

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

The Role of Grassroots Organizations and Social Media in Education

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Les femmes autochtones au Canada sont la cible des violences suite à la colonisation par les médias sociaux et les organismes de la base qui influencent l'éducation et la sensibilisation. aux problèmes des droits de la personne. L'auteure utilise l'intersectionnalité et le féminisme des autochtones pour sonder leurs expériences et les aider à réagir face à l'urgence de cette menace à leurs droits. L'auteure conclut que les groupes à la base et les médias sociaux sont responsables de la perception des problèmes des autochtones et exige qu'une éducation de meilleure qualité et des médias avertis engagent les autochtones dans une formation qui changera la société.

Allegations in 2014 against prominent figures in Canadian media and politics, in 2015 and beyond within the Canadian military, and into 2017 against political leaders in Ontario, have brought to light the systemic and widespread nature of harassment and violence against women in Canada. While women of all backgrounds are targets of gendered violence, Aboriginal women are seven times more likely to be victims of homicide than non-Aboriginal women (O'Donnell and Wallace 42). A 2014 report from Amnesty International acknowledges that “[t]he scale and severity of violence faced by Indigenous women and girls in Canada ... constitutes a national human rights crisis” (“Violence Against” 1). The Canadian federal government responded to this call by initiating the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in 2016.

Aboriginal peoples in Canada are oppressed through ideological domination and the imposition of colonial culture, which denies them access and opportunity in society (Sensoy and Di Angelo 39). Further, as Wendee

Kubik, Carrie Bourassa, and Mary Hampton point out, “When looking at the impact of racism, sexism, and colonization on Aboriginal women, gaps exist between Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men as well as [between] non-Aboriginal men and women, but also *among and between* Aboriginal women themselves” (24). It is important to acknowledge the role of colonization when examining the conditions that provide for differentiated forms of male power. By identifying the power of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal men, one can better understand the ways in which sexism is used to oppress Aboriginal women. Joyce Green asserts that

[c]olonialism is closely tied to racism and sexism. These twin phenomena exist in the context of colonial society, directed at Indigenous people, but they have also been internalized by some Indigenous political cultures in ways that are oppressive to Indigenous women. (22-23)

Not only have colonial settlers perpetuated Western ideologies of patriarchy and discrimination, but some Aboriginal men and communities have embraced these ideals as well.

It would be impossible to unweave the raced, classed, and gendered experiences of Aboriginal women (Smith “Not an Indian” 70), but it is important to recognize that these parts of identity might not be equally important to one’s self-definition (Collins 22). For some Aboriginal women, “one’s first loyalty is to one’s nation, race or culture, above gender” (St. Denis 48). For them, addressing concerns of colonization, racism, and economic disparity are more important than achieving gender equality (St.

Denis 40). These women see themselves as colonized first, then oppressed as women. Furthermore, feminism itself does not do enough to represent the experiences of diverse women “because hegemonic femininity is not automatically attributed to racialized women and girls, [so] women marginalized by other social locations will always experience systemic bias” (Pietsch 139). Some Aboriginal women reject feminism and do not support the claim that society is male-dominated because when looking at societal relations in many Aboriginal communities prior

Di Angelo 39). Even before Canada became a country, assimilating Aboriginal peoples was at the forefront of government planning and policy development. The values and traditions of dominant colonial society were dispersed through institutions to rationalize the social inequality of Aboriginal peoples. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Aboriginal children were forcefully removed from their homes and communities and educated in residential schools. The aim of residential schooling was to impose onto Aboriginal children colonial values,

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to contact, critics recognize that Aboriginal women held high political status (St. Denis 37). Indeed, some Aboriginal women claim that equality with men is not relevant because it is a concept imposed by colonizers (St. Denis 38). In contrast, others “argue that feminist, far from being a ‘white’ concept, is actually an Indigenous concept white women borrowed from Native women” (Smith “Native American” 96). Aboriginal feminism, which at its core aims to reconcile colonization, is a useful tool to examine the impacts of colonialism, patriarchy, and the ways in which they interact to oppress Aboriginal women and their differing experiences.

