sup>57</sup> informed by the country’s historical treatment of Indigenous people. Lethbridge, in particular, defines itself geographically as distinct from nearby reserves with its physical borders; this separation is racialized and ordered ideologically in the form of a racialized geography. When transgressions occur, discursive tools aimed at removing individuals perceived to be disorderly are taken up, each working together to accomplish this. It is not simply that Indigenous people in Lethbridge are othered and understood by some as non-cityzens who truly belong to the Blood Reserve, for instance, that leads to this separation, but also that they are (misleadingly) assumed to be the primary clients of supervised consumption sites. The qualities of criminality and laziness attributed to people who access these services serve to further position Indigenous people as being at odds with the law-abiding, tax-paying cityzens imagined to belong to the city. In this way, while seemingly addressing simple concerns related to supervised consumption sites, cityzens in fact craft a repertoire of discursive tools which work in tandem to distance themselves from Indigenous people, maintaining a separation that is felt to be threatened when racialized boundaries are transgressed.

## VI Conclusion

On March 23, 2021, a public hearing was held in Lethbridge City Council Chambers, giving citizens an opportunity to have their concerns heard regarding a proposal submitted by The Mustard Seed, an organization seeking to open a sober shelter in the city. This would require council to approve a motion put forward to rezone the building at 110 13 Street south from commercial to direct control. This location is approximately four blocks east of the former ARCHES site, and many of those in attendance were business owners from this area. Thirty citizens addressed council at the hearing, some in favour of, and others opposed to the proposed location. While the intention of the hearing was strictly to address the motion to rezone, race was invoked by some of those cityzens who were opposed, revealing how conceptions of belonging become racialized not only in the case of the supervised consumption site controversy, but in other contexts involving proposed social services.

One speaker, seemingly making a veiled reference to the felt disorderly behaviour of Indigenous people, noted that, “we’ve had this issue in Lethbridge since Fort Whoop-Up” in expressing their disagreement with the proposal. Fort Whoop-Up was the former hub of the whisky trade in Lethbridge, and existed during the late 1800s, with Blackfoot people often trading buffalo robes and other pelts for alcohol, among other goods<sup>58</sup>. After noting their position against the proposed

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<sup>56</sup>Kory Wilson, *Pulling Together: Foundations Guide* (Victoria: BCcampus, 2018), 40, <https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationfoundations/>.

<sup>57</sup>Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

<sup>58</sup>“Fort Whoop-Up: What is Fort Whoop-Up?,” The Galt Museum & Archives, accessed April 9, 2021,

shelter's location, a second citizen additionally made a sudden reference to Indigenous people, completing their presentation by saying that ". . .not many cities can say that they live outside the largest reserves. We have got special needs, and we need to address those in order to be able to help them". It was another speaker, however, who made the most obvious connection to Indigenous people, first sharing images of people sleeping in the Galt Gardens, describing feeling unsafe in the park, and addressing the illegality of the LOPS tent. The speaker then suggested that services such as the sober shelter would cause Indigenous people from the Blood Reserve, felt to be disorderly or perhaps criminal, to bring this disorder to the city:

What we have to recognize is a lot of these problems are originating from the Blood Tribe and other reservations, and we cannot ignore that. Lethbridge has a population of around 100,000, the Blood Tribe population is about 12,000. You know, why, we have to recog—we, you know, it's like the elephant in the room, we have to talk about it sometime.

Clearly, the sentiments underlying the ARCHES controversy are in no way isolated to a specific organization or form of social service. Instead, perceptions of belonging have been deeply racialized in Lethbridge, this view affecting other interactions in the city. The continued (false) perception of Indigenous people as dangerous, criminal, and addicted, their presence in the city enabled by organizations like ARCHES or the Mustard Seed, is highly salient in the minds of many Lethbridge citizens. In the case of the Mustard Seed, it also appears to be effective enough to have organizations step away from the city, as the Mustard Seed did when their rezoning application was defeated<sup>59</sup>. In an interview, then-City Councillor Rob Miyashiro, who was present via Zoom at the public hearing, described how many of the speakers "lowered the bar for discourse when they started talking about Indigenous people", and that he felt race played a factor in the position of many attendees<sup>60</sup>. Clearly then, these narratives about Indigenous people have serious impacts on the marginalized communities of Lethbridge, both Indigenous and otherwise, who are understood as non-citizens, and perhaps sometimes, undeserving of help. Studying the discourse surrounding organizations such as the Mustard Seed in Lethbridge could prove to be a valuable source of insight into these perceptions. Given that the Mustard Seed proposed a sober shelter and indicated specifically that they would not supply sterile injection supplies, it is perhaps more difficult for citizens invoking a separation between non-citizens and themselves to hide these sentiments behind arguments of safety and needle debris. However, some speakers did specify that it was not those accessing the sober shelter they were concerned about, but rather, those who would be turned away near their businesses due to their state of intoxication.

