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Gone to the Spirits: A Transgender Prophet on the Columbia Plateau

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This article examines the life of Kaúxuma núpika, an indigenous transgender prophet living on the Columbia Plateau in the early nineteenth century. As a Ktunaxa woman, she crossed cultural boundaries to marry a Euroamerican. When she left her husband, insisting on her independence and autonomy, she crossed another frontier. When Kaúxuma núpika declared herself no longer a woman, but a man, and secured himself a wife, he crossed further boundaries of gender and sexuality. As a warrior and a prophet, Kaúxuma núpika crossed the boundaries to the world of the spirit, returning with warnings, guidance, and hope for the tribal people of the Columbia River valley. In this project, I reflect upon the historical record in light of indigenous prophet traditions on the Columbia Plateau and current scholarship on gender and power among Native communities of the region, to consider notions of power, identity, and the religio-cultural dynamics of gender and sexual identity among indigenous communities on the Columbia Plateau.

KEYWORDS Columbia Plateau, indigenous, prophetic movements, transgender

In 1808, a young Native woman on the Columbia Plateau left her Ktunaxa (Kutenai) community in the company of white fur traders. She returned a year later with a dramatic revelation: she was now a man. His new name was Kaúxuma núpika (COWshuma NUpika) or Gone to the Spirits.¹ Gone to the Spirits quickly married a Ktunaxa woman and went on to become a powerful warrior, hunter, guide, interpreter, and cultural go-between for Natives and settlers, Kutenai and Blackfoot, Blackfoot and Flathead. Gone to the Spirits led a remarkable life, one that defied borders and crossed boundaries, becoming one of the most

¹ Schaeffer, "The Kutenai Female Berdache," 196–7.

influential individuals of the day.² While Kaúxuma núpika's story has been recorded in the journals of fur traders and cited in contemporary studies, his life has not yet been considered fully within the context of Plateau views of gender, sexuality, and religious life. As a result, the story has often been used as another affirmation of the vanishing Indian, reaffirming settler colonialism and the othering of Native cultures. Located within his cultural and religious context however, the story of Kaúxuma núpika comes into conversation with the work of contemporary Two Spirit activists. His story makes clear that third gender or Two Spirit individuals were a vital and accepted part of indigenous cultures. And, the restoration of such stories to the historical landscape supports the work of contemporary activists seeking to unsettle the heteronormativity of settler colonialism, reminding us of the gender variability found within indigenous cultures and histories.³

His story

The first written accounts of Kaúxuma núpika were recorded in 1811 when he and his wife arrived at Fort Astoria at the end of a remarkable journey that included traversing the Rocky Mountains, crossing the Plateau, and traveling the length of the Columbia River. Observers noted that they were well-dressed and well-equipped, an indication that Kaúxuma núpika was skilled as a hunter and provider. The men they greeted at the fort were astonished that anyone had made the journey, let alone what they took to be two women. Several traders subsequently hired Kaúxuma núpika as a guide, and he led them into the interior.⁴

David Thompson was one of these traders, and he described Kaúxuma núpika as a woman who had “set herself up for a prophetess, and gradually had gained, by her shrewdness, some influence among the Natives as a dreamer, and expounder of dreams.”⁵ Kaúxuma núpika had indeed traveled the length of the Columbia River, predicting a coming apocalypse and the destruction of Native people by epidemic diseases brought by Euroamerican settlers. Thompson learned of these prophecies when he was approached by four Native men from the Columbia Gorge. As he wrote:

The four men addressed me, saying, “when you passed down to the sea, we were all strong in life, and you return to find us strong to live, but what is this we hear,” casting their eyes with a stern look on [Kaúxuma núpika], “is it true that the white men” (looking at Mr. Stuart and his Men) “have brought with them the Small Pox to

² A note on naming and pronouns. The prophet had several Ktunaxa/Kutenai names that appear throughout the historical record in a variety of different spellings and pronunciations. There is little agreement as to what the correct forms of his names might have been. But there does appear to be some agreement on the translation of his primary self-declared name: Gone to the Spirits. Throughout this essay I will use both Kaúxuma núpika and Gone to the Spirits interchangeably. I have also chosen to use the male pronoun for Gone to the Spirits throughout this piece, unless I am referring to the period prior to his transition to male. For the sake of consistency and clarity, I have changed the pronouns in historical quotations as well, putting the pronoun in brackets when I have done so.

³ See for example, Qwo-Li Driskill, “Stolen from Our Bodies,” 50–64; Qwo-Li Driskill et al., *Sovereign Erotics*; and Qwo-Li Driskill et al., *Queer Indigenous Studies*.

⁴ See Schaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 193–236; Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative*, 512–3, 520–1. Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 85, 144–9.

⁵ Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative*, 437, 512–3. See also Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 92, 111.

destroy us; and also two men of enormous size, who are on their way to us, overturning the Ground, and burying all the Villages and Lodges underneath it? Is this true and are we all soon to die?”⁶

After he parted ways with his guide, Thompson continued to encounter people along the river “eager to learn the news” of the prophet, and curious about the nature of his relationship with his wife.⁷

Alexander Ross also traveled with Kaúxuma núpika during this period, noting: “sometimes they shot ahead, and at other times loitered behind, as suited their plans.” He observed his prophesying as well, though when traveling with Ross the message paradoxically emphasized the coming renewal of the world and a great accumulation of wealth that would come with the arrival of Euroamericans. While Thompson described Native people as being suspicious of the prophet, Ross had a very different experience, writing that Columbia River tribes approached him with respect, curiosity and gratitude, all of which translated into generous gifts. By the time they reached the interior, Ross wrote that Kaúxuma núpika had accumulated “gifts that eventually amounted to 26 loaded packhorses ... an unheard of amount of wealth for a single person.”⁸