In this paper I argue that Aboriginal women become the target of violence as a result of their raced, classed, and gendered positions, as a consequence of colonization, and I explore how social media and grassroots organizations lead to education and awareness measures. I recognize intersectionality and use Aboriginal feminism to interrogate Aboriginal women’s experiences, including the assimilationist policies that have targeted or continue to target these women. Finally, I explain how the problem identified in the media as missing and murdered Indigenous women (#MMIW) has been taken up by grassroots organizations and online social media campaigns to educate and empower people about this pressing human rights issue.

Raced, Classed, and Gendered Experiences of Aboriginal Women in Canada

Oppression is reproduced through policies, practices, traditions, norms, definitions, and discourses that systematically exploit one group to the benefit of another (Sensoy and

ostensibly to provide them with tools for success in colonial Canadian society (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 61). However, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) asserts, the use of residential schools was part of a larger policy initiative

to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada” (1) which is described by the commission as “cultural genocide. (1)

Furthermore, most Aboriginal students in the residential school system did not actually acquire academic skills (White and Peters 19). When students left residential school, they often lacked both academic and cultural competencies, which resulted in exclusion from both colonial society and from their Aboriginal communities (TRC 201). Ultimately these students did not fit into either world.

The last Canadian residential school closed in 1996. Recent work of the TRC and a formal apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008 has brought attention to the abuse, trauma, and torture that took place in many residential schools across Canada. As Nicole Pietsch notes, “in Canada, from the [nineteenth] century until 1996, residential schools effectively institutionalized the sexual abuse of (and White complicity toward) Aboriginal children” (138). Too many of the students who attended residential schools were emotionally, physically, and sexually abused (TRC 107). As a result of the trauma Aboriginal

students and their families experienced, intergenerational impacts of residential schooling continue to be felt in communities. The TRC describes the legacy of residential schooling as including “poverty, addictions, and domestic and sexual violence” (191), and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in the criminal justice system (271), among other impacts. Although children and their families were impacted by the residential school system, the *Indian Act* described below provides further justification of the undeniable targeting of Aboriginal peoples based on their race, and more so of Aboriginal women, because of their gender.

The *Indian Act*, the existing legislation for First Nations in Canada, has had various amendments over the years, but it continues to outline who is a status First Nations person based on lineage, how community governance is implemented, and how education is provided to status First Nations students, among other definitions. This legislation is a source of oppression based on race and class because it assigns unequal value to First Nations people through social stratification in which a binary is created between First Nations and the rest of Canadian society. Many describe the *Indian Act* as paternalistic because it gives the federal government jurisdiction over First Nations affairs even though First Nations identify as sovereign nations that have the inherent right to self-determination (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 238).

The regulation of reserves, through legislative means of the *Indian Act*, has purposely marginalized First Nations communities. Reservations, or reserves as they are known in Canada, were initially used to segregate and control First Nations peoples. Today, poverty is rampant on reserves, and First Nations women are most affected; they suffer the effects of poverty and high unemployment rates, which make them more vulnerable to the sex trade industry (Kubik, Bourassa, and Hampton 23). Women are further marginalized by the reserve system because most reserves in Canada do not have enough adequate housing, and when a woman cannot stay in her home, she is forced to go elsewhere (Harper 33). However, poverty on reserves does not only affect First Nations women. The poverty rate among Indigenous children is double the rate for other young Canadians (Macdonald and Wilson 6). The *Indian Act* creates a binary between First Nations and Canadians through legislation, and has also contributed to changes in the ways that First Nations women are valued. Before colonization, many First Nations’ traditions valued women’s roles in society—women were political, spiritual, and community leaders (Green 21). However, after the imposition of colonial, patriarchal values, First Nations women lost much of this power. For example, First Nations women’s political powers were removed by

the *Indian Act* in 1869 when an elected chief and council system was imposed by the government to undermine traditional governance structures (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 237) in which only men were able to sit on the councils and women were essentially removed from political life on-reserve. This change clearly demonstrates how colonization has contributed to the oppression of First Nations women as a result of their race and gender. It was not until 1951 that First Nations women gained the right to vote in on-reserve elections (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 252), and it was only in 1960, that both First Nations men and women gained the right to vote in federal elections.

