

STOLEN SISTERS: THE STORY OF TWO MISSING GIRLS, THEIR FAMILIES, AND HOW CANADA HAS FAILED INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Emmanuelle Walter
Toronto: Harper Collins, 2015

**REVIEWED BY CLARE
CONLOGUE**

In *Stolen Sisters: The Story of Two Missing Girls, Their Families, and How Canada Has Failed Indigenous Women*, Walker explores the disappearance of Maisy Odjick and Shannon Alexander as a window into the Canada-wide crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women. She identifies colonialism and anti-Indigenous racism as underlying causes, and suggests that a feminicide is taking place, “a twofold phenomenon whereby countless women are murdered solely because of their gender, and government negligence further exacerbates the impact” (15). Overarchingly, she investigates the disproportionate and unique ways that violence against women manifests in Indigenous communities and among Indigenous women throughout Canada.

Since 1980, over 1,200 Indigenous women have gone missing or been murdered in Canada. Walker pays homage to them throughout *Stolen Sisters*. She assesses how anti-Indigenous racism is entrenched in Canadian society, including the police and government, and cites it as the primary reason why Indigenous women are disproportionately likely to go missing or be murdered, and

to have their cases go unsolved. Although only 4.3 percent of all women in Canada are Indigenous, they represent approximately 25 percent of all cases of missing or murdered women (Pearce as cited in Walker, 2015). In 2012, 23 percent of female homicide victims were Indigenous women.

Walker overviews Canada’s colonial history to contextualize the discrimination that Indigenous communities continue to face. She documents how settlers murdered Indigenous people in cold blood, including over 4,000 children via residential schools. Those who survived the genocide were deemed second-class citizens, and the social and political marginalization borne of this time continue to be felt today. Indigenous communities experience health disparities comparable to “third-world” countries, in addition to severely limited employment and education opportunities. Walker argues that the Canadian government is complicit in this marginalization and directly discriminates against Indigenous communities.

Stolen Sisters also aims to commemorate Maisy and Shannon. Maisy lived on the Algonquin reserve of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg (KZA), which sits just outside Maniwaki, the Quebec town where Shannon resided. In September 2008, the girls went missing. Police and the media victim-blamed them for supposedly living “at-risk lifestyles,” and blamed their families for supposedly failing to protect them. By contrast, Walker asserts that police negligence, based in anti-Indigenous racism, was the primary reason why they were never found.

Stolen Sisters makes a significant contribution to the limited body of literature addressing the crisis of

missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. Walker offers a wide range of evidence to demonstrate that this crisis is the direct result of gender inequality and lack of access to institutional accountability and justice within Indigenous communities. She frames the plight of Indigenous women in Canada as inextricable from that of Indigenous women worldwide.

Institutional accountability is chronically lacking in cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Shannon’s disappearance was reported to the Maniwaki police, the Sûreté du Québec (SQ). Maisy’s was reported to the reserve police, Kitigan Zibi police services (KZPS). Based on racist stereotypes, both forces initially assumed—despite ample evidence to the contrary—that the girls had run away. Maisy’s mother Laurie expressed that the KZPS was “incompetent and quick to lay blame” (66), while Shannon’s father Bryan felt “neglected and scorned by the SQ” (68), which his mother attributed to their Indigeneity.

The cases were handled separately and wholly incompetently for the first two months, losing invaluable investigation time. Once sightings were reported outside the region, the OPP and the RCMP became involved. Of all four police forces involved, not one took the lead or gathered basic clues. Laurie received little to no information concerning her daughter’s case, and ultimately felt that she did the police’s job for them. Maisy’s aunt, Maria Jacko, was independently responsible for getting the girls featured on the RCMP website of missing children and organizing the first ground search. It is appalling that tasks such as these were neglected by police.

