The life activity:
what it means to kill and die in the Arctic

Jonathan Lam

Hello, everyone! I'm presenting my paper topic, about death in the Arctic, particularly among the Inuit people and other native people living above the Arctic circle.

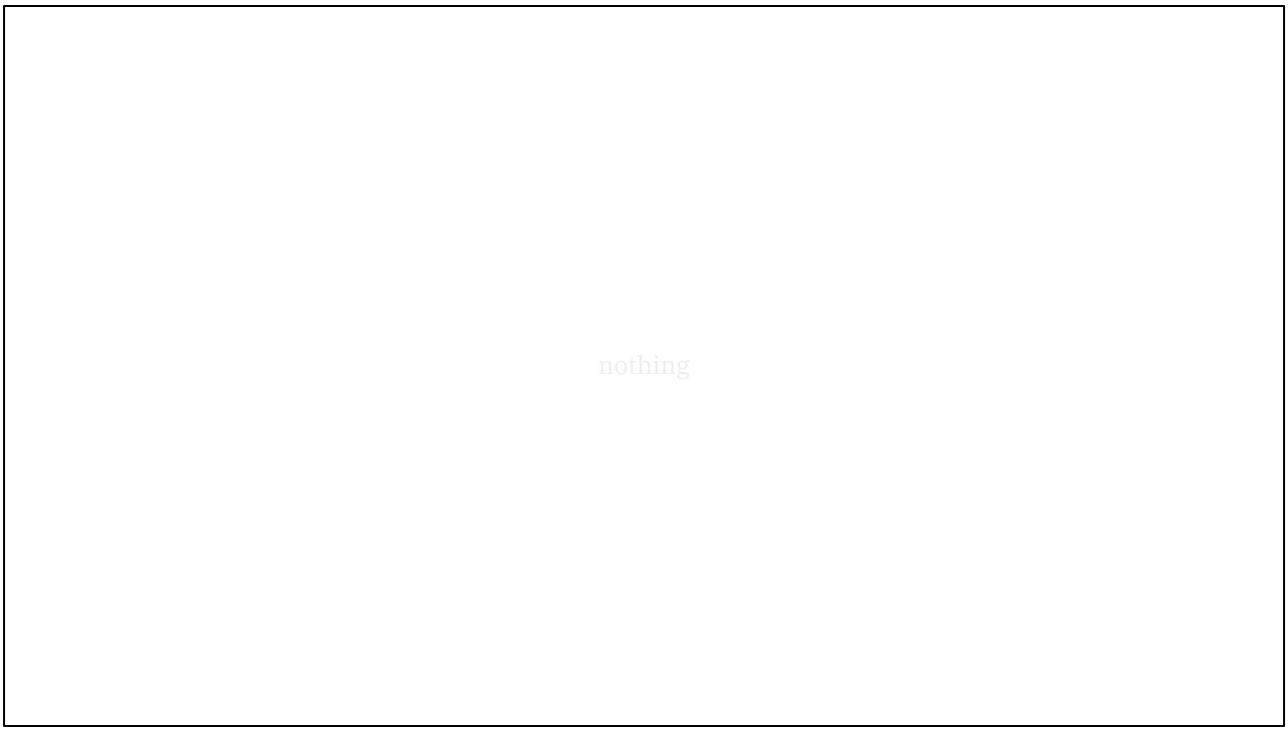
It sounds like a very broad and grandiose topic, to talk about death. And it is. It stemmed from a particular image from one of our readings, but became something very large. Therefore, I'd like to take some time to frame this discussion first, with a very big question.

What do you believe happens after death?

What do you believe happens after death? Or, what are your beliefs of life-after-death?

I don't expect anyone to answer this right now. But take some time, think about it for a minute, because chances are you don't think about this every day. I'll take 30 seconds to pause here.

I'm not expecting anyone's answer to this, but this will help warm up this discussion. If someone wants to share, then feel free. But I will go ahead and share my own. And my own belief of what happens after death is…



Nothing. We evolved from some primordial soup, a genetic algorithm that is a function of chemistry, physics, and probability. Consciousness, life, and what we may call a soul, to me, may be thought of as an advanced survival mechanism. To reason about our lives allows us to make really good decisions about survival. But, once we're done with living, and the electricity stops running in your brain, the consciousness stops, just like turning off a computer.