Not only does on-reserve poverty and the deterioration of First Nations women’s political status result in marginalization, but a lack of legislation to protect First Nations women’s rights breeds opportunities for further colonial violence. If a First Nations woman chooses to leave her home on-reserve, she is not provided with her share of the property because laws protecting Aboriginal women and their rights to the division of communal property on-reserve, such as those that protect the rest of Canadians under their respective provincial laws (Harper 33), do not exist on First Nations reserves. Once again, the *Indian Act* creates a binary, this time between First Nations women and other women in Canada, leaving First Nations women more vulnerable to exploitation. This is additionally problematic because of the family violence in Aboriginal communities, which is a direct result of the residential school system and intergenerational trauma (TRC 224).

Section 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act* is yet another problematic example of raced and gendered policies that have oppressed First Nations women in Canada. Between 1869 and 1985, First Nations women lost status when they married a non-First Nations man:

Women could not own property, and once a woman left the reserve to marry she could not return because non-Indians could not reside on the reserve even if a divorce had occurred. This also applied to her children. From the government’s perspective, these women had been assimilated and had lost their Indian status. However, if an Indian (First Nations) man married a non-Indian woman, he not only retained his Indian status, but the non-Indian woman would gain status under the *Act* and so would their children. (Kubik, Bourassa, and Hampton 21)

This part of the *Indian Act* was challenged by two women, Yvonne Bedard and Jeanette Lavell, who lost their status when they married non-Aboriginal men (Kubik,

Bourassa, and Hampton 21). The women lost their cases in the Supreme Court of Canada, but Sandra Lovelace filed a complaint with the United Nations Committee on Human Rights, which ruled in favour of the women (Kubik, Bourassa, and Hampton 21-22). In 1985, Bill C-31 passed in Canadian parliament to remove Section 12(1)(b) from the *Indian Act* so First Nations women would no longer lose status through marriage. Additionally, it re-instated status to women and children who lost status prior to 1985. However, there are ongoing efforts

March 2009 there were 520 missing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. Researcher Maryanne Pearce spent six years dedicated to identifying missing and murdered women in Canada. Her 2013 doctoral dissertation from the University of Ottawa found that between 1945 and 2013 there were 3,329 missing or murdered women in Canada (4). Ethnicity could not be determined for 1,734 of the women (52 percent), but of those whose ethnicity was determined, 824 were Aboriginal girls or women, almost 25 percent (23). A 2014 report from the Royal Canadian

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to make additional changes to the *Indian Act* to remove further discrimination based on the second-generation cut-off rule (Gehl).

As a result of their raced, classed, and gendered identities, many Aboriginal women contend with racialized violence, which leads to their disappearances and murders. Aboriginal women continue to be the target of colonial policies and practices which put them at increased risk of violence and death. Kubik, Bourassa, and Hampton suggest that “[w]hile all Aboriginal people experienced the adverse effects of colonization, Aboriginal women faced more extreme effects as sexism and racism combined to oppress and marginalize them” (21). Many federal-level policies put Aboriginal women in harm’s way and fail to protect these women from violence (Amnesty International “Stolen Sisters” 2). Furthermore, the intersection of racism and sexism “contributes to the assumption on the part of perpetrators of violence against Indigenous women that their actions are justifiable or condoned by society” (Amnesty International “Stolen Sisters” 17). In the next section, I outline how the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women is taken up by grassroots organizations and online social media campaigns, and how this form of awareness can help Canadians move towards positive change to ensure the safety of Aboriginal women and girls.

#MMIW: Grassroots Organizations and Social Media to Educate Canadians

The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) is a national organization dedicated to the wellbeing of Aboriginal women and girls. According to its research, as of

Mounted Police found 1,181 police-recorded incidents of Indigenous female homicides or missing persons between 1980 and 2012 (3). In 2004, NWAC launched Sisters in Spirit, an education and policy initiative funded by the Status of Women Canada, to address the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women through research and community engagement. This initiative also aims to give voice to the families of missing or murdered Aboriginal women. Although funding for the project ended in 2010, the annual October 4th vigil, which started in 2006, continues to take place across Canada. In 2017, there were over 200 vigils across Canada.

