

Two Teenage Sisters seek to create a decolonizing space in honor and recognition of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous women in Canada
By Jenlen

Introduction

Colonial meta-narratives conceal, sustain, promote and lay the ground work for violence against Indigenous women. Decolonization seeks to challenge the supremacy of these narratives by disrupting, deconstructing and, hopefully, dismantling the power of colonial space through resistance and resurgence.

The commemorative and awareness-raising public art project, Footprints Remembering the Missing and Murdered Indigenous women (featured at Awo Taan Healing Lodge's annual sisters in spirit event) was conceived and implemented by two Oji-Cree teenage girls and is reflective of many Indigenous youth today, as they seek to create their own decolonizing counter-narratives, highlighting their own empowerment, resistance and cultural resurgence.

Colonial Violence

Gender-based violence directly impacts both Indigenous men and women but violence against women is particularly insidious. According to a recent RCMP report (RCMP, 2012) there are more than 1,200 Missing and Murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) on the record books in Canada. Methodological concerns of the report include an under-estimation of the number of MMIW (i.e., it does not include two-spirited peoples or the LGBT community, or murders that are classified suicides), and certainly the report does not capture the patriarchal, sexist and racist attitudes that lead to violence against Indigenous women, nor the fraught relationship that Indigenous women have with the RCMP. As importantly, the oft-cited number of 1200 women as though not bad enough, are only up to the year 2012, four years ago and counting.

Jacobs (2013) argues colonization *is* violence and that Indigenous women take the full force of colonization as it attempts to “erase them from existence so that there will be no long future generations” (p. 1).

Simpson (2014) states that violence is linked to the dispossession and occupation of lands by way of erasure of Indigenous women in Canada. Certainly, the annals of Canada’s colonial history reflect that systemic violence endured by Indigenous women and communities for generations. Arising from patriarchal, colonial, misogynist and racist Canadian policies, violence is endemic in the Indian Act and entrenched in systems such as Residential Schools, child welfare, policing and other institutions mandated to control Indigenous women’s bodies, minds, and souls (Kubik, Bourassa & Hampton, 2009).

The colonial mentality seeps into non-Indigenous Canadians’ consciousness, and manifests itself in patriarchal, sexist and racist attitudes toward Indigenous women. We become secure in our knowledge, social position and the colonial myths that serve to dehumanize Indigenous women.



Adams, KC. *First Person: Contemporary Indigenous Portraiture (Photography)*. Calgary, Alberta: Glenbow Museum.

As this photo of KC Adams' exhibit I took at the Glenbow Museum exemplifies, we demonize Indigenous women (and men), allowing us to ignore antecedents of colonial violence of which we are complicit by ascribing pejorative labels to Indigenous women, including “tax burden, marginal, poor, homeless, damaged (FAS), shoplifter, wannabe, criminal, wanton”, all the while ignoring the counter-frame that these men and women are, “artist, mother, sister, medal winner, Cree, vet, student, doctor ...”.

Indigenous women are invisible except when viewed through a lens of violence, metaphorically and realistically; they are hyper-visible in bodies but invisible as victims.

Indigenous women's lives (and deaths) are superfluous and relegated to the margins of society, As Cariou (2014) highlights, colonization creates boundaries or hardened edges – no longer visible to the colonized mind – normalized, serving to objectify, exile, and ‘other’ Indigenous women, creating divisions, destroying relationality and creating colonial binaries. Indigenous knowledge systems, values and historical perspectives have been written out of the official version of Canadian history, including women's traditional roles, matrilineal teachings and customs. This “writing out’ (Donald, 2009, p. 9) provides a rationale (which eventually is no longer needed) from which to expand social, political and economic controls over Indigenous lands.

Decolonizing: Strategies

Decolonization offers up many counterpoints with which to challenge colonial narratives. A diversity of Indigenous voices and epistemologies are necessary “as colonial leopards never change their spots, they just stalk their pray in other ways” (Swadener and Mutua, 2008, p. 31).

Indigenous art is on the resistance and resurgence forefront, i.e., poetry, song, oral storytelling, dance, poetry and traditions/rituals. Cariou (2014) shows us, for example, how Indigenous poetry pushes out boundaries, creating space within the colonial sphere for Indigenous voices, helping to destabilize a normalized colonial reality, exposing it to “shake up a divisive mindset that is endemic in our class-infected and still colonized world” (p. 23).

For Jacobs (2013), decolonization means shifting our language; moving from victim status to becoming empowered; honouring our women, men children and elders; taking responsibility and incorporating traditional teachings. In other words, creating resiliency and capacity.

Holmes, Hunt & Piedalue (n.d.), in a roundtable dialogue, talk about decolonizing geography, specifically how forms of violence are connected to, and produced by, certain spaces and forms of colonial violence becomes normalized, i.e., the nation, the home or reserve. They suggested that these normative framing of violence can, and must, be challenged through critical discourse and education.