And maybe this is a depressing thought, because you might think, well, there's no point to living -- everything's going to be gone at some point. And this was really a struggle I had around those angsty years of middle school to early high school. I think for around a year or two, every night in bed I would play through scenarios of death: either imminent death or terminal illness. Inescapable death. Usually involving family. And then thinking about how I would react afterwards, when they had passed, and there was no way to reach them.

Eventually I overcame this, but it was a few years of thinking about it. What got me over it was just that school got too busy around sophomore year of high school, and I don't think I've ever really caught a break since then. But in a way, it's crowded out any thoughts about death, and I've become much accepting of this nothingness -- if something were to happen, I think now, the best thing to do is to keep doing all the other things that are to be done.

At this point, I'm wondering if anyone else would like to share their beliefs on life after death.

How does the way you think about death affect the way you live?

This sets us up for the second question, and the one that is really more important: how is this belief linked into your life? How did it form from your circumstances, and how does it affect your decisions?

So, rather than a explanatory view of death, where we try to rationalize any particular view, this is more functional and practical, and something we can work with. Also, we'll probably never get a global consensus on what truly happens after death.

In my case, I think that confronting the hypothetical for some time, and eventually realizing that the best way to stop worrying about an untacklable problem like death, is to simply immerse yourself in other things. That probably changed the way I think about worrying things. It might also be why I am such a procrastinator.

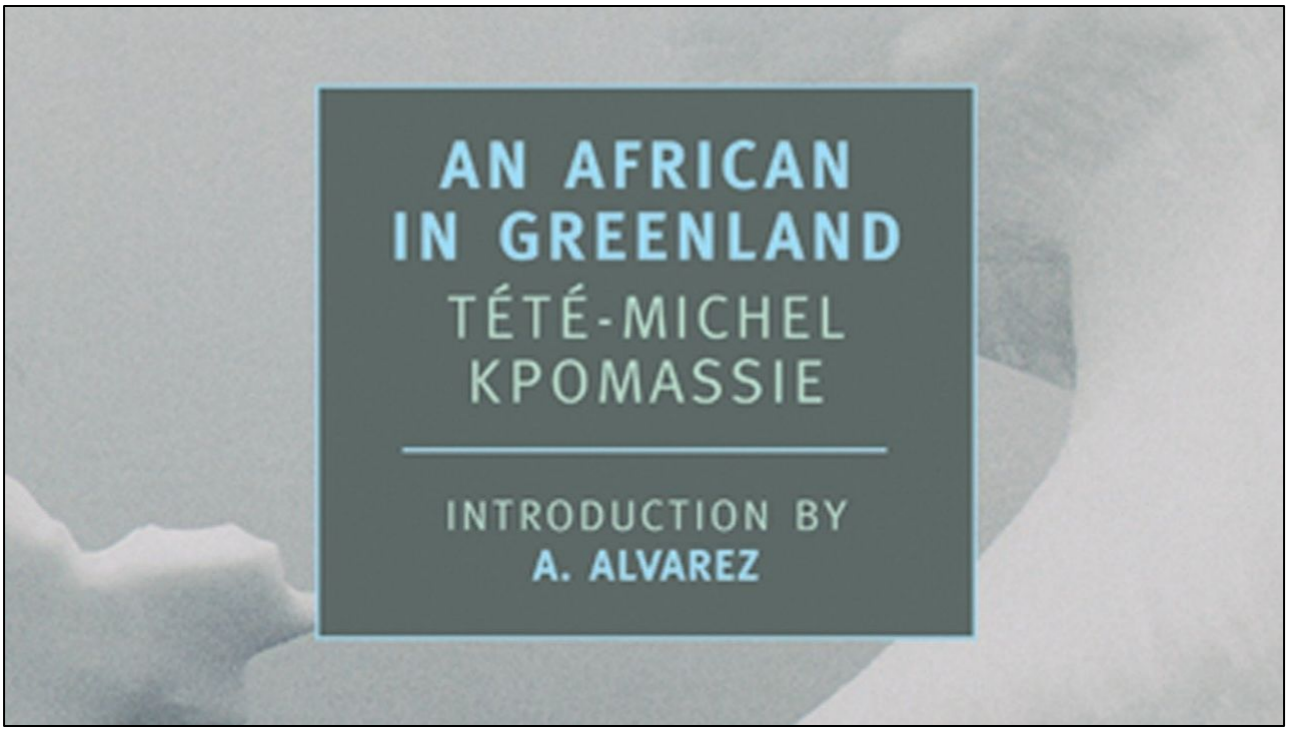
“If you live each day as if it were your last, someday you'll be right. Every morning I looked in the mirror and asked myself: If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I do today?”