In 2012, Métis artist and community activist Christi Belcourt made a call on Facebook for people to create moccasin tops, also known as vamps, that would contribute to a grassroots commemorative art installation and ceremony. Walking With Our Sisters (WWOS) honours missing and murdered Indigenous women across Canada and the United States. The pieces that make up the installation, however, are more than just pieces of moccasins:

Each pair of vamps (or “uppers” as they are also called) represents one missing or murdered Indigenous woman. The unfinished moccasins represent the unfinished lives of the women whose lives were cut short. The children’s vamps are dedicated to children who never returned home from residential schools. Together the installation represents all these women, paying respect to their lives and existence on this earth. They are not forgotten. They are sisters, mothers, aunts, daughters, cousins, grandmothers, wives, and partners. They have been cared for, they

have been loved, they are missing and they are not forgotten.” (Walking With Our Sisters)

WWOS initially had a goal of 600 vamps, but as of 2014, there were over 1800 contributions to the installation from women, children, and men all over the world. The issue of #MMIW and the efforts of WWOS are a direct result of Aboriginal women’s racialized and gendered status in Canada. Patricia Hill Collins identifies three dimensions of gender oppression: the institutional, the symbolic, and the individual. The individual dimension of oppression is understood in terms of its engagement with institutional and symbolic oppression: “As a result of our institutional and symbolic statuses, all of our choices become political acts” (Collins 26). WWOS allows participants and viewers to consider their own stories—how one has become involved in the installation and why—in addition to the stories of Aboriginal women who are missing or have been murdered. Both institutional and symbolic forms of oppression are brought to bear on these individual stories—for example, how I personally experience privilege on the basis of my race, but experience both institutional and symbolic oppression on the basis of my gender. In the summer of 2013, I myself created a pair of vamps for the project. I felt that it was necessary to demonstrate my support for the project and the women it represents. My vamps depict four paths, represented by the four colours of the Anishinaabe medicine wheel (red, yellow, white, and black) to represent the four races. These four paths, symbolizing women of all backgrounds, are linked to a heart. The image reminds me of the interconnected relationship and responsibility humans have to each other. In 2017, I was able to support and attend the Toronto, Ontario installation and ceremony. By participating in WWOS, I am able to connect to the issue of violence against women to challenge symbolic oppression and engage in a political act of activism and consciousness-raising. [can we include a photo of your vamp?]

The use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to raise awareness about missing and murdered Indigenous women is interrelated with the lack of and biased reporting of stories about Indigenous women. According to Kristen Gilchrist, “[r]epresentations of Aboriginality in mainstream media are steeped in negative stereotypes stripping Aboriginal Peoples, including missing/murdered Aboriginal women, of legitimate status as human beings” (384). As a result of their raced, classed, and gendered positions, Aboriginal women’s stories of violence and murder are not provided with the same level of attention and respect as stories about missing or murdered White women. The Native Women’s Association of Canada states: “Media reports about missing and murdered Aboriginal women

and girls frequently sensationalize the incidents, while saying little or nothing about the woman or girl and her unique experiences” (9). In her research investigating the differences in local press reporting of missing or murdered Aboriginal and White women, Gilchrist found that crimes against white women were mentioned six times more often in longer articles (379), stories about white women appeared on the front page more often (380), and language describing the women was used differently (380-381). In contrast to this problematic mainstream reporting, grassroots organizations like WWOS and other social media movements aim to provide accurate and reflective stories of Aboriginal women.

In September 2014, after the highly publicized disappearance and murder of her cousin Loretta Saunders, Holly Jarrett organized the Twitter hashtag #AmINext to raise awareness about #MMIW (missing and murdered Indigenous women as it is known on social media). The campaign encouraged First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women to take photos of themselves holding up signs that read #AmINext. The campaign morphed into one of resilience in which women started posting pictures with the hashtag #ImNotNext. Some Indigenous women on social media rejected the #AmINext campaign because it suggested that Aboriginal women are inherently rapeable (CTV Staff). Andrea Smith and Luana Ross acknowledge this notion, and suggest that, “Indian bodies have become marked as inherently ‘dirty’ through the colonial process. They are then considered sexually violable and ‘rapeable’” (1). By moving from the question #AmINext to the assertion that #ImNotNext, Aboriginal women are problematizing and resisting their symbolic oppression.

