



Stolen Sisters...

Violence against Indigenous Women

“Once our eyes are open, we cannot fall asleep again” (*Raichō Hiratsuka, 1913*).

This essay investigates the violence perpetrated against Indigenous women using a social constructivist and feminist perspective. This topic is important because it is often overlooked by society and the media. The violence and assault that Native women experience is an epidemic that has been an ongoing issue that has plagued the Indigenous community. I hope readers will understand the importance that all women regardless of race or class deserve to feel safe.

Keywords: Indigenous, colonization, patriarchy, violence, media, MMIW, REDress, intersectionality

The Story

I watch as the last puff of air escapes my breath into the cold night. My exposed chest surrounded by what remains of my shirt, ceasing to rise and fall. I know that we all await death in this life, but I didn't realize this is how I would meet my maker in my twenty-second year on this earth. Twenty-two seems hardly long enough. My death was not the first and it certainly won't be the last. No one cares about an Indigenous woman.

What started out as a simple act of walking to the local high school to see my little brother play in his debut basketball game would end with my demise. I didn't think to pay attention to the headlights that illuminated my body from behind, anticipating it would pass by like all the others. Fuck, I wish I had paid attention! It all happened so quickly. The creaking hinged door didn't even have enough time to allow sound to travel through the cold night air to my pierced ear. I felt the tug of arms embracing me in a sinister hug as I was hurled into the car, my 118-pound frame doing little to stave off my attacker. The driver speeding away from what remained the site of my innocence, while his accomplice restrained me, my punches and kicks bouncing off his body like that of a tantrum-throwing child. I knew it was over. I'd never see my mom, never see my little brother get his first shot on varsity, no... I would become another statistic, just another red dress lining the highway representing my physical form stolen. No one cares about an Indigenous woman.

As the weight of their bodies took what was left of me, their hands took what was left of my being. The pain in between my legs fell silent as the noose of their fingers encased my neck.

My last visual being the night sky clouded with the last of my breath. I

remain there behind that bush on the embankment off of the roadside waiting for some passersby to stumble upon my bones, but that might be awhile. Law enforcement is not looking for me, only my blood searches and prays. I am just another of the forgotten. No one cares about an Indigenous woman.

Before And Still

According to the United States Department of Justice (2021), one in three Native American women will be raped and three out of four women will be physically assaulted. Nearly fifty percent of these women will or have experienced stalking, rape, physical violence, or murder (Hay, 2021). Although the above piece is a fictional story, it is a harsh reality as these sobering statistics reveal what Indigenous women face on a daily basis. Native Americans comprise about two percent of the population yet are the most victimized group of individuals (Lucchesi, 2018). According to Hay, federal data records that homicide is the third leading cause of death in Native women. This population of females are murdered at rates more than ten times the national average of that than any other racial group. The Urban Indian Health Institute (2018) reports that the youngest victim of Native female violence

recorded has been a three-year old girl and the oldest victim was 83.

This essay analyzes violence against Native women that is often neglected by society and news outlets compared to women of other races. The intersections of race and gender, along with the patriarchal legacy of colonialism contributes to the levels of violence that Indigenous women face. Andrea Smith (2003) posits that “sexual violence is not only a tool of the patriarchy, but also a tool of colonialism and racism” (p. 71). Native women did not conform to European ethnocentric ideals of what was appropriate gender roles and dress. They were seen as uncivilized and unChristian and therefore unhuman (Agtuca, 2008). Sexual assault was not rape if the woman was not human and hence, in the European male’s eyes, permitted.

Native societies differed greatly from those of Europeans in that many of the former were egalitarian or matrilineal. Egalitarian refers to the power in a community being divided equally among all genders. Matrilineal is defined as women occupying culturally and structurally central roles in societies that trace descent through the mother’s line (Agtuca). The power that Indigenous women possessed threatened European patriarchal society as white women viewed

them enjoying opportunities that they were denied. Because of Native women’s strong identities and important roles, Agtuca says, “they were perceived to be uncivilized and subsequently became targets of the federal efforts to civilize the Indian populations” (p. 8). This perceived lens of power dynamics became central to the violence that Native women would face.

A Synopsis of Historical Violence

The violence perpetrated against Native women has been a central feature of United States colonialism and imperialism. During this colonial and postcolonial era, European Americans not only claimed the right by Manifest Destiny in 1845 to the land, but also to the Native women that dwelled there. Rose Stremlau (2020) states, “Moreover, like their European forebears, Americans claimed sexual access to women, along with other forms of property, as a right of conquest. These beliefs were not limited to men of low status” (p.189). As colonizers began to dominate land, women’s safety became a concern. Before the arrival of the Europeans, Indigenous women were freely able to venture further than the confines of their community to gather food for their family and village. The presence of these European men put

Native women at an increased risk for being kidnapped and sexually assaulted. Many of these women no longer felt safe to maneuver beyond the visibility of their own men to secure food. In Sarah Winnemucca's autobiography (1883), Stremlau states, "Sexual violence characterized many white men's relations with the Native American women and girls whom they considered racially and culturally inferior and economically marginal" (p. 185). Winnemucca (2020) a northern Paiute woman herself, describes an event in April of 1860 involving two Northern Paiute women who were gathering roots and were seized by a group of white men. These men dragged them to a nearby barn where the girls were held captive and repeatedly gang raped. Stremlau explains, "Women were accustomed to spending a significant amount of their time gathering away from men's supervision and protection. These women were independent workers unaccustomed to being sexually harassed" (p. 187). Indigenous women's wellbeing and physical safety would be a constant challenge with the arrival of the male white colonizers.