Steve Jobs

As another example, take this well-known quote from Steve Jobs. [READ QUOTE]

We can pick up some aspect of an interpretation of death even from this quote. It implies that we should attempt to achieve as much as possible in this lifetime, otherwise we may feel unfulfilled at the end of our life journey, which seems fairly reasonable. But if we consider alternative interpretations, it may be less reasonable. For example, take the hypothetical belief that after one dies, they are transferred to an afterworld where they never age. In this case, one may “strategically” die young in the ordinary world so that they live forever young in the afterlife. If a long life is their goal in their first life, then they will be punished for that in the second. Or, imagine a world where the ones who are most fulfilled in their first life are given poor chances in the afterlife. If this were the case, Steve Jobs’ advice would be harmful rather than helpful.

As mentioned before, we will never know the true nature of life after death. But by now, hopefully you can see the lens with which we will try to view the Inuit people, who must have formed a different perspective on life after death, given their tough situation.



That brings us to this book. There is a lot of death in this book. To name a few: freezing, drowning, starvation, drunk parents falling on and suffocating their baby, babies devoured by dogs, puppies devoured by dogs, a middle-aged man devoured by dogs, an execution of dogs suspected of manslaughter, able-bodied men falling through thin ice and dying of drowning or freezing, a carelessly drunk murder due to a relationship dispute, an accidental gunshot through the leg in a canoe, and many more that I have probably missed.

While this seems very random, the themes of death in this book seem to be fairly widespread -- accidental deaths are still much more common in Arctic regions than sub-Arctic regions of the same nations. The point is that death is in close proximity to the Greenlanders, and I wonder how they must think about it.

> “In the old days, both in Greenland and among the other Eskimos, the old people, so as not to encumber a migration, would elect to remain behind and die slowly in the abandoned igloos. It was a spontaneous, stoic, unforced decision, and one which to them seemed noble.”
>
> Tété-Michel Kpomassie

But, despite the ubiquity of accidental death, and the need to cope with it, still the most striking incident of death was in the shown quote: that of the voluntary death of elders. [READ QUOTE]

To me, there is a very strong emotion here: sacrifice of a human being that you care for, in order for the preservation of the youth. There is immense trust on both sides: both of the family leaving the elder behind, and the elder, facing that scenario of imminent, unstoppable death, as they wait out the rest of their time, alone.

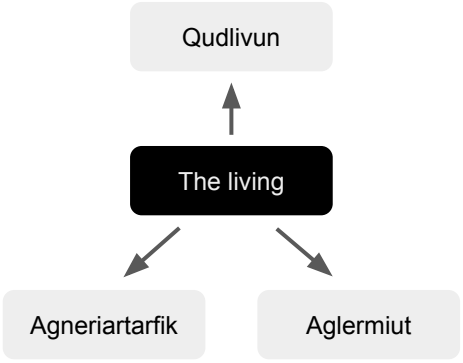
Smith, Craig S. "A Lost Art in the Arctic: Igloo Making." *The New York Times*, 21 Jun. 2017. Web.

…

It's hard to imagine what goes through their head at this time. We might say that it's only a matter of efficiency and survival, but it turns out that voluntary death among the Inuit people is not limited to situations of dire survival.

