WHO IS WOMAN?

How Standards of (white) Womanhood Contribute to the M.M.I.W.G. Crisis

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(English/Scottish/Irish Decent)

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge that this Zine was created on the stolen lands of the Qayqayt Nation.

I further acknowledge that the tone of my skin and my settler roots have afforded me unearned privileges that allow me to succeed in this capitalist society in so-called "Canada."

This Zine was created in solidarity to explore, examine, and name the continued harm that Indigenous folks suffer at the hands of settler-colonialism.

CONTENTS

The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls

Author's Note

As a millennial and bisexual cis-woman, I have felt aspects of the patriarchal system growing up through the 2000's. I recognize that the culture I was surrounded in created hostility towards other women, LGBTQIA2+, and people of colour. I am grateful to deprogram these aspects of myself and continue the work to become a better ally for marginalized folks.

Anyone can be negatively programmed; we must offer ourselves grace when challenging these narratives. Change is difficult but is also the way of the universe. No one is past redemption.

Between 1980-2012

Police estimated 1200 M.M.I.W.G. (SBS Dateline 2018).

Indigenous communities think the number is closer to 4000 M.M.I.W.G. (SBS Dateline 2018, Vice 2016, NWAC).

Between 2009-2021

Rate of homicides for Indigenous women are 6 x higher than non-Indigenous women (StatsCan 2023).

Indigenous women and girls make up 2-3% of the population and yet represent 5-7% of the homicides (StatsCan 2023).

The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (M.M.I.W.G.) is a complex and multilayered issue wrapped up in longstanding systems such as settler-colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy.

Why are Indigenous women and girls more likely to experience violence than their white counterparts?

I argue that three dehumanizing tactics are used to justify the violence against Indigenous women and girls. These tactics are as follows:

-settler-colonial heteropatriarchy relegates Indigenous womanhood as unreal.

-the settler-colonial myths of the "squaw" and the "Indian Princess."

-symbolic institutions normalization of "worthy" and "unworthy" victims.

These issues compound underneath the expectations that womanhood is submissive and white. Canadian society can then continually ignore and justify the layers of oppression experienced by Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the violence against Indigenous women and girls reinforces the hierarchy of white supremacy, and the settlers attempts to legitimize their place on stolen lands.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) expressed in *The Second Sex* how women are measured as the ultimate Other. While men occupy a space of being the "absolute" One (1949:16). Beauvoir summarizes the fundamental core of patriarchy through this binary.

Why has this Othering occurred? The justification of women's Otherness has ranged from biblical stories of Eve to biological determinates such as women being the physically weaker or "overly emotional" sex (1949:15).

This binary can be a helpful starting point; however, it is limited in expressing why Indigenous womanhood is not considered "real" womanhood.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1993) closes this gap through intersectionality. Crenshaw observed that gender and race tended to be separated in activist discourse (1993:1241). Either it was a feminist issue, or a racism issue, yet both racism and patriarchy work in tandem to oppress women of colour(1993:1241). Crenshaw summarizes this through observations of how victims of rape are

treated dependent on their race (1993:1268). Crenshaw notes harsher punishments for perpetrators of rape against white victims than Black victims (1993:1269).
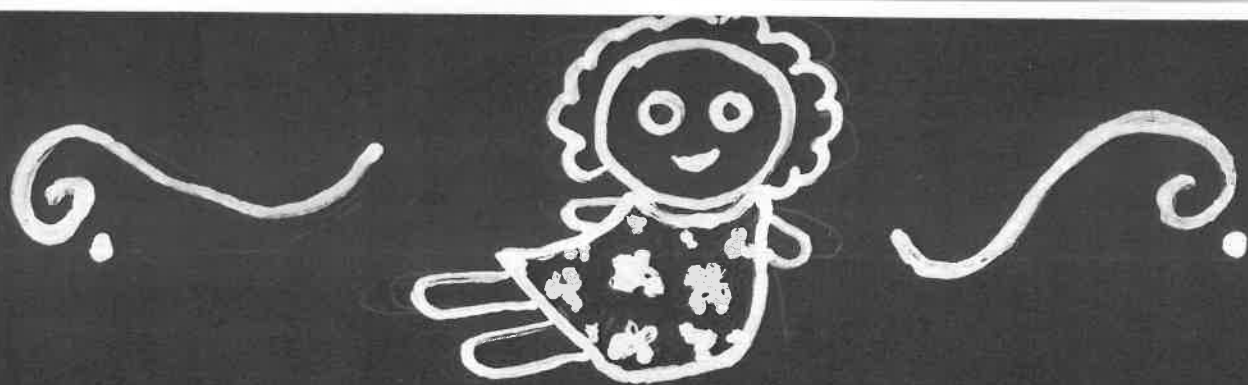
Furthermore, this "un-realness" is upheld in Canadian society under Micheal Foucault's concept of biopower. In which institutions such as government enforce ideas of what bodies are considered "normal" (Foucault, 1978). The power is then spread to networks on individual levels through educators, doctors, or police (Zaidi, et al. 2021:74). One article by Zaidi et al., (2021) suggests that Othering bodies is a "top-down" and "bottom-up" process. Institutions normalize whiteness, and individuals perpetuate this through means of valuing white bodies (Zaidi, et al. 2021:74).