The next mention of Kaúxuma núpika in the historical record comes in 1820, when Euroamerican observers reported the presence of a female prophet in the Mackenzie area of British Columbia. She was said to be living as a man, “skilled in necromancy,” possessing “great medicine to restore the dead to life,” and prophesying a “complete change in the face of the country,” when “fertility and plenty” would replace their present poverty.⁹ Another observer noted that the prophet in question experienced great success in warfare, with “many young men putting themselves under [his] command,” and that “at length [he] became the principal leader of the tribe.” This same observer claimed that his youth and “delicate frame” led his followers to attribute his success to “supernatural power, and therefore received whatever [he] said with implicit faith.”¹⁰ In 1825, we find another mention of the prophet in the records of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Flathead post which described “a woman who goes in men’s clothes and is a leading character among them,” and who acted as an interpreter for “Kootenay” chiefs visiting the fort.¹¹ Another source of this time likewise described “a woman who assumes a masculine character and is of some note among them,” saying that he “acted as interpreter for us,” and that she spoke Flathead very well.¹²

The last written record we have of Kaúxuma núpika is in 1837, this time in the journals of W.H. Gray, a missionary traveling with Hudson’s Bay Company among the Flathead. Gray reports that at this time Kaúxuma núpika was active as a mediator, traveling back and forth between Flathead, Blackfoot, and Kutenai (Ktunaxa) tribes. While the Flathead and Blackfoot were at odds with one

⁶ Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative*, 513. See also Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 214.

⁷ Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative*, 513; and Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 214.

⁸ Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 156–8. See also Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 214–5.

⁹ Franklin 1823, 202, 152, quoted in Shaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 208.

¹⁰ Franklin 1828, 305–6, quoted in Shaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 208–9.

¹¹ Sperlin 1930, 127–30, quoted in Shaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 213.

¹² Work 1914, 190, quoted in Shaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 214.

another, he was (in Gray's words) "permitted to go from all the camps, without molestation, to carry any message given [him] to either camp."¹³ However, Gone to the Spirits met his fatal end when a Blackfoot war party surrounded a group of Flathead with whom he was in close association. In what has been described as a voluntary sacrifice of his own life, Kaúxuma núpika deceived the Blackfoot, creating a diversion so that the Flathead were able to escape. When their escape was discovered, the Blackfoot tortured and killed Gone to the Spirits in reprisal.¹⁴

Both historical accounts and twentieth century oral traditions surrounding Gone to the Spirits' death are imbued with elements of the supernatural. Simon Francis reported that his knife wounds "were said to have healed themselves," and that "it had taken several shots to seriously wound" the prophet. The Blackfoot reported that it was not until they opened up Kaúxuma núpika's chest and cut off the lower portion of his heart that the prophet finally died. Afterward it was maintained that "no wild animals or birds disturbed" his body, and that the prophet's powerful spirit would continue to trouble the Blackfoot war party, such that they began fighting amongst themselves on their way home. Their leader was forced to intervene, telling them: "Men, you must realize that this woman's spirit continues to trouble us. We have killed a powerful woman."¹⁵

These are the accounts included in the historical record, filtered as they were through the perspective of Euroamerican fur traders and explorers. As such, it is heavily shaped by the assumptions and worldview of settler colonialism, which failed to consider indigenous views of gender and sexuality or experiences of the sacred. When he is mentioned Kaúxuma núpika is usually included in historical accounts as an oddity, an example of a woman pretending to be a man in a world where such things were scarcely heard of. Later non-Native authors described Kaúxuma núpika as a "common woman" because of his sexual inclinations, who "set herself up for a prophetess," who was "shrewd," "haughty," "defiant," and "deviant." One author made sense of his change in gender identification by arguing that as a young woman Kaúxuma núpika was heavy and big boned — and so undesirable to any men in his tribe. This is of course in contrast to the previously mentioned source that argued he was "of a delicate frame," which made his achievements in war attributable to supernatural power. Other authors described Kaúxuma núpika as a calculating liar, as one "capable of practicing all the arts of well instructed cheats." In his 1969 essay on the prophet, Schaeffer concluded that he was a "shrewd woman" who changed his prophecies to suit his own self-interests.¹⁶ Even seeming compliments reduce this individual to a caricature, however, such as within the writings of Alexander Ross who described Gone to the Spirits and his wife as "bold adventurous amazons," and the prophet in particular as a "shrewd and intelligent Indian."¹⁷

Such descriptors point to the unsurprising patriarchal and androcentric bias with which Gone to the Spirits' story has generally been related in the past. And, they

¹³ Gray, "The Unpublished Journals," 36–7, 46–67.

¹⁴ See also Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, 238–9.

¹⁵ Francis, quoted in Schaeffer, "The Kutenai Female Berdache," 216.

¹⁶ Schaeffer, "The Kutenai Female Berdache," 212.

¹⁷ Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 147.

reveal the repercussions of not considering his life story in light of indigenous traditions regarding gender, sexuality, religion, and power on the Columbia Plateau. Without a critical consideration of what settler colonialism imposes upon this story, it is easy to dismiss Kaúxuma núpika as a calculating woman trying to increase her own prestige (as Claude Schaeffer, Thompson, Ross do), or as simply another run-of-the-mill prophet within a larger regional religious complex (as Leslie Spier and Elizabeth Vibert appear to do). The former mistake requires ignoring the indigenous religious context of his life and work, while the later entails disregarding the socio-cultural implications of his gender and identity transformation. At the same time, while contemporary scholars interested in Two Spirit traditions have included Kaúxuma núpika's story in their surveys of gender and sexual diversity in North America, they list him as one more example within a broad universal category of "Two Spirit" or "berdache" individuals, rather than locating the significance of his life within the particulars of his own Ktunaxa culture.¹⁸ I would argue that when the life of Kaúxuma núpika is considered through the lens of Ktunaxa gender, sexuality, and prophetic traditions, we find that it was not in spite of, but *because of* the very border-crossing nature of Kaúxuma núpika's life that he was able to become a powerful prophet and culture broker.

Gender and sexuality on the Columbia Plateau

Considering gender and sexuality among Native communities of the Columbia Plateau help us to better understand the significance of Kaúxuma núpika's life. In part, this is because it helps to challenge colonial settler assumptions about gender roles and female-to-male transgender people. Previous Euroamerican scholars and observers often assumed that women chose to live as men because it gave them more social and political power, allowing them to escape the supposed drudgery of women's lives. A consideration of Plateau gender roles challenges these conclusions, because it shows that when Kaúxuma núpika was transformed into a man, his life choices actually became *more* limited, not less.