Afterlives
of the Netsilik Inuit

(Walsh and O'Neill)



It is time to talk about what the Inuit people think about life death. It's difficult to avoid overgeneralizing, but there do seem to be a number of patterns. A report by Walsh and O'Neill talk about the death traditions and beliefs of the various Inuit groups among northern Canada. There is a general trend of burial by simply abandoning the body, covered by a simple covering. This is a matter of pragmatics -- usually, it is too difficult to bury due to the frozen ground. The body may also be buried with some of the person's broken possessions, such as weapons, so that they are also "killed" and pass with the person to the other world.

What is the afterlife? The specifics seem to vary between Inuit groups, but there seems to be a general consensus on life after death. The Netsilik Inuit, for example, have the idea of three afterlives: one in the sky, the most honorable, for hunters and those who suffer honorable deaths; then there are two underworlds, one which is similarly joyful, and the other which is for the less honorable, and more negative.

This may be a fairly easy to understand belief of the afterlife, one that lines up closely with Heaven and Hell. There are of course subtle differences, such as what qualifies one to enter one realm or the other, the existence of two "joyful" realms, and the "killing" of possessions -- all which can have additional interpretations drawn from them.

The “mirror realm”
of the Chukchi of Siberia

(Willerslev)

But the previous interpretation is not the only one. It also seems that a common theme among the Inuit people is a recycling of souls, i.e., a rebirth into the current world. One of these beliefs is described in detail by Willerslev.

“The Chukchi cosmos can perhaps best be described as a hall-of- mirrors world: Each thing is paired with almost endless doubles of itself, which extend in all directions and continually reflect and echo one another. For example, the much feared evil spirits, the ke'let (sing, ke'le) are said to live in camps and villages, travel about the country on sledges, and go hunting for prey as do human beings. The game they hunt, however, is the souls of men, which they call their "little seals" or "reindeer". From the viewpoint of a human being, the ke'let have monstrous and terrifying features, such as hanging eyes, half-formed bodies, and large mouths full of teeth. Yet, from the viewpoint of the ke'let themselves, they are the ones who are human, and they regard the human shamans who can attack and kill them as ke'let - that is, as evil spirits” (Willerslev)

I’ll ask you, the audience, what to think about this. This is actually the most important slide in the whole presentation, indecorous as it is. What kind of conclusions can you draw from this interpretation?

This example introduces the mirror world in terms of evil spirits, but it also applies to the living and the dead. The living and dead are said to occupy two parallel realms, and death in one means rebirth in the other. The two are thus locked in tandem with a fixed number of souls. Moreover, each realm sees itself as the living and the other as

the dead, and everything in the other realm is opposite the current realm -- e.g., the people are inside out. Each world is also known to exert some control over the lives of the other; only if the living die will people in the dead realm be born.

Thus there is both a reverence and fear of the dead; we must offer periodic sacrifices so that their world is plentiful, and they would not try to limit the life in the living realm. Willerslev notes that the voluntary death is considered the “optimal sacrifice,” worth more than livestock or other substitutes, and that this sacrifice is an additional reason for self-sacrifice: to preserve the equilibrium between the two realms.

Suicide:
then and now

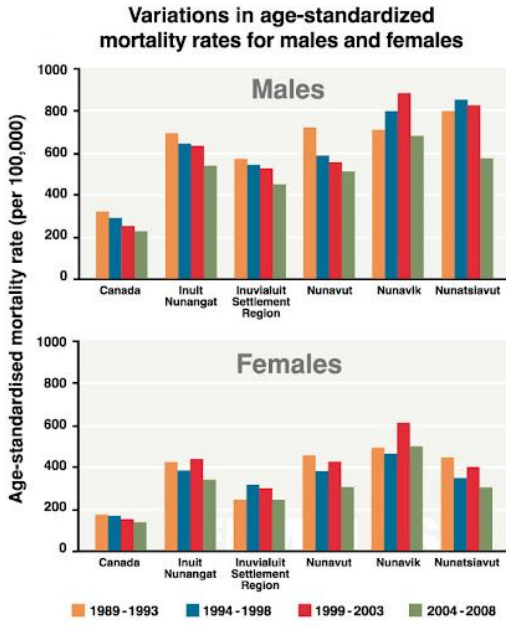
We turn our attention to how these interpretations manifest today. You may remember that alongside that quote from before, about the elders committing suicide. It is accompanied by the modern equivalent.