This indicates that white womanhood is seen as the One (deserving of justice and protection) while racialized womanhood fits the Other category. Biopower is the continuing force that perpetuates what is considered "real" womanhood. These tools are utilized in settler-colonialism to legitimize whiteness and ownership of so-called "Canada."

Dehumanizing Tactic #2: Racialized Stereotypes

Another aspect of dehumanization can come from the stereotypes we observe within Canadian society. There is a binary of "Indian Princess" (i.e., Pocahontas) or the slur "squaw" (Lavell-

Harvard and Brant 2016:39). Each title helps reduce Indigenous womanhood to cartoonish tropes.

The earliest record of the "squaw" stereotype was in Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* (1504) in which he mentioned that Indigenous women would joyfully prostitute themselves to white men (Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe 1995:33). Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe notes that if an Indigenous woman became "good" (helpful to the white man) they were allowed to have sex with white men (Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe 1995:34). Both dichotomies are harmful as either an objectifying statement that can lead to sexual violence or assimilation of white values to "avoid" violence.

Crenshaw in *Mapping the Margins* (1993) also noticed this binary in the legal system. Judges and juries often held up the good/bad woman dichotomy within believing a woman was raped or that she was "seduced" (Crenshaw 1993:1266).

If Indigenous womanhood falls under the category of "squaw," perpetrators of violence can justify their actions backed by the longstanding stereotype.

The "Indian Princess" or "good" side is also harmful. This falls under the assimilation category of white womanhood. Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe (1995) noted that residential schools helped solidify patriarchal teachings of

"women's roles" as domesticated "good" Christian housewives (Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe 1995:38).

The insidious nature of these tropes continues to endure because of the white-euro-christian and patriarchal standards thar exist within settler-colonialism (Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe 1995:40). Then literature and media reflect these stereotypes as "truthful" portrayals of Indigenous womanhood (Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe 1995:42).

Institutions such as the police create socialized heuristics on which bodies are considered valuable and worthy. This was seen when Vancouver Police Department (VPD) and RCMP refused to handle the disappearance of women on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in the 1990's (O'Reilly and Fleming 2016:48). One detective, Kim Rossmo, called attention to the fact that these women (who were sex workers) were dead, not missing. Rossmo was dismissed from his detective position (O'Reilly and Fleming 2016:50).

In 2002, 27 female remains were discovered at Robert Pickton's farm in Coquitlam (O'Reilly and Fleming 2016:50). Out of all Pickton's victims, half were Indigenous Women (O'Reilly and Fleming 2016:53). It is suspected that because of who the victims were (sex workers or substance

users), VPD and RCMP cared less about solving their cases (O'Reilly and Fleming 2016:52).

This is echoed in Jerry Flores and Andrea Roman Alfaro study on police (in)action (2023). They summarize the excuses made by the police to justify the M.M.I.W.G. crisis. They found that the police often dismiss the disappearance of Indigenous women as a function of their Indigeneity (Flores and Roman Alfaro 2023:393).

Moreover, the police often claim that the Indigenous women who go missing are "drunks" "addicts" or "sex workers" (Flores and Roman Alfaro 2023:393). In which their disappearances are a "natural consequence" of their life choices (Flores and Roman Alfaro 2023:393).

Additionally, there are reports of the police being callous and indifferent to the cases of missing Indigenous women (Flores and Roman Alfaro 2023:400). These attitudes from the police further reinforce the dismissal of violence against Indigenous women and girls.

Another institution that can perpetuate violence is news outlets. Kristen Gilchrist (2010) analyzed what makes headlines in the case of murdered women. She looked at six victims, three white women and three Indigenous women. The data showed that the white women were mentioned six times more often in the region's papers (Gilchrist 2010:379). That there was an average of 140, 000 words used to describe the white women's stories versus 28,500 words for the Indigenous women's stories (Gilchrist 2010:379).

Moreover, placement for the white women were more likely to be on the first page of the newspapers, with larger centered photos, and vibrant descriptors (Gilchrist 2010:380). The Indigenous women would have smaller photos and more neutral language to describe their personality and home-life (Gilchrist 2010:382).

This indicates a hierarchy of what is "worth" reporting. Which presents to the population that white women are more deserving of detailed attention and justice (Gilchrist 2010:385).

These examples highlight how violence can be continually perpetuated through inattention and disregard. If the police seem uninterested in protecting Indigenous women, then perpetrators can continue to harm them with impunity (Lavell-Harvard and Brant 2016:53). If newspapers only show compassion for the white female victim, then Indigenous female victims do not matter to the newsreader (Gilchrist 2010:385). These cultural heuristics evoke perceptions of Indigenous womanhood that dehumanize their worth.

Daleen   Melanie   Amber

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Indigenous womanhood was highly valued before settler-colonialism (Lavell-Harvard and Brant 2016:37). Effects of patriarchal values did not exist until euro-christian masculinity arrived (Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe 1995). It is

unsurprising (but heartbreaking) that settler-colonialism continues its silent genocide through the M.M.I.W.G crisis.

Indigenous womanhood threatens the very function of settler-colonialism through their resistance of white womanhood. Their bodies can carry new generations of Indigenous peoples that can continue to resist settler-colonialism (Lavell-Harvard and Brant 2016:4).

The systemic dehumanization of Indigenous womanhood is an insidious attempt for settlers to continue its goal of legitimizing their ownership of so-called "Canada." It is time to recognize these harmful tactics and restore the rightful respect, love, and balance to the peoples who resided here long before the settlers.

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