Police forces respond vastly differently when non-Indigenous women go missing as compared to non-Indigenous women. Pearce, referring to women in Vancouver, asserts that “Racism, apathy, and blatant disdain... led to [police] inaction. These women were not afforded... the same concern, time and resources after they had gone missing that would have been afforded to citizens deemed more worthy” (as cited in Walker 72). In May 2014, an RCMP report cited a solve rate of eighty-eight percent for homicides of Indigenous women, only one percent lower than that of non-Indigenous women. However, this statistic exaggerated police effectiveness. It did not include suspicious deaths mistakenly ruled accidental or the countless long-term missing persons cases that may have been homicides.

With respect to gender inequality, it must be acknowledged that the 1,200 cases of murdered or missing Indigenous women in Canada are not a series of isolated incidents. As asserted by Walker, they are examples of gender-based violence and collectively constitute a femicide. Gender inequality made these women vulnerable to violence. These instances of explicit violence and neglect are further contextualized by daily experiences of marginalization. As compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous women have a dramatically shorter life expectancy and thirty percent lower average income. “Twice as many are single parents; twice as many unemployed. Three times as many are victims of domestic abuse; three times as many likely to contract AIDS” (47). Most alarmingly, their chance of being murdered is seven times higher.

Young Indigenous women and girls are faced with unique vulnerability factors. One of the most concerning examples is evidenced by their overrepresentation among underage

(exploited) sex trade workers: ninety percent of these workers are Indigenous. Walker notes that because Canada often associates Indigenous women with the sex trade, trafficking them is less conspicuous than trafficking other minorities. Thus, they become targeted.

Walker emphasizes that the extreme gender inequality experienced by Indigenous women in Canada is largely a result of colonization. Prior to the 1876 Indian Act, Indigenous communities benefitted from much greater equality, but “In the space of a century, women were reduced to an underclass in their own communities” (102). The Act severely limited the power and rights of Indigenous women and forced those who married non-Indigenous men to surrender their cultural identity and the resources they were previously entitled to. Colonizers created “the fiction of the depraved ‘squaw,’” falsely portraying Indigenous women as “lustful, immoral, unfeeling and dirty” and rendering them “vulnerable to gross physical, psychological and sexual violence” (Laroque cited in Walker, 102) not only by outsiders but by Indigenous men as well.

Although *Stolen Sisters* makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge base, Walker’s own anti-Indigenous racism still presents itself in the form of demeaning stereotypes, pathologization, and essentialization.

The “drug addict” is one of the most prominent stereotypes applied to Indigenous people in Canada. Walker fixates on Shannon’s father’s drinking: “I hadn’t dared approach Bryan when I saw him ... beer can in hand, his head shaved, the ravaged features of someone whose life is no life” (26). Instantaneously, readers are made to picture the stereotypical alcoholic indigenous man who, dishevelled and subhuman, deserves nothing more than perpetual pity and reprimand. She initially fears

him, “...leery of his alcoholism, his rage...” (35), which she may not have had he been white. Walker problematizes and pathologizes substance use and links it directly to Indigeneity.

When describing Maisy and Shannon, Walker refers to their traditionally “deviant” behaviours with a negative connotation, particularly in the case of substance use. In doing so, she implies that they are morally reprehensible, that they misconducted themselves, and that they “suffer[ed] the consequences” (47). Thus, Walker actively participates in the victim-blaming that Indigenous women are so often subject to.

These racist ideas are shared by many Canadians. It would be dishonest for Walker to deny that she holds some of these prejudices, but they had no place in *Stolen Sisters*, unless they had themselves been subject to critical analysis. Although she speaks at length about racism, she does not once refer to whiteness. One cannot not exist without the other, and failing to address the latter is deceptive. To remedy these omissions, Walker should have explicitly stated that she was non-Indigenous, critically assessed her biases, and considered seeking out an indigenous co-author. As a white woman, I recognize that responsible authorship includes being explicit and transparent about one’s social location with respect to one’s subject of study. This is especially crucial in the context of working with indigenous communities, or other communities of which one is not a member, because this work tends to be somewhat more intrusive and to have a higher potential to cause harm.