> “Today, the old sometimes commit suicide. An old man may be driven to such an extremity when he is *gamapok*, angry. Angry with himself. He goes out and never comes back. Sometimes he tells his family, and they do nothing to stop him. The old man has made up his mind and will not budge! Those who kill themselves in this way have often been great hunters. Diminished by old age and feeling themselves a burden to everyone, they don’t take easily to their changed condition.”
>
> Tété-Michel Kpomassie

[READ QUOTE]

But this sounds like more of a grumpy old man than a matter of sacrifice. It’s lost a lot of the nobleness. This is reflected in more than just one way in the Inuit community.

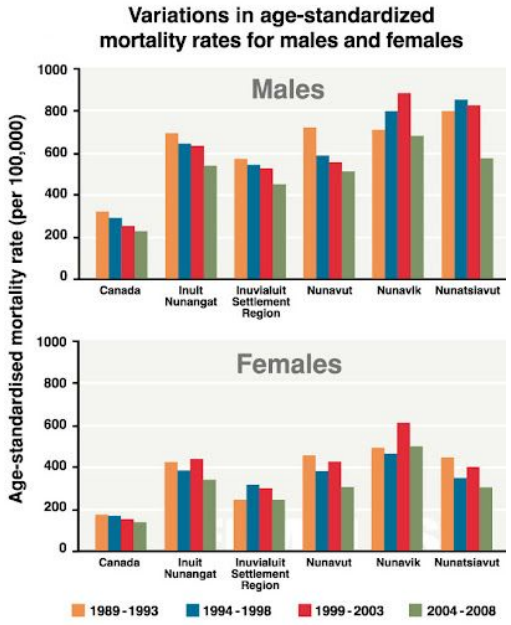
But is there still a vestige of that nobleness? Perhaps the old man thinks that he is a burden, and that killing himself is in some way helping the youth. This would make sense within the “mirror realm” framework.

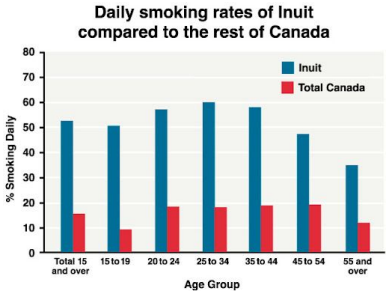


"Health Indicators for Inuit Nunangat." *Canadian Environmental Health Atlas,* Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2021. Web.

As we slowly transition over to the pressing modern issue of youth suicide, let us first consider mortality rates in general. There are a number of studies that study mortality rate of Inuit people, especially in Canada and Alaska in the second half of the twentieth century. The picture is not pretty. We can very roughly attribute many negative health consequences to a more sedentary lifestyle, access to unhealthy foods, climate change and pollution, and systematic racism -- broadly speaking, the general symptoms of colonization. New education and healthcare systems are imposed that cause increased familial separation and loss of cultural knowledge, causing increased feelings of separation amongst the youth. The situation is similar among several groups in Siberia.

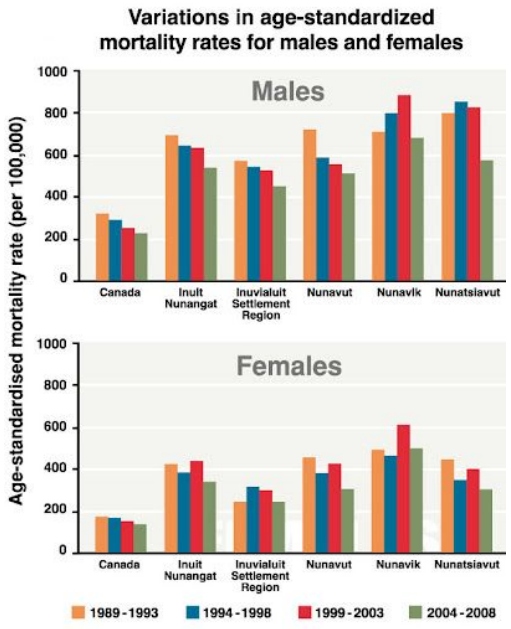
Thus, it is not surprising that mortality is still very high in Inuit societies. If we consider the following charts showing mortality rates of Inuit groups in Canada from 1989 to 2008, we can see that the mortality rate is consistently many times higher than that of Canada in general.