Lillian Ackerman argues that Plateau cultures were marked by "gender equality" in that they maintained "equal or balanced access of men and women to power, authority and autonomy" within four spheres of social life: the economic, the domestic, the political, and the religious. Ackerman notes that this "general egalitarianism in the culture as a whole," led many early Euroamerican observers to describe Plateau women as insufferably "haughty and independent."¹⁹ Indeed, the lack of formalized class structure on the Plateau made it possible for women as well as men to amass wealth, reflecting the individualism and egalitarianism that are deeply held values in this part of the world. Individuals were (and are) free to

¹⁸ Jean Guy Goulet makes a similar argument when he writes that simply identifying "berdaches" or "amazons" within the Northern Athabaskan community with whom he works would be less helpful. Rather, "it is more fruitful to examine local conceptions of personhood and gender, as I have done for the Dene Tha, and show how individuals come to self-identify as woman, as man, or as both in cooperation with others as they jointly create and maintain these identities." Jacobs et al., *Two Spirit People*, 64.

¹⁹ Ackerman, "Complementary but Equal", 97.

achieve what they could by the merit of their own skills and their spiritual power. They were not confined by caste, family status, or other expectations.

What also made egalitarianism possible in this context, Ackerman argues, was women's economic independence.²⁰ Plateau cultures had a complementary division of labor, with women in control of the greater portion of material wealth. Women's subsistence practices of plant gathering and root digging accounted for 70% of the caloric intake of Plateau diets, and surplus could easily be used to trade for fish and meat if they did not have a male provider about the house. Women owned their own horses and participated in trade, independent of the men in their life. Married couples did not hold any property in common, and maintained a kind of interdependent independence, further reinforced by the fact that women and men's different subsistence activities meant they often spent a large part of the year apart from one another.

At the same time, while women's subsistence activities were independent of men, men's subsistence activities actually relied upon women's labor. For instance, while men were responsible for fishing, only women knew where to find the particular plants necessary for constructing a salmon weir, and kept this information secret from men. When fish were caught, it was the task of women to dry, smoke and preserve them. Likewise, while hunting was perhaps the Plateau male activity par excellence, the task of processing and drying the meat generally fell to women, and women often participated in supporting the hunt by driving out game. Such obligations might sound onerous, but it is worth noting that once women processed a fish or a deer, they owned the meat and thereby controlled to whom that meat would be distributed.²¹

Women had access to substantial amounts of social and political power as well. While chiefs on the Plateau tended to be male, some instances of female chiefs existed, particularly if they were entering into a role vacated by the death of their husband or son. Ackerman argues that "genders were socially and economically equal within Plateau societies," with a "differential access of men and women to certain public roles."²² Men were more likely to act as chiefs and prophets (who held a more publicly political and social role), while women were more likely to act as doctors and cultural advisors. Ross noted in the early nineteenth century that women — and grandmothers in particular — tended to govern the domestic sphere more than men, while Ackerman noted in the late twentieth century the leadership in family life was contingent upon individual personalities, rather than predetermined by cultural norms.

Women's independence was also supported by the nature of marriage on the Plateau. Indigenous cultures in this region were traditionally ambilocal, meaning that couples can live with either the man or woman's families. And, each partner had equal right to divorce. However, given that women owned their own homes and were responsible for setting up and moving them, they were in many ways more equipped to send an ill-favored spouse away than men. The wife had merely

²⁰ See also James, *Nez Perce Women in Transition*, which provides evidence of the importance of women's food production in this region.

²¹ See Ackerman, "Complementary but Equal" and Ackerman, *A Necessary Balance*.

²² Ackerman, "Complementary but Equal," 78.

to place her estranged husband's belongings outside the home, and the man in question knew he would need to find somewhere else to live. All of this meant that women on the Plateau were more able to be self-sufficient, owning their own homes and the products of their labor. Because of this economic independence, it was not unusual for women to live independently of men.²³

At the same time, Ackerman suggests that a man without a wife would soon be very poor indeed. Despite the egalitarianism present in pre-colonial Plateau cultures, she notes that men were generally *not* permitted to do the work of women. Building his own shelter, processing game, preparing fish traps, clothing himself, and even cooking for himself would be considered off-limits to men in this culture.²⁴ Since *Gone to the Spirits* remained a biological female (though he sometimes made claims to the contrary) it is likely that he had to be particularly fastidious in his avoidance of any women's activities, lest his claims to masculine identity be even more suspect than they already were. Hence, it should not be surprising that several historical accounts note that his first act upon announcing his change in gender identification was to go in search of a wife. As Ackerman argues, it was quite easy for Plateau women to live independently without a man in their household. A man without a wife, however, would soon be destitute.²⁵

At the same time, while men were restricted from women's activities, the same was not necessarily true for women. Women warriors were rare, for instance, but they were not unheard of in Plains and Plateau cultures.

In early historic times, a few Plateau women participated in warfare on a voluntary basis.

They did not give up their female status to do this and were not assigned to an unusual social status because of it. Informants [sic] note that the only difference between warrior women and other women was their courage.²⁶

Women also participated in equal numbers in most religious and healing professions. At puberty, both boys and girls underwent nearly identical rituals of purification and questing for visions, while boys cut their legs to initiate a flow of blood, likely to imitate the purifying flow that young women were undergoing.²⁷ Men and women had equal access to the spiritual power that ensured success in gambling. And, in contrast to Shaeffer's assertion that "shamanism" was "almost entirely a male activity," it is clear that women were equally likely to become spiritual leaders and healers, including during the years prior to menopause.²⁸ Further, Plateau vision culture meant that *any* individual could potentially have a visionary experience or dream that needed to be shared with the community. Because of this,

²³ This economic independence is important to keep in mind when considering Plateau gender egalitarianism. While men and women had different cultural roles, economic independence helped ensure that social power was complementary and equal. While patriarchal systems can also make claims for "separate but equal" gender roles, the access to real economic independence here means that women were not merely stewards of men's resources, but could demonstrate considerable control over their own destiny.

