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Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (and Children) – A Global Problem

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The University of New Mexico

INTRODUCTION. The United States, Canada, and Australia we know today would not have been possible absent colonial settler attempts to systematically destroy and exterminate Indigenous culture; first through outright violence and bloodshed, then through forced assimilation, and continuing today through extractive capitalism. This paper aims to show that violence against Indigenous communities all over the world are not a thing of the past and that Western society has not moved beyond the damage done to Indigenous Peoples. Modern colonialism has evolved from outright barbarity to more covert forms of violence which are exacerbated by extractive capitalism, structural racism, and fetishization of indigenous bodies in mainstream media.

MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN – A GLOBAL PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS. According to data compiled and published by the Centers for Disease Control, homicide was the 3rd leading cause of death for Indigenous women (Urban Indian Health Institute, 2018). By comparison, data collected from among the entire US population where indigenous folks represent much smaller portions of the data indicate that homicide isn't even among top 10 leading causes of death for most US residents. Excepting accidental injuries, all the causes of death on the list are disease related. The NGO International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) estimates that people with calculable Indigenous heritage represent only 2% of the US population, and those who claim solely indigenous heritage represent only 0.8%. In the general nationwide data, Indigenous peoples are underrepresented and thus the data is not generalizable to them. This constitutes a global health crisis because the "health consequences have the potential to overwhelm routine community capabilities to address them (Nelson et al, 2007)."

Prior to settler introduction, the