The level of abuse continued as Indigenous women were forced to assimilate to the dominant white culture. Boarding schools were founded to "Kill

the Indian, Save the Man" (Richard Henry Pratt, 1892) by teaching them to conform to the European American language, religion, gender roles, dress, and ideals. In her memoir, Inupiat native Florence Kenney (1995) discusses the sexual abuse she received at the age of sixteen by the head priest. She states, "I'd be sent to him for a talk. He would draw the shades in the girls' building, he'd hug and kiss me and rub me and press me to his body" (Kenney, p. 38). In 1952, when Florence was eighteen years old, she went to work at a nearby army air base. Kenney recalls, "In the two years I was there, it seemed like I spent most of it hitting men with my purse just to get away. My girlfriend and I were walking to a show and all the way, there was this carful of servicemen who kept screaming at us- how they would take us off into the bushes, and what they would do to us- it was frightening" (p. 39). Acts of violence and threats of violence as evidenced in these narratives demonstrate the ongoing fear that Native women contended with as they maneuvered throughout their lives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From the 1950s through the 1970s many Native women were sterilized against their will or unknowingly. Simple procedures such as seeking medical care for a broken limb would result in the Indigenous

woman being administered anesthesia and waking up with a hysterectomy. Others who required care during labor would not only deliver their baby, but the doctor would extract their uterus. Ramirez (2004) writes, “Native women are also threatening because of their ability to reproduce the next generation of peoples who can resist colonization” (p. 78). The very natural right of a woman’s capability to give birth results in Native women being singled out and slaughtered at unprecedented rates to keep white patriarchy in control (Ramirez, 2004). Having control over reproductive faculties assists in destroying the Native race and maintaining white conquering mentality.

One victim of forced sterilization as documented by Agtuca states,

I was badly beaten by my husband and left on the street outside our apartment building. An ambulance took me to the hospital. When I woke up I felt my stomach and there were stitches. I asked the nurse, ‘Did my husband do this?’ She said, ‘No, the doctor did that.’ I asked why. The nurse said, ‘The doctor gave you a hysterectomy.’ I didn’t know the meaning of the word. No one in my family knew the meaning of the word (p. 18).

Later, the Indian Health Service reported that in 1976, some 3,406 hysterectomy

procedures were performed on Native women in four cities alone without their consent (Agtuca). This is another example of the ways white settlers colonized and tried to eradicate Indigenous populations.

Current Situation: Media Impacts

The disappearance of Native women only started being documented in the 1960s, but since the 2000s the rate of occurrence of those missing has rapidly increased. Every year the number of Native women missing has been steadily on the rise (“The Tragedy,” 2019). The Urban Indian Health Institute (2018) documents that, “The National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016 there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaskan Native women and girls, though the U.S. Department of Justice’s federal missing person database, NamUs, only logged 116 cases” (para. 1). Victims of sexual assault indicated more often that the attacker was not of Indigenous descent. The National Institute of Justice reported that ninety six percent of Native American women report experiencing violence inflicted upon them by a Non-Indigenous person, particularly white males (Brewer, 2021). As an oppressed marginalized group covering multiple intersections of identity, the attacks imposed upon Native women by those in

power, who also happen to be white males, are continually denied justice for such crimes.

Many are unaware of the level of brutality that these women endure. Current justice systems and organizations do not sufficiently address the violence against Indigenous women (Kuokkanen, 2012). Media coverage is essential in finding missing women or identifying an attacker. Native women, however, are underrepresented by news outlets in locating their whereabouts. According to Andrew Hay (2021), only eighteen percent of Indigenous female homicide victims elicit media attention compared to fifty one percent of white female victims. This lack of representation showcases the inequality that Indigenous women face in being found safely or in a timely manner.

So why are more Caucasian females highlighted than any other race in the media? We have to ask ourselves who is reporting what makes news. Joy Mayer (2021) addresses the biases manifest in journalists' reporting. As Mayer explains,

Journalists are also better educated than average, more middle to upper class and less likely to live in low-income areas. What we see in our own lives informs who we talk to, what we think is important, what we think is normal, what we ask questions about and

ultimately, what our coverage includes (para. 9).

Diversity needs to be a priority in our newsrooms if all are to receive equality in media coverage.