²⁴ Wright notes that women also build menstrual and birth lodges as well as family dwellings. Wright, "The Women's Lodge," 253.

²⁵ Ackerman, "Complementary but Equal," 87.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁷ Wright, "The Women's Lodge," 255.

²⁸ Ackerman, "Complementary but Equal," 95; and Schaeffer, "The Kutenai Female Berdache," 214.

being a prophet was not necessarily restricted to men, though men's more public presence as tribal spokespeople — and the fact that many of the more well-known prophets tended to represent their tribes when interacting with other groups — meant that nearly all well-known extra-tribal prophets were men.

Taking this argument further, Mary Wright contends that women on the Plateau were actually seen as more spiritually powerful than men, because of their ability to menstruate and bear children. As she notes, “Just as shamans were honoured and feared among the Plateau peoples, menstruating women were revered and believed powerful.”²⁹ Wright notes a Nez Perce testimonial from the 1980s arguing that “Woman is strong when she is pregnant, woman is strong on her moon [menstruating]. She is creator at time of pregnancy.”³⁰ In a related vein, Ackerman notes that both new parents or the newly bereaved, whether men or women, were required to avoid salmon fishing sites, but that women of great power could still defy these conventions. A 1938 text describes a woman with salmon power who insisted upon her right to swim above the weir, arguing “I made the salmon come, it's all right if I take a swim.”³¹

This religious egalitarianism is also seen within first foods ceremonies, which lie at the heart of Plateau religious life. Gathering, digging, hunting, and fishing are religious activities on the Plateau, and require spiritual preparation. Responsibility for these foods is evenly divided between men and women, and while men's and women's subsistence practices are carefully distinguished, they also closely parallel one another. Coming of age ceremonies in this region include the girls' first roots or first berries, and the boys' first catch or first hunt. When teenage boys and girls first participate in subsistence practices their ceremonies honoring their first hunt or first gathering are virtually identical, and their religious restrictions for future endeavors are complementary as well: both conduct sweats and abstain from sex and alcohol before gathering, hunting, or fishing. When Ackerman interviewed traditionalists on the northern Plateau asking which foods were most important she was told most emphatically that they were all “equally important.”³² Michelle Jacob supports this claim toward gender egalitarianism within Plateau cultures in her work on the Yakama. As she argues, a Plateau worldview “refuses to institute hierarchy, as no living being is outside of the sacred realm. At the core of this principle is a profound respect for the feminine.”³³ Jacob goes on to make an explicit link between settler colonialism with its attendant dualistic and hierarchical worldview, and the destruction of traditional egalitarianism.

All of this is important to keep in mind when considering the significance of Kaúxuma núpika's life, because it challenges colonial patriarchal and

²⁹ Wright, “The Women's Lodge,” 255.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

³¹ Ackerman, “Complementary but Equal,” 81.

³² Ackerman, “Complementary but Equal,” 83. See also Ackerman, “Kinship, Family and Gender Roles.” There is a geographical and ecological equality of these foods as well: men gather salmon (from the lowlands) and deer (from the mountains). Women gather roots (from the lowlands) and berries (from the highlands). Higher altitudes are often associated with religious power and purity in this part of the world, and so it is significant that no single gender has a monopoly on food resources in the highlands.

³³ Jacob, *Yakama Rising*, 90.

heteronormative assumptions that the prophet opted for a male identity because masculinity afforded greater freedom or power. Rather than a strategic move to gain more freedom, from an indigenous perspective the transition from female to male was a potentially costly one. While he might have lived independently as a woman, after his transformation he was now dependent upon a wife for his well-being, losing access to considerable avenues for economic independence, spiritual power, and social influence. Despite historical observers' assumptions to the contrary, this makes clear that Kaúxuma núpika was not necessarily moving from a powerless position to a more powerful one, nor was his new male status required to access other modes of vocation. Women were known to be religious leaders and to live and travel on their own. And, had Kaúxuma núpika remained a woman, he could have been a prophet, healer, or a warrior, all without sacrificing the independence that women were able to maintain. Rather, the change to male identification meant Kaúxuma núpika *gave up* a great deal of social and economic power. In return, Kaúxuma núpika may have gained access to more mobility — it was almost certainly safer to travel as a man, and he was able to work with and be heard by Euroamerican settlers in a way that otherwise would not likely have been possible. But that alone would not have been enough to account for such a dramatic transformation. All of this matters, because it complicates early Euroamerican observers' rather cynical assumption that the prophet's transformation was a calculated or strategic move. Instead, it prompts us to look elsewhere: toward Plateau encounters with the sacred. For this, it is important to consider the broader context of Plateau religious life.

The prophet dance on the Columbia Plateau

Of course it is Kaúxuma núpika's identity as a prophet for which he is most well known. He is mentioned in Leslie Spier's seminal 1935 study of the Prophet Dance Complex on the Plateau, and while Spier pays little attention to the significance of the prophet's transgender status, he does argue that he was one of the earliest prophets in recorded in the region.³⁴ But what is the Prophet Dance, and how does Kaúxuma núpika fit within this larger historical movement? The primary features of the Prophet Dance were a

belief in the impending destruction and renewal of the world, when the dead would return, in conjunction with which there was a dance based on supposed imitation of the dances of the dead, and a conviction that intense preoccupation with the dance would hasten the happy day.³⁵

The dance itself was a simple side-stepping circle dance, led by an inspired leader who would receive visions and prophecy. Such prophets were often said to have died