What these three speakers seem to suggest, in varying degrees of discreteness, is the view that Indigenous people are the primary clients of these services. This claim is misleading and deserves closer examination. While ARCHES statistics from February 28 to December 15, 2018 did indicate that Indigenous people accounted for approximately 53% of the site's unique clientele<sup>61</sup>, other considerations must be made as to why citizens appear able to conflate categories of people who use drugs and Indigenous so readily, as well as to why this statistic may be. Speaking to this first point, the heightened visibility of Indigenous people experiencing homelessness and drug use in local parks, compared to differently-raced people who use drugs, who tend to occupy less visible spaces, certainly plays into this perception. Martin Heavy Head captured this over-representation

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<https://fort.galtmuseum.com/history>.

<sup>59</sup>Connor Gunn, "Mustard Seed Leaving Lethbridge After Sober Shelter Denied," Lethbridge News Now, March 24, 2021, <https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2021/03/24/mustard-seed-leaving-lethbridge-after-sober-shelter-denied/>.

<sup>60</sup>Gunn, "Mustard Seed Leaving Lethbridge."

<sup>61</sup>Canada, Alberta, City of Lethbridge, Community Social Development, Community Wellbeing Needs Assessment Report, 56.

in a conversation with Wes Hillyer, a non-Indigenous man experiencing homelessness. Describing what he perceives to be the view of the majority of Lethbridge citizens when it comes to the Indigenous homeless population, he notes: "...they think they know, like, from going downtown, there's a handful [of Indigenous people]. Like, you've [Hillyer] been out to Blood Tribe, you know that there's thousands and thousands of people out there. But then you go downtown and there's like, there's a handful of like, you know, native peoples down there, so that's what they're exposed to, that's what they see in Lethbridge"<sup>62</sup>. This perception echoes those described by an individual interviewed by Kingfisher, who suggested that their perspective of Indigenous people lacked balance due to a lack of Indigenous visibility in service industry jobs, coupled with the heightened presence of intoxicated Indigenous people in a local park<sup>63</sup>. It appears then, that the issue at hand is not one of generalizing a population of people who use drugs as Indigenous, but perhaps, of generalizing Indigenous people as people who use drugs, especially as the characteristics associated with this social identity are understood to oppose local conceptions of citizenship.

The perception that Indigenous people are the primary clients of shelter and supervised consumption services additionally tends to obscure or ignore entirely the historical traumas due to legacies of colonialism, the residential schooling system, and persistent structural racism that Indigenous peoples face, which are directly linked to higher rates of substance misuse. Taking the stereotypical view of the ignoble savage trope that posits Indigenous people as "drunken" or "addicted" locates a deficiency not only in the individual but also in the "race" as a whole, rather than acknowledging the systemic health inequalities reproduced by our system of governance, as well as the ongoing effects of colonialism. This reveals not only the troubling implications of the persistence of racist stereotypes, but also a larger issue with the naturalization of race in biological terms. As Dorothy Roberts suggests, this view continues to perpetuate an impression that "social inequality [is] the consequence of biological difference", obscuring the true origin of inequality and health disparities in colonial practices<sup>64</sup>. Racialized inequalities in Southern Alberta between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens arguably have their origins in colonialism (settler colonialism in particular), which as Jonathan Marks argues, emerged at the same time as racial sciences<sup>65</sup>, cementing this naturalized view of health disparities in the Southern Albertan consciousness.

This points once again to the importance of considering settler colonialism in the debate of supervised consumption sites in Lethbridge. This is necessary not only because colonialism continues to inform how mental health issues and addiction among Indigenous people are framed and treated<sup>66</sup>, but because this same view informs the reaction of citizens towards social services like ARCHES, LOPS, and the Mustard Seed, ultimately impacting the success of these organizations, as well as the perceptions of their clients. The impact of citizens on this local perception is evidenced in the ARCHES controversy, in which the arguments against the site embodied a neo-colonial logic of separation previously seen in the advent of the reserve system, and seem to have made citizens wary of other social services like those proposed by the Mustard Seed. Using a discourse centered analysis, as de Leeuw et al. (2009) suggest, allows us to "[uncover] the continuities between the colonial 'past' and present (neo)colonial relations"<sup>67</sup>, and to begin to recognize both the historical traumas that have caused these issues, as well as the discourse that continues to frame them. In the case of addiction and mental health issues, for instance, a particular discourse positing Indigenous people as deviant is argued to have been maintained by provincial and federal governments<sup>68</sup>,

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<sup>62</sup>"Where is Home?," Berdusco.

<sup>63</sup>Kingfisher, "Spatializing Neoliberalism," 20.

<sup>64</sup>Dorothy E. Roberts and Jonathan Marks, "Is Race a Social Invention? (With Transcript)," Case in Point Podcasts, 23 (July 2015): 7, <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/podcasts/23/>.