Kevin Kumashiro suggests that an education that changes students and society requires an understanding that “oppression is produced by discourse, and in particular, is produced when certain discourses (especially ways of thinking that privilege certain identities and marginalize others) are cited over and over” (50). The symbolic representation of Aboriginal women “as ‘squaw,’ ‘princess,’ or ‘sexually promiscuous,’” which were historically perpetuated by European colonizers, is a factor that leads to the sexual victimization of Aboriginal women today (Kubik, Bourassa, and Hampton 26). Discourse rooted in colonization, racism, and patriarchy will continue to perpetuate the marginalization of Aboriginal women. Therefore it is necessary that projects such as WWOS and social media campaigns problematize this discourse to encourage learning that addresses the oppression of Aboriginal peoples, and women in particular.

One of the challenges of an education that seeks change is the partiality of voices (Kumashiro 58). It is important that educators, who exist in multiple capacities, “include

differences in ways that change the underlying story and the implications of the story for thinking, identifying, and acting in oppressive and/or anti-oppressive ways” (Kumashiro 59). When one comes to understand the silence of Aboriginal women’s voices in media stories and in Canadian history, one also comes to understand the “effects of [these] silences on the ‘meaning’ of a text” (Kumashiro 62). Looking at the voices involved in WWOS and the various Twitter campaigns helps to explain how grassroots organizations and social media add to the stories of colonization and patriarchy. Participation in WWOS and #ImNotNext also demonstrates one’s resistance (“refusing to act in conventional ways”), and one’s transgression (“acting in new ways and towards new realities”) (Stromquist and Fischman 468). Because of the lack of appropriate media coverage of Aboriginal people’s stories, it can be understood that some believe “their stories are not dramatic or worthy enough to tell, that Aboriginal women’s victimization is too routine or ordinary, and/or irrelevant to (White) readers” (Gilchrist 385). We can read into the silences of Aboriginal women from political and educational discourse to better understand how colonization, racism, and sexism shape these women’s lives and our perceived understanding of them.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Collins cautions that “[w]hile race, class, and gender as categories of analysis are essential in helping us understand the structural bases of domination and subordination, new ways of thinking that are not accompanied by new ways of acting offer incomplete prospects for change” (21). Examining how Aboriginal women are oppressed as a result of their raced, classed, and gendered positions makes visible how colonization, and its racist and sexist assumptions, have worked together as an integrated process to oppress Aboriginal women. Using Kumashiro’s goal of education that changes students and society supports Collins’ assertion that we need new ways of thinking and acting in order to effectively address oppression. The WWOS installation and social media movements are clear examples of this goal as they offer all Canadians new opportunities for resisting the continued oppression of Aboriginal women. However, what is needed is widespread acknowledgement of the impacts of colonization and patriarchy on Aboriginal women and their families outside of the important work of grassroots organizations and social media activities. Grassroots organizations and social media campaigns cannot be the only ways in which Canadians become educated about the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women. A recent Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) piece resulted in an online

registry of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada, which might be perceived as a step in the right direction towards unbiased reporting. However, mainstream media outlets still need to do a better job representing the stories of missing or murdered Aboriginal women. Racist and sexist reporting does not do justice to the Aboriginal women who continue to go missing or are murdered.

Amnesty International recognizes that there are “overt cultural prejudice and ...implicit or systemic biases in the policies and actions of government officials and agencies, [and] ...of society as a whole” when it comes to the treatment of Aboriginal women and girls in Canada (“Stolen Sisters” 3). Because patriarchy and racism is embedded in Canadian society, we cannot ignore that Aboriginal women continue to be marginalized more deeply than other women. Governments cannot continue to use legislation as a tool of institutional oppression. Furthermore, changes to legislation must be made to end the explicit risks to Aboriginal women, and to protect them from poverty and forced entry into vulnerable situations.

Aboriginal women are oppressed as Aboriginal peoples and as women supported by colonial ideologies perpetuated by government legislation. Unfortunately, grassroots organizations such as Walking With Our Sisters and social media campaigns like #MMIW, #AmINext, and #ImNotNext are the extent to which Aboriginal women’s stories of oppression and resilience are taken up in society. Mainstream media and formal education need to do a better job of engaging with these stories to bring about an education that changes society. Without this change, Aboriginal women will continue to disappear, experience violence, and ultimately lose their lives.

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Endnote

¹In this paper I use the term Aboriginal to refer to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. However, only status First Nation people are recognized under the *Indian Act*.

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