³⁴ Spier's primary concern with this study was to prove that the Ghost Dance movement, which swept Indian Country in the 1890s, did not originate in the Great Basin as a response to the deprivations of the reservation era, but was rather an offshoot of an older Plateau tradition predating the arrival of Euroamericans. See Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

and come back to life, or to have visited the land of the dead in visions.³⁶ The renewal of the world, the return of the dead and forthcoming blessings of great wealth could be brought about more quickly if people participated in the dances and prayers taught by the prophets. There was, then, a long-standing tradition on the Columbia Plateau of prophets who died, traveled to the spirit world, and returned from the dead with messages and warnings that the world would end soon, but that those who maintained their traditions would see their homelands and ways of life restored. The Ktunaxa people in particular maintained an ancient belief in the coming end of the world, which would be followed by world renewal and the return of the dead on the shores of Lake Pend d'Orielle. To speed that day, the Ktunaxa traditionally gathered at the lake, to dance every night for a series of nights, in a clockwise manner.³⁷

This pre-existing prophetic tradition helped Native people make sense of and respond to the arrival of Euroamerican settlers. Edward Curtis noted this, pointing out that

throughout the northern region west of the Rocky Mountains one hears in almost every tribe a tradition that before the appearance of the white man a dreamer, or in some instances (and nearer the truth) a wandering Indian of another tribe, prophesied the coming of a new race with wonderful implements. In every case the people formed a circle and began to sing according to the instructions of the prophet.³⁸

While traveling with Kaúxuma núpika during the summer of 1811 both Thompson and Ross observed the tribes along the Columbia participating in similar dances, “moving in a restrained manner,” on a nightly basis.³⁹ The dance was “supposed to imitate the dances performed by the dead, who inhabited the land of souls.”⁴⁰ It is clear that *Gone to the Spirits* was working within this religious milieu “when with the Chinooks, as a prophetess, she predicted diseases to them.”⁴¹ As Vibert notes,

Thompson’s sketch of Kaúxuma núpika’s prophecy is telling: the prophet foretold the coming of white men with smallpox and also of “two men of enormous size ...

³⁶ Ibid. Walker, “New Light on the Prophet Dance Controversy,” 245; Vibert “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 200. “The Prophet Dance emphasized apocalypse and return of the dead: From time to time men [sic] “died” and returned to life with renewed assurances of the truth of the doctrine; at intervals cataclysms of nature occurred which were taken as portents of the end. Each of these events led to the performance of the dance with renewed fervour, only to have it fall into abeyance again when their expectations remained unfulfilled.” (Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives*, 5).

³⁷ Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives*, 58; and Schaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 210–1.

³⁸ Quoting Edward Curtis, in Walker, “New Light on the Prophet Dance Controversy,” 251. See also Aberle, “The Prophet Dance and Reactions,” 75. Calls for reform were a primary part of these traditions, calling Native people to return to their traditional paths and reject colonialism. Such self-critique appears to have intensified in the late nineteenth century, as Euroamerican influences grew stronger. As Martin notes, “In almost all these revolts, the critique of colonialism began at home with self-critique. This self-critique brought to consciousness major ways in which the people had collaborated with colonialist forces.” Martin, “Before and Beyond the Ghost Dance,” 686. These messages do not seem to have been as important during *Gone to the Spirit’s* day. Native people had been impacted by fur trading, but were still living traditionally in subsistence economies at this time. The most significant impact was disease.

³⁹ Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative*, 475–95. Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 211. Vibert notes that such dancing, which here took place during the summertime, would have been in contrast to the more unrestrained winter spirit dancing, wherein individuals honored their spirit powers.

⁴⁰ Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 211.

⁴¹ Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative*, 111.

overturning the ground.” The two men sound much like Coyote and Old One, who, as the Nespelem tale promised, were to return at the time of destruction.⁴²

As Ross notes, *Gone to the Spirits* did not only predict coming destruction, but also predicted a coming world renewal along with the arrival of great wealth. The prophet said he had been sent

with a message to apprise the natives in general that gifts, consisting of goods and implements of all kinds, were forthwith to be poured in upon them; that the great white chief knew their wants and was about to supply them with everything their hearts could desire; that the whites had hitherto cheated the Indians, by selling goods, in place of making presents to them as directed by the great white chief.⁴³

Early observers and writers saw these two contradictory prophecies as evidence that Kaúxuma núpika was a manipulative charlatan, changing his story to suit his audience. It was Vibert in her 1995 study of the Plateau prophet dance who first pointed out that these were in fact not two contradictory messages, but rather two pieces of the same prophetic tradition: destruction and world renewal. “Creation and destruction are elements of a continuum in Plateau cosmology,” she wrote.⁴⁴ And such elements fit the colonial moment: while Euroamericans were seen as dangerous, they were also known to carry great wealth and to have access to incredible powers.⁴⁵

While Euroamerican observers disregarded Kaúxuma núpika’s prophecies as foolish chicanery, it is chilling to note that they were tragically accurate. Robert Boyd has made the case that by 1802, almost a decade before Thompson and Ross made their journeys along the Columbia, the Plateau’s population had already been reduced by a staggering 45% due to smallpox alone.⁴⁶ In his 1831 travel, narrative Ross Cox recorded that

about thirty years before this period the small-pox had committed dreadful ravages among these Indians, the vestiges of which were still visible on the countenances of the elderly men and women. ... the disease first proceeded from the banks of the Missouri. ... It travelled with destructive rapidity as far north as Athabasca and the shores of the Great Slave Lake, crossed the Rocky Mountains at the sources of the Missouri, and having fastened its deadly venom on the Snake Indians, spread its devastating

⁴² Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 220. Spier recorded a Nespelem prophecy that was widely circulated throughout the Columbia Plateau in the nineteenth century. A prophet died and met “Old One” in the spirit world. He was told: “I will send messages to earth by the souls of people that reach me, but whose time to die has not yet come. They will carry messages to you from time to time; and when their souls return to their bodies, they will revive, and tell you their experiences. Coyote and myself will not be seen until the Earth Woman is very old. Then we shall return to earth, for it will require a new change by that time. Coyote will precede me by some little time; and when you see him, you will know that the time is at hand. When I return, all the spirits of the dead will accompany me, and after that there will be no spirit-land. All the people will live together... Then will things be made right, and there will be much happiness.” Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives*.

⁴³ Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 158.

⁴⁴ Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 216. See also *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴⁵ See Walker, “New Light on the Prophet Dance Controversy,” 250–1; and Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 212.