<sup>65</sup>Roberts and Marks, "Is Race a Social Invention?," 2.

<sup>66</sup>de Leeuw, Greenwood, and Cameron, "Deviant Constructions."

<sup>67</sup>de Leeuw, Greenwood, and Cameron, "Deviant Constructions," 283.

<sup>68</sup>de Leeuw, Greenwood, and Cameron, "Deviant Constructions."

likely informing a conflation between Indigenous people and people who use drugs in the ARCHES controversy, who are often seen in the same light.

The work of untangling this framing is especially pressing today (2021-2022 at the time of writing), during the height of both the opioid crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced people who use drugs to follow public health recommendations that are often at odds with safe use guidelines, including not using alone. While it remains difficult at this time to determine precisely how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the number of drug poisoning deaths in Lethbridge, available data and word of mouth suggest that the opioid crisis has worsened during this time. From January to October 2021, there were a recorded 51 opioid-related unintentional drug poisoning deaths in Lethbridge, an increase from 20 deaths in 2019 and 40 in 2020<sup>6970</sup>. According to monthly data released by the Government of Alberta from January 2016 to October 2021, October 2021 also saw a record monthly rate of opioid-related unintentional drug poisonings in the city, reaching 119.8 per 100,000 person years<sup>71</sup>. This is just over three times the provincial rate for the same month<sup>72</sup>. While it is clear that supervised consumption site services in the city were not without their issues, we must critically examine the arguments against these sites, especially as they permeate provincial politics, with Premier Jason Kenney describing these services as “enabling” in March 2018, mirroring the sentiments of some Lethbridge residents<sup>73</sup>. This warrants particular consideration given that ARCHES did not receive funding after being cleared of any criminal wrongdoing following an audit and investigation by LPS, and harm reduction services remain limited in Lethbridge in terms of their capacity. One wonders what the long-term effects of a government that embraces a neoliberal set of values may be, which, as commentators appeared to suggest, is at odds with the perceived identity of those accessing supervised consumption sites.

The debate surrounding supervised consumption sites in Lethbridge has become increasingly polarizing over the years, coming to a head with the closure of ARCHES in August 2020, and the set-up of the LOPS tent in a public park the following month. Even when addressing apparently “simple” concerns such as perceptions of increased needle debris and notions of the correct use of space, commentators often draw upon a logic of separation deeply embedded in the city’s history, a logic that deems themselves to be proper citizens and the people who access these sites as non-citizens. This separation is also reflected in the local landscape, serving to divide the city from the Reserve, and in line with this, enforce racialized ideas of individuals’ belonging. These concerns then must be contextualized in the larger local narratives at play, including those told in serious tones to newly minted University of Lethbridge freshmen about the “natives” in the city. These narratives themselves, which conflate Indigenous people with people who use drugs, both understood to be dangerous, suggest a “common sense” separation between these individuals and the dominant society, or “normal citizen[s] like me and you”, a distinction achieved through race, character, location, or a synthesis of all three. It is because of the nature of these narratives that I argue we must consider the arguments opposing these sites in the context of the historical

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<sup>69</sup>Canada, Government of Alberta, Alberta Substance Use Surveillance System (updated January 2022), Acute Substance Deaths Overview, accessed February 4, 2022, [https://healthanalytics.alberta.ca/SASVisualAnalytics/?reportUri=%2Freports%2Freports%2F1bbb695d-14b1-4346-b66e-d401a40f53e6&sectionIndex=0&sso\\_guest=true&reportViewOnly=true&reportContextBar=false&sas-welcome=false](https://healthanalytics.alberta.ca/SASVisualAnalytics/?reportUri=%2Freports%2Freports%2F1bbb695d-14b1-4346-b66e-d401a40f53e6&sectionIndex=0&sso_guest=true&reportViewOnly=true&reportContextBar=false&sas-welcome=false).

<sup>70</sup>The Alberta Substance Use Surveillance System includes the following disclaimer: “Some drug poisoning deaths in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 are currently under review by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and have not been confirmed. Therefore, upon completion of all cases, the final number of total drug poisoning deaths in 2018, 2019, and 2020 will be higher than the current number.”

<sup>71</sup>Canada, Government of Alberta, Alberta Substance Use Surveillance System, Acute Substance Deaths Overview.

<sup>72</sup>Canada, Government of Alberta, Alberta Substance Use Surveillance System, Acute Substance Deaths Overview.

<sup>73</sup>CBC News, “UCP Leader Jason Kenney Draws Fire for Saying Safe Consumption Sites Help Addicts ‘Inject Poison,’” CBC News, March 2, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/jason-kenney-safe-consumption-lethbridge-1.4559556>.

relationship between the city and nearby reserves, as well as the reserve and pass systems in Canada. Until this is done, and the systemic nature of these views examined, racist stereotypes will continue to limit access to and stigmatize much needed social services in Lethbridge, and likely elsewhere in Alberta.

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