Funding is essential in providing search and rescue efforts in missing cases. Unfortunately, Caucasian females receive more aid and attention than those of Indigenous women. Recently, Gabby Petito made headlines in her disappearance, however Native women in the same state were not granted the same publicity and financial support. Petito tragically lost her life, also as a result of male on -female violence. Her body was found in Wyoming, the same state where more than four hundred Indigenous women have been reported missing, yet received no publicity or funding (Hay). Jolene Holgate (cited in Hay), director for the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Indigenous Women states,

The national attention and resources that were put toward that case (Petito) when there's such a high number of missing and murdered indigenous women cases in Wyoming and even the neighboring state of Montana, it did not feel good. I think there's this practice of discounting indigenous bodies when it comes to folks who go missing or murdered (para. 5).

The term “missing white woman syndrome” coined by Gwen Ifill illuminates the white privilege in media and law enforcement funding that is granted to those atop the racial hierarchy that does not similarly benefit individuals of color in the same platform or context (Gonzalez-Ramirez, 2021).

The language that the media uses also contributes to the public’s empathy and assistance in these crimes. According to Hay, “Media coverage of homicides of Indigenous people was more likely to use violent language and portray the victim in negative light” (para. 9). Examples of these negative attributes include using mug shots from past arrests to serve as their missing photo or describing/portraying the victim as wearing provocative clothing to tarnish their image. Jaime Black (2019, as cited in Bolen, 2019) explains, “The justice system has repeatedly blamed the victim. The system is skewed toward the non-Indigenous” (para. 8). The result is lack of empathy among the viewing public and a prejudgment based upon what the media is showcasing. Attitudes such as victim blaming of “she was asking for it,” or “look at her lifestyle” feed the failure of assistance from those whom these women need help from the most, the public.

Measures of Addressing the Violence Epidemic

As the numbers of Native women missing and murdered continues to rise, local Indigenous groups are actively trying to generate the attention these women deserve. Organizations focused on confronting media attention have been established in an effort to locate these women and young girls. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) was established in 2015 and its goal is raising awareness about the ongoing issue of violence and assault that Native women endure (Lucchesi, 2018). The foundation has social media accounts, a website, and other promotional endeavors to get images out with pertinent data on the last whereabouts of these women, what they were wearing, height and weight measurements, and other useful information vital in their safe return.

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement have also created a visual aid in the form of a logo. The red and black handprint over the mouth reiterates their slogan of “No More Stolen Sisters.” As a powerful metaphor, the handprint over the mouth symbolizes the silenced voice of another victim that has been taken. The color red is incorporated, as red is believed in Indigenous culture to

have a spiritual connection to the dead, while also associating the color of blood of a murder victim (Lucchesi, 2018). It is a powerful reminder of those lives that have been taken and the stain that ravages the Indigenous community.

Visual art can have an impactful meaning and is often difficult to ignore. Artist Jaime Black (2009) has created the REDress project in 2009 to bring awareness to our sensory faculties and magnify the issue of Native women violence. Black began to collect and display red dresses along the Winnipeg highway as a representation for each Indigenous woman who had their lives cut short due to murderous attacks. As reflected in the fictional story that I crafted to open this essay, our character acknowledges that she will simply be another red dress lining the highway. Black (cited in Bolen, 2019) states, “People notice there is a presence in the absence. This is a way to get the public’s attention on a tremendously unpleasant issue that otherwise they are not likely to want to be responsive to” (para. 3). To date Black has over four hundred dresses running up and down the roadway, among other public spaces, a solemn reminder of the vast number of victims who have been lost, and should not be forgotten (Bolen).

Where to Go from Here

The violence against Native women that is often neglected by society and news outlets compared to women of other races continues to be an epidemic that we must acknowledge. The intersections of racial and gender identities, compounded by the patriarchal power of colonialism contributes to the levels of violence that Indigenous women continue to face compared to other racial groups.

The level of danger that Indigenous women contend with is a disturbing reminder that the violent nature of colonization is still at work. The marginalization and racial stigmas surrounding Indigenous communities in today's world need to be addressed if all women are to feel safe and secure in everyday life. Native women's lives are just as important as all women’s lives and deserve the attention and recognition by society, law enforcement, and the media. No woman should fear for her safety and maybe one day, hopefully soon, we will truly care about an Indigenous woman.

The Story Continued

.... I close my eyes as I hover above my lifeless body and imagine a new reality. My spirit longing for a new outcome, one that would involve opening my eyes as the illuminated headlights that outline my

body speeds past my small frame. I quickly pick up the pace as my sneakers scrape against the pebbles lining the shoulder of the road. As I entered the all too familiar high school entrance that I have outgrown, a kind, pale man would hold

open the door allowing me to pass. I find an empty place on the bare wood bleachers as my brother looks up into the crowd, smiles and waves at me. I smile and reciprocate a wave back, but mine is in the form of goodbye.

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