⁴⁶ Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 206. See also Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*.

course to the northward and westward, until its frightful progress was arrested by the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁷

Kaúxuma núpika would have been very familiar with the impacts of disease: sometime around 1777 an entire eastern band of the Kutenai had been entirely wiped out by the first wave of smallpox to hit the region.⁴⁸ Of course, smallpox was only the beginning. Measles arrived with Hudson's Bay traders in 1821, and tuberculosis and "fever and ague" (likely malaria or flu) would further decimate Columbia River populations in the 1820s and 1830s. From 1835 to 1847, outbreaks of meningitis, smallpox, influenza, mumps, and dysentery would strike. Measles would return in 1848 and smallpox once again in 1853. Throughout the Northwest as a whole, indigenous populations would decline by 88% between 1805 and 1855.

At the time when Gone to the Spirits began her life as a traveling prophet, the people of the Plateau were already in the midst of what Hunn has labeled a "spiritual apocalypse."⁴⁹ Consider that Kaúxuma núpika was born around 1790 and died in 1837: he lived through the worst of the epidemics and witnessed their impacts first hand. As a prophet, he was faced with the daunting task of warning people of the devastation that was to come, but also offering encouragement of the renewal that was to follow. Euroamericans brought incredible disease and destruction. But they also brought the horse, the rifle, and would later bring motorized boats and all the incredible wealth of modernity.

Vibert reminds us that while prophecy was a "powerful intellectual response" to the smallpox epidemics of the late nineteenth century, the prophetic tradition was not a *product* of those epidemics. Rather, it was the religious *tool* by which Native people could interpret and make sense of the crisis, while offering an implicit critique of settler incursion. As she argues, "illness was interpreted as a symptom of unease in the spirit world; prophets tapped the power of deep-rooted myth and ritual to cleanse and renew an unbalanced world."⁵⁰ Disease was understood as signaling spiritual imbalance within the world and amongst the spiritual forces that inhabited it. It was a spiritual crisis, and one that required spiritual attention from the people.

⁴⁷ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 169. Vibert, "The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live," 207–8). Various scholars have pointed to the impact of epidemic disease as motivation for the prophet dance movement. Aberle, for instance, argued that the prophet dance may have preexisted direct Euroamerican contact, but that epidemic diseases did as well, and insisted that the movement could therefore still be seen as "deprivation resulting from changes imposed by contact" (Aberle, "The Prophet Dance and Reactions to White Contact," 83). See also Walker, "New Light on the Prophet Dance Controversy," 247–8. This is one of the central arguments of Christopher Miller's book as well, wherein he argues that the Prophet Dance grew out of a response to epidemic disease, the introduction of the horse, and a "mini-ice age" which brought starvation to some parts of the region. See Miller, *Prophetic Worlds*.

⁴⁸ Mengarini 1977, 193–4 and Turney-High 1941, 132. Both are cited in Vibert, "The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live," 208.

⁴⁹ Hunn, *Nchi'Wana*, 241.

⁵⁰ Vibert, "The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live," 197, 199. Vibert is navigating a narrow line here, wanting to recognize the role of disease in influences the prophet movement, she also wants to insist that Native practices predated the arrival of Euroamericans, that they were and are active agents in interpreting their experience, and not merely passively responding to the deprivations inflicted upon them. As she writes, "in order to understand such movements, it is essential to consider their internal logics—the systems of beliefs and practices that give them resonance in native societies. To link the prophetic movements of a particular era to a contemporary epidemic is not necessarily to cast them as reactions to the colonial incursion," (Vibert, "The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live," 198–9).

But why does thinking about this history of prophecy and disease better help us understand the life of Kaúxuma núpika, as a *transgender* prophet, in particular?⁵¹ And, how might paying attention to gender identity help us better understand the history of prophetic movements? The answer lies in the very nature of spiritual power on the Columbia Plateau. Spiritual power could be acquired by anyone who received dreams and visions through which they acquired spirit helpers, songs, and dances. What distinguished prophets from visionaries more generally was their ability to travel to the world of the spirit and back: to die and return to life.⁵² Their authority lay in their ability to cross borders from the material to the spiritual world, to negotiate with spirits, and to be transformed by them. When the young Kutenai prophet returned with a new gender, he also claimed a new name: Gone to the Spirits. The name itself declares that he had undergone a journey to the spirit world, had died — in one sense or another — and had returned. It is this transformative spiritual journey that imbued him with particular power, and marked him as a powerful prophet.

Two spirit traditions in Native America

But Gone to the Spirits was no ordinary prophet (if there is such a thing), for he was set apart by his transgender status. To more fully understand the significance of his life, we need to consider current scholarship regarding sexual diversity in North America. While authors and observers speculated on the nature of his sexual relations with his wife — with more than a small degree of lurid curiosity — few have considered how his sexual identity fits within the broader religious context in which he lived and worked. While Spier mentions Kaúxuma núpika in his seminal study on the prophet dance movement, the prophet's gender identification is a minor footnote at best. Schaeffer, whose 1965 essay remains the most thorough historical reconstruction of the prophet's life, refers to him as a “female berdache,” but does not reflect upon how this identity might have related to his work as a prophet, or how that work fit within the broader cultural and religious context in which he lived. Vibert includes Kaúxuma núpika in her discussion of the prophet dance movement, but like Spier his gender identity is only briefly mentioned and does not appear to be centrally important. I would argue that we cannot begin to understand the significance of this remarkable individual without considering all elements of this puzzle: gender on the Plateau, religious traditions on the Plateau, and what we know about Two Spirit traditions in the region and elsewhere in Native America.

Among current scholars, there is a general consensus that Two Spirit people across North America were accepted and honored within the great majority of indigenous cultures and communities. Indeed, they were often believed to have access to greater or unique kinds of spiritual power.⁵³ At the same time, scholars like Jean-Guy Goulet,

⁵¹ The use of the term “transgender” is certainly not without problems. It is a contemporary term to explain someone who changes their gender identification, and it is not a historical or indigenous one. Despite its potential baggage, I opt to use it because it provides a succinct way of calling our attention to the important transition from female to male identity undertaken in this instance.