Youth Decolonizing and Actualization



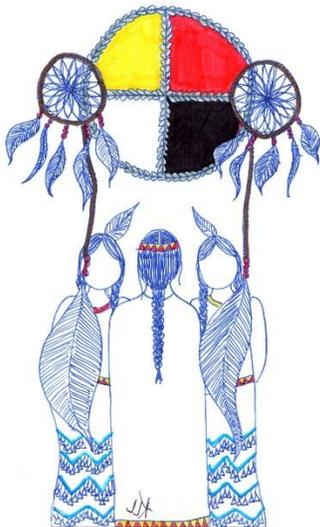
Kaiya and Aiyana at a MMIW march

Simpson (2014) envisions the issue of gender violence as a core resurgence and key to Indigenous mobilization and recognizes the limitation of a national MMIW inquiry because the colonial government cannot be the solution because they are the problem.

She believes that youth are critical to resurgence and that “each generation should be getting stronger, more grounded and less influenced by colonialism, and this means people like me can learn from them. This is why resurgence is about bodies and land” (para. 9).

Dhillon (2015) also see youth as instrumental in creating spaces from which to decolonize and argues that we need to decolonize and politicize youth studies by decentering colonial voices and to look for opportunities to show how Indigenous girls “are already leaders in the struggle to end colonial gender violence and we have to think strategically about how we can actively support them in expanding and growing this work” (p. 26). They are, after all, the “bridges between our ancestors and the people that are ahead of us” (Dhillon, 2015, p. 26).

The Decolonizing Project



*Graphic created for the Footprints Project.
Artist: Kaiiya Leonard La Couvee*

Two teenage sisters, Kaiya and Aiyana, inspired in part to want to honor their recently murdered birth mother, and learning that the number of reported Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (MMIW) across Canada is now estimated at 1,200 sisters, reached their goal (and beyond) of the collection of 1,200 pairs of shoes as part of an art-and-awareness project for the Sisters in Spirit event.

The sisters presented their project to several youth-serving programs. For instance, they led a group of 10-12 year old girls

in the Women's Center of Calgary's Girl Power group to create a banner that was featured in the October 4, 2016 Sisters in Spirit's march and ceremony.

This moving public-art tribute to their missing and murdered sisters across Canada was inspirational. Visually, a bird's eye point of view showed the shoes arranged in a medicine wheel formation at Olympic Plaza, each pair representing a lost missing and murdered sisters standing in the protection of the medicine wheel.

The shoes will be once again featured in October at a Calgary Board of Education high school, continuing to cast light on this important issue. After this event, all the shoes to be donated to women-serving agencies in Calgary.

This project allows the youth to reclaim time and space and create an awakening of sorts, drawing attention through this temporary claim of public space to spread awareness of the issues facing Indigenous women – decolonizing, resurging and revitalizing.

As Martin (2013) states: "Capturing and explicating footprints through images and stories may work to dispel and decolonize notions of the vanishing Indian. The social and contextual dimensions consider perspectives that illuminate the land we live on and the footprints we leave, not ones that historicize people and events as ongoing stereotypical constructions, rather as part of an active interpreted present" (p. 1).

Conclusion

We've seen how Indigenous women are subjected to erasure, invisibility, and their minds, souls and bodies subjugated because of colonial violence.

Decolonizing narratives using the arts is one of many ways forward for all Indigenous peoples; a way to resist and challenge colonial boundaries with the idea of dismantling them to embrace Indigenous ways of knowing.

We must continue to support youth that are working for their communities using a decolonizing framework, freeing up their minds, their bodies and their souls; to create, to dream and to love and to be in the inner circle where they belong.

References

- Adams, KC. (n.d.). *First Person: Contemporary Indigenous Portraiture* (Photography). Calgary, Alberta: Glenbow Museum.
- Cariou, W. (2014). Edgework: Indigenous Poetics as re-placement. In McLeod, N. (Ed.), *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* (pp. 31-38). Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Dhillon, J. (2015). Indigenous girls and the violence of settler colonial policing. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. 4(2), pp.1-31.
- Donald, D. (2009). Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Metissage: Imagining Decolonization of Aboriginal-Canadian Relations in Educational Contexts. *First Nations Perspectives* 2(1), 1-24. Retrieved from http://www.nfnerc.org/up-content/uploads/2012/11/004_Donald.pdf
- Holmes, C., Hunt, S. & Piedalue, A. (n.d.). Violence, Colonialism and Space: Towards a decolonizing dialogue. Retrieved from <http://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/acme/article/viewFile/1102/992>.
- Jacobs, B. (2013). Decolonizing the violence against Indigenous women. *Decolonization: Indigeneity: Education and Society*. Retrieved from <https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2013/02/13/decolonizing-the-violence-against-indigenous-women/>
- Kubik, W., Bourassa, C. & Hampton, M. (2009). Stolen sisters, second class citizens, poor health health: The legacy of colonialism in Canada. *Humanity and Society*, 33, 18-34.
- Martin, K. (2013). Native footprints: Photographs and stories written on the land. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, (2)2, 1-24.
- R.C.M.P. (2012). Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview. Retrieved from <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/mmaw-faapd-eng.pdf>
- Simpson, L. (2014). Not murdered and not missing. Indigenous Nationhood Movement. Retrieved from <http://leannesimpson.ca/not-murdered-not-missing/>
- Swadener, B.B., & Mutua, K. (2008). Decolonizing performances: Deconstructing the global postcolonial In N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln, & L.T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and Indigenous methodologies* (pp. 31-43). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Productions, Inc.