If someone were to read *Stolen Sisters* with no prior knowledge of the subject matter, their most basic prejudices may not be challenged. This could limit Walker’s ability to achieve one of her central goals: to alleviate ignorance by targeting the subtlest, most elusive forms of an-

ti-Indigenous racism as they exist in the Canadian conscience. That said, the book is still an excellent example of how ideology functions. Despite intending to protest racial injustice, at times, Walker reproduces white supremacist ideology throughout the book.

Stolen Sisters recognizes the disappearance of Maisy Odjick and Shannon Alexander as an example of the Canada-wide phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Walker deems the latter a femicide and illustrates the impact of gender inequality and lack of institutional justice on the safety of Indigenous women. Despite reinforcing anti-Indigenous racism in a number of ways, Walker makes a substantial and highly necessary contribution to the body of literature documenting this crisis. She demonstrates that as long as Indigenous women are denied the right to gender equality and institutional accountability, disproportionate levels of violence will continue to be inflicted upon them. Demanding governmental response to such violence requires a concerted international effort; a stand in solidarity with Indigenous women worldwide.

Clare Conlogue is a fourth year Social Work student at Ryerson University. As an intersectional feminist with an anti-oppressive practice focus, her primary research interests include poverty reduction and prevention and violence against women. She hopes to work within housing and homelessness.

References

United Nations (2015). *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Web.

ABOUT CANADA: WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Penni Mitchell
Halifax: Fernwood, 2015

REVIEWED BY AMANDA LE ROUGETEL

If history is the study of the past as it relates to human beings, then *About Canada: Women's Rights* brings 150 years of that past vividly to life through the names and stories of the countless women whose courage and hard work helped shape Canada into the country of essential, if not always actual, equality, justice and caring it is today. Using secondary sources, Penni Mitchell, editor of Winnipeg-based *Herizons* magazine, succeeds admirably in her objective to shine a spotlight on “just some of the women who climbed on soapboxes and defied the limitations of their gender” to bring about change.

Beginning in the mid-1800s and following through to 1999 (with a nod to First Nation and colonial era women before those dates), Mitchell tells the stories of the many firsts by women. New France (today's Québec) had no shortage of such firsts: It saw the first hospital in 1645, the first school for girls in 1676, and the first recorded public protest by women in 1757 against the governor's proposed reduction in public rations of bread and meat. The first female principal in Canada was Emily Stowe of Ontario; in 1867, she became the first woman to practice medicine in Canada, after having had to train in the U.S. because she was denied entry to the U of T's medical school on the basis of her sex. In 1921, Agnes Macphail became the first woman elected as a member of parliament.

The list of women with impact – first or otherwise – goes on: You'll read about familiar names, including

Nellie McClung, Madeleine Parent, Muriel Duckworth, and Judy Rebick, to name just four. But you'll also read about women you've likely never heard of, including Thanadelthur, a young Dene woman in 1713 who was an instrumental negotiator in the fur trade in northern Manitoba; Agathe de Saint-Père, a successful businesswoman in early 1700s Québec; Mary Ann Shadd, active in the Underground Railway in the early 1800s, a proponent of integration, an author and a newspaper publisher; Margaret Bulkley, who assumed a male identity and practiced as a surgeon in the mid-1800s; Elsie Gregory MacGill, North America's first female aeronautical engineer (1927); and many more.

The individual women's stories are fascinating, and when woven together they tell the larger story of social change effected through collective action. Women worked together in clubs, institutes, councils, action committees, funds, and leagues. For example, women gathered in the guise of 'literary' clubs to organize politically; the National Council of Women was founded in 1893 to fight for equal wages and public health services; in the early 1900s, university women's clubs advocated for equal pay and suffrage; in 1904, the Canadian Women's Press Club brought together women reformers who were earning their living as published writers. Fast forward over the decades to the late 20th century and you'll learn about the work of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL), the Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), the Disabled Women's Network (DAWN), Le front de libération des femmes du Québec, and others.

Read the book linearly from start to end to experience the sense of evolving rights over the decades – and