⁵² Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 217.

⁵³ See Roscoe, *Changing Ones*; and Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*.

Carolyn Epple, and Evelyn Blackwood have called for work that goes beyond broad generalizations or superficial comparisons to instead produce local, contextual studies. This is important because, as Blackwood points out, gender and sexuality are shaped by their particular contexts, and vary widely across Native North America.

In the rush to categorize two-spirit people, scholars were guilty of generalizing about “North American two-spirits” placing all two-spirit people in a single category ... This overgeneralization can be remedied by attention to local meanings and gender systems that lump together divergent practices.⁵⁴

Contextual studies on the Columbia Plateau provide examples of both men and women changing their gender identification both prior to and after Euroamerican contact.⁵⁵ But it is worth recalling, as noted above, that women may have had fewer material incentives to undertake such a transformation, since they could live independently more easily than men, had access to considerable degrees of economic, social and religious power, and had access to nearly all male-dominated activities, should they choose to pursue them. The same could not be said of men, who were much more dependent on women and were restricted from female-only activities and knowledge. Furthermore, both because of their economic independence and the Plateau respect for individual autonomy, women in Ktunaxa society frequently lived together as long-time companions without a husband. These relationships were not subject to public censure, unless one of the partners was being subjected to abuse.⁵⁶ Hence, a publically acknowledged change in gender identity was not necessary in order to pursue a same-sex relationship. And yet, despite the fact that women did not necessarily stand to benefit from a change in gender identity, female to male transitions *did* take place among the Ktunaxa/Kutenai, and often enough that a word for it did exist. Schaeffer records the Kutenai term as “títqattek,” and provides the translation as “a woman pretending to be a man.”⁵⁷

This lack of material incentives helps to support the notion that the motivation for declaring a change in gender identification was not simply pragmatic. Rather, as various scholars have argued, gender transformation was tied to spiritual concerns. Within both Plateau and Plains societies such transformations were almost always tied to a spiritual calling. Changes in gender identity followed a dream or vision — the religious experience par excellence in this part of the world — which informed the individual of their new gender identity. Such transformative experiences validated the change in the eyes of family and community, and marked them as spiritually powerful.⁵⁸ As Lang notes, “gender role change seems to have required

⁵⁴ Blackwood, “Native American Genders and Sexualities,” 285.

⁵⁵ See Schaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,”; and Roscoe, *Changing Ones*.

⁵⁶ Kaúxuma núpika himself was guilty of spousal abuse, and his first two wives left him because of this. He was said to have been reprimanded by his brother, who called for him to treat his wives better. According to some accounts Kaúxuma núpika changed his behavior after his second wife threatened to kill him.

⁵⁷ Schaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 224. Schaeffer’s heteronormative bias is apparent in his poor choice of translation.

⁵⁸ “Both in assuming berdache status and in leaving it, supernatural dictate is the determining factor,” (Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, 25). “Receiving instructions from a vision inhibits others from trying to change the berdache,” (Ibid., 30). See also Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, 321. Roscoe singles *Gone to the Spirits* out in particular as an example wherein an individual’s gender change is inseparable from their claim to spiritual power (Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 92).

some kind of legitimating... on the Plateau this purpose was served primarily by standardized visions.”⁵⁹ Lang argues that all known examples of female-to-male transgender individuals (what she calls “men-women”) are found “where visions or dreams legitimated the behavioral modes of both sexes” including the Plateau.⁶⁰

To better understand the significance of Gone to the Spirits’ life, then, we need to consider it in light of such spiritual traditions. As mentioned above, the vision quest tradition was central to religious life on the Plateau. Young boys and girls went out in search of a vision at puberty, and quests might be repeated throughout life when individuals felt the need to seek out additional spiritual power or assistance. Individuals who received particularly powerful spirits could gain the power to heal others. Kaúxuma núpika’s life story indicates that he had ties with multiple and powerful spirits. His power ensured him success in gambling in a culture where such luck is considered a spiritual activity, and provided evidence that he had the support of powerful spiritual helpers.⁶¹ He was said to have the power to heal as well as the power of “necromancy,” which on the Plateau would imply that he could travel to the land of the dead and retrieve lost souls, returning them to his patients and so preventing their death. The stories of his death also suggest that Kaúxuma núpika had acquired particularly powerful spirit helpers that made him very difficult to kill, sacralizing his body so that it was later respected even by scavenging animals.

As already mentioned above, spiritual power on the Plateau is not tied to one’s gender or class status. Instead, power has to do with one’s ability to negotiate the boundaries between the material and spiritual worlds. It was Kaúxuma núpika’s ability to cross borders, to go between this world and the next, and this gender and the next that made him so powerful. As Schaeffer puts it, his “ability to heal the sick arose from the supernatural power supposedly gained from [his] sexual transformation,” an argument put forth by the twentieth century Ktunaxa with whom he spoke, and who were still “inclined to accept such an explanation.”⁶² Historical accounts further support the notion that the prophet associated his transformed gender identity with his spiritual power. For instance, one fur trader who traveled with the prophet noted that when he was asked about his gender change

⁵⁹ Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, 345. Another example of this can be found in Bacigalupo’s fascinating study of a transgender healer in South America. See Bacigalupo, “The Mapuche Man Who Became a Woman Shaman,” 440–57. Bacigalupo notes that Marta’s transformation is “based on her spiritual transformation,” not her sexuality. She became a woman following a “dream about the Virgin Mary and his possession by the machi spirit of his great-grandmother Flora that transformed him, at age 21, into a woman shaman named Marta. Marta’s identity as a woman machi was legitimated because it was not her choice but, rather, a divine gender transformation effected by Flora’s spirit and the Virgin Mary,” (441). The spiritual nature of her transformation is reflected in the fact that, when she does things to offend her spirit, it withdraws and her more masculine identity can surface. As Bacigalupo notes, when Marta drinks her voice gets deeper and loses its falsetto. “Marta’s spirit gets angry when she drinks, so it leaves. Then she becomes more devilish, like a man” (446).