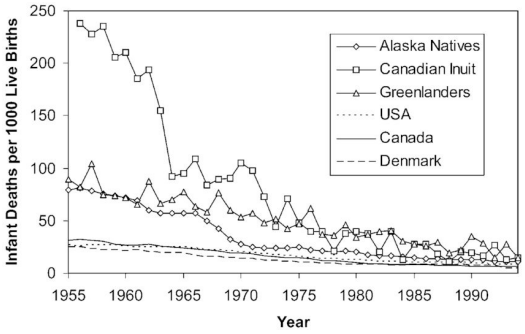


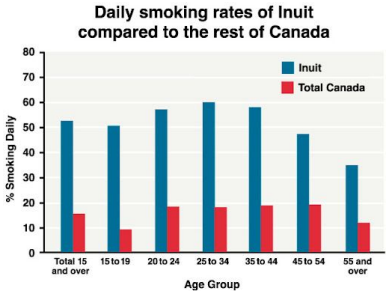


"Health Indicators for Inuit Nunangat." *Canadian Environmental Health Atlas,* Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2021. Web.

This second chart is similarly not painting a good picture. High rates of tobacco and alcoholism have rocked Inuit societies.





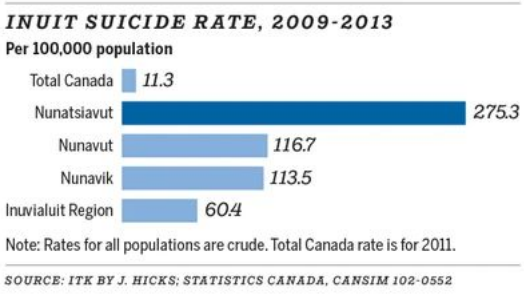


"Health Indicators for Inuit Nunangat." *Canadian Environmental Health Atlas,* Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2021. Web.
Bjerregaard, Peter, et al. "Indigenous health in the Arctic: an overview of the circumpolar Inuit population." *Scandinavian journal of public health* 32.5 (2004): 390-395.

And in this chart in the top right, we see infant mortality rates among several Inuit groups in Alaska, Canada, and Greenland when compared to national averages. Luckily, modern medicine is able to help with some cases of mortality, such as infant mortality, but it is still noticeably higher than the national averages.

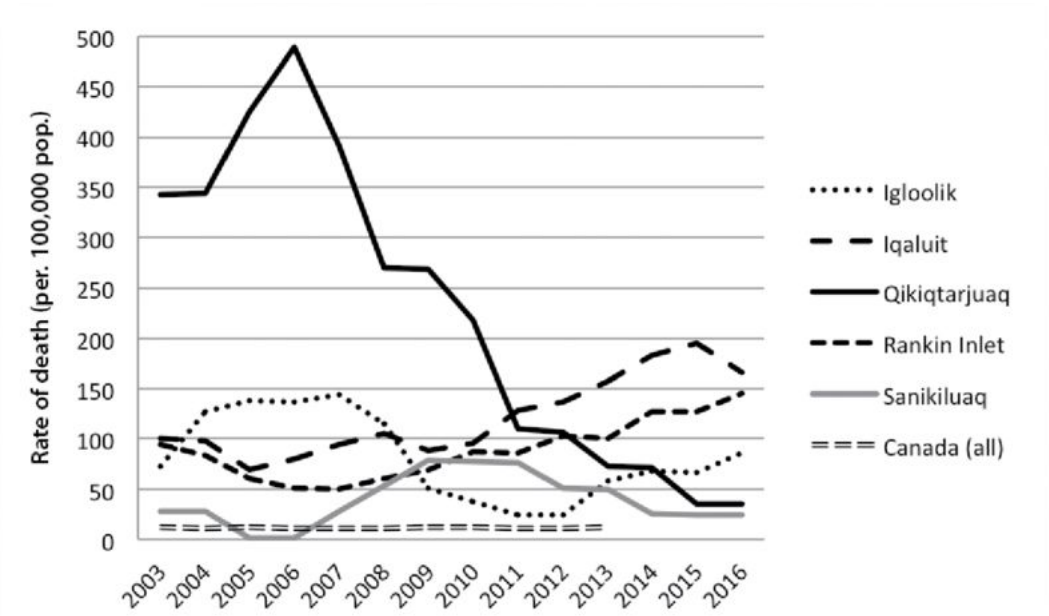
Just for context, some additional statistics on mortality from Day and Lanier about mortality rates in Alaska in the late twentieth century:

- unintentional mortality 3.9 times national average
- suicide 4.2 times national average (and fourth leading cause of death)
- homicide 3.3 times national average
- alcoholism mortality 14 times national average (Fleshman, 1968)



Crawford, Blair. "Fix 'unacceptable' social inequity to reduce Inuit suicide rates, report urges." *Ottawa Citizen*. 4 July 2016. Web. https://ottawacitizen.com/health/family-child/fix-unacceptable-social-inequity-to-reduce-inuit-suicide-rates-report-urges

We show some numbers related to suicide from only a decade ago. While most of the studies on Inuit mortality have mostly been centered around the mid-to-later parts of the twentieth century, suicide rates among the Inuit are still very high.

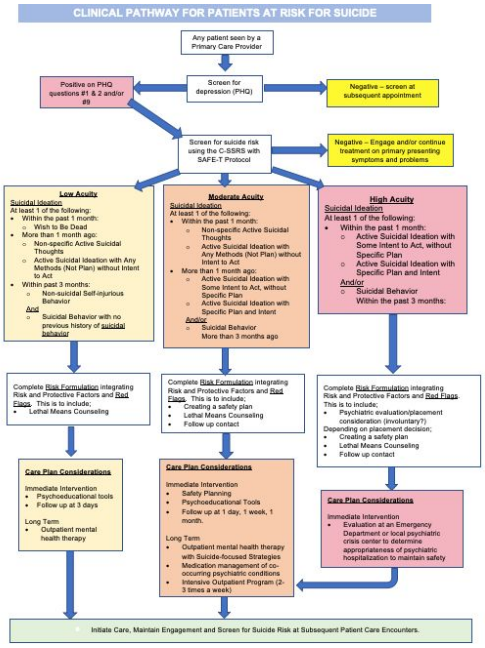


Hicks, Jack. "A critical analysis of myth-perpetuating research on suicide prevention." *Northern Public Affairs* 5.3 (2018): 44-49.

As another view, also from Hicks, we see the change over time from 2003 to 2016. Only one of the Inuit groups shows a marked decline in suicide rates; but all of them appear to be several times higher than the national suicide rate in Canada.

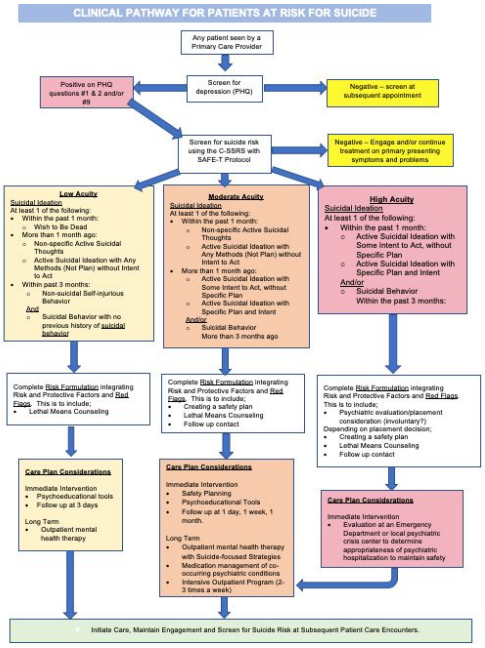
It is important to note that these suicides are of a different nature than that of the voluntary death. Willerslev in particular is very particular to separate the two. The modern suicides are of a much more spontaneous manner, and are usually spiteful: towards failed romantic relationships, towards family, or towards the systematic oppression. Some report that they see the dead coaxing them over to the other side, and that there is a greater unity in death than in life.