⁶⁰ The exception to this, Lang argues is where “sons were lacking in a male-dominated subsistence economy,” and girls were needed to fulfill these roles. This was found in the Arctic and Subarctic (Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, 346).

⁶¹ Kaúxuma núpika’s wife leaves him following a gambling loss, because the humiliating loss he suffered would have indicated a loss in spiritual power: something far worse than simply losing some material wealth. Ackerman explains, for instance, that class status was almost nonexistent on the Plateau. Wealth was not considered an indicator of status, because the most well-respected persons, such as chiefs, were often completely destitute, having given away everything they owned to support others in their extended family and community.

⁶² Schaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 214.

Kaúxuma núpika “performed a little dance as an indication of [his] sexual transformation,” and “soon began to claim great spiritual power.”⁶³ Such accounts affirm that the prophet, as well as his people, saw his spirituality and his transformed gender identity as intricately tied together, each dependent upon the other. It was not being a man, but rather *the act of crossing borders from one gender to another* that gave Kaúxuma núpika the power to heal the sick, retrieve lost souls from the land of the dead, perform great feats as a warrior, and prophecy concerning the future.

Kaúxuma núpika and prophetic-erotic sovereignty

In 1808, a young Ktunaxa returned with tales of great journeys, of crossing borders and of personal transformation. And from that transformation Gone to the Spirits, as he was now known, would draw enormous spiritual power. Such power enabled him to become a warrior, a courier, a translator, and a great traveler, to marry and provide for several wives (in succession), to retrieve lost souls, to heal the sick, and to have prophetic visions. He had become a “go-between” (to use Walter Williams’ term).⁶⁴ He navigated the borderlands between Native and non-native, between Blackfoot and Flathead, between men and women, between spirit world and material world. An examination of Plateau gender roles makes clear that spiritual power did not lie within his claim to male identity — for women had equal access to spiritual power and in many ways actually had more economic and social power than men. Rather, spiritual power emerged from his passage from one identity to another, from a journey to the spirits and back. Because of this he was able to enter into a unique social position, to move freely between competing groups, and so negotiate complex relationships with breathtaking skill.

This era of prophecy was a vital time for people on the Plateau, as they responded in innovative and creative ways to the spiritual apocalypse of the nineteenth century. Prophets empowered their people to initiate “new ways of life within the world created by contact.”⁶⁵ And prophets called upon “diverse peoples to put aside their differences and forge a new common identity.”⁶⁶ These statements were true of all prophets. But they were true of Gone to the Spirits in a particular and powerful way. As a go-between he visited the diverse peoples that inhabited the Columbia River, from the Canadian Rockies to the Pacific coast. He negotiated between whites and Natives, between warring factions and rival tribes. And he did so in a way almost no one else could, creating new narratives and new ways of responding to and making sense of Euroamerican colonialism.

Joel Martin has argued that,

for the colonized person ... no traditional reintegration is possible. Because society under colonialism is always already distorted, millenarian initiation, unlike traditional initiation, cannot terminate in the assumption of a whole or self-same identity. No return to the ordinary world is possible. Rather, if it is to cancel the negativity of

⁶³ Schaeffer, “The Kutenai Female Berdache,” 197.

⁶⁴ Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, 70.

⁶⁵ Martin, “Before and Beyond the Ghost Dance,” 684.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 692.

colonialism, the initiation process must grant to the initiand actions, words, and meanings that signify an irreducible difference from the identity that the colonial order has imposed or desires to impose upon him/her... Colonizing “writing” must be overpowered by an oppositional writing that is at once more primordial and post-colonial.⁶⁷

Prophets, by their very nature symbolized and embodied that “difference.”⁶⁸ Prophets were able to “tap all the ambiguous power of enduring symbol and myth and ritual,” even as they moved beyond those “age-old patterns,” shaping them in innovative ways that responded to new stressors.⁶⁹

Gone to the Spirits was able to do this in a particularly powerful way, writing that old-yet-new narrative with his own body and his own gender identity. His story is in part one of continuity with previous prophet, spirit power, and third-gender traditions. But it is also more than that. He was also a figure that represented the moment in-between, the space of transformation and survival.⁷⁰

When told by non-Native observers, Kaúxuma núpika’s story is filtered through the lens of settler colonialism, easily evoking stereotypes of the vanishing Indian. From the view of the settler, Gone to the Spirits must ultimately perish because he exists outside the norm of Euroamerican civilization — he is indigenous, non-Christian, and exists outside of accepted gender binaries. Considered within the context of indigenous Plateau cultures and beliefs, however, Kaúxuma núpika defies that stereotype. Instead, he becomes a historical example of what Qwo-Li Driskill has called the “sovereign erotic,” a reclaiming of the complex and fluid gender realities found within indigenous cultures and spiritualities. Such realities have been “erased and hidden by colonial cultures,” subject to “gendercide” at the hands of military, missionary, and settler culture. Reclaiming historical narratives such as this, stories that demonstrate the variability of gender and sexuality in indigenous communities, challenges the power of settler colonialism and heteronormativity. They are a reclaiming of Native ways of being, and a resurrection of ways of living and loving that were subject to the “gendercide” of colonialism. For Driskill and other Two Spirit activists, reclaiming the right to define and interpret erotic experience from an indigenous perspective is a vital “tool for healing from trauma.”⁷¹ It is a return to the most fundamental of homelands: one’s body and one’s self.⁷²

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⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁹ Vibert, “The Native Peoples Were Strong to Live,” 204.

⁷⁰ Roscoe argues that we look beyond the standard western dualism of sexual identity, to consider multiple identities. As he writes, “If berdaches simply exchanged one of two genders for the other, then they can be interpreted as upholding a heterosexist gender system, but if they are understood as entering a distinct gender status, neither male nor female, something more complex is going on. A multiple gender paradigm makes it possible to see berdache status not as a compromise between nature and culture or a means to accommodate ‘natural’ variation, but as an integral and predictable element of certain sociocultural systems” (Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 129).

⁷¹ Driskill, “Stolen from Our Bodies,” 57, 60. Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas,” 253–84.

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