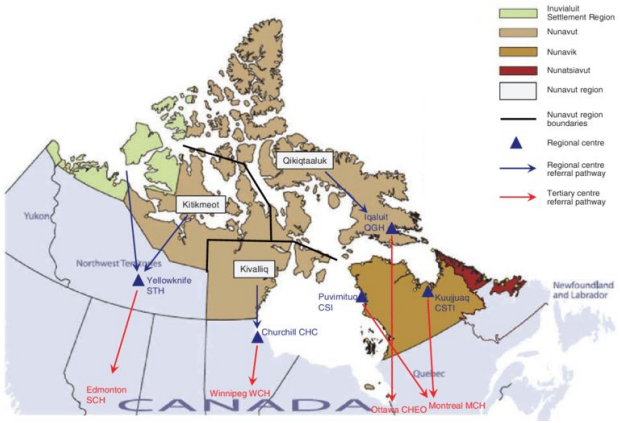
I can imagine this in the framework of the mirror world model in two ways. Firstly, the dead inviting over the living when they are not careful is a recurring theme. Secondly, the thought that not only is there life after death, but that the mirror world is opposite the current one in many aspects: if the current world is oppressive and limited, then the other one is united and free. Death in this model, dishonorable as it may be, is an escape to that opposite world.



"Suicide prevention in primary care settings." *Montana DPHHS*. Montana.gov. 2021. Web.

Some researchers attempt to drill down into the causes of these absurdly high suicide rates. Stevenson focuses on the colonial healthcare system as a system that doesn't work. She mentions that a lot of the healthcare workers turn to procedural flowcharts such as this one, rather than attempting to better understand the person and root cause.





"Suicide prevention in primary care settings." *Montana DPHHS*. Montana.gov. 2021. Web.
Banerji, Anna, et al. "Hospital admissions for lower respiratory tract infections among infants in the Canadian Arctic: a cohort study." *CMAJ* open 4.4 (2016): E615.

Another aspect is the isolation caused by modern medicine. Pictured here are the common referrals for medical facilities in Canada. They are expectedly sparse in the northern regions, and this causes hundreds to thousands of miles of separation from family. There are also horror stories of family members never returning from treatment, or perhaps returning months later and not being accepted by the family. Stevenson notes the following exchange between a social worker and the family of a child who had just returned from years of treatment for tuberculosis:

"On arrival to the house … the social worker … knocks on the door, says to the Eskimo couple who lived there … 'Here is your daughter we brought her back for you,' to which they replied 'We don't have a daughter. We never had one.' 'Well yes you did but that was a long time ago.' And they say, 'Yes, but she died. The white man took her away and she died. We've never heard of her since'" (Pearson 1973).

This may be considered the "curse of modern, anonymized healthcare." It clashes too strongly with the other aspects of Inuit belief systems on death. We may summarize our thoughts with another quote from Stevenson:

"The word *annaktujuniq* literally means the state of one who escapes from sickness, hunger, danger. And in another context, the base annaktuq is used to describe an animal or quarry that gets away, escapes death. Survival is linked to escape. The intimacy of the other's death, the death that one escaped, is crucial – the other's death is imagined as one's own" (Stevenson)

From this, we may be able to see why modern healthcare is the antagonist of the Inuit death tradition. To survive or live in the Inuit tradition does not necessarily align with the physical definition of being alive. But we can consider that not being in this cycle of being chased, of living in life-and-death situations, may be as well as considered dead. To be in a stagnant state for so many years, may be no better than recycling the soul in the mirror world -- what one may call the “life activity.”

“If we let suicide remain a wound rather than a problem to be solved through cooperation, we can experience the suicidal imagination, its desires and its negations, rather than circumscribe it with meaning.”

Lisa Stevenson

I’ll leave you guys on this note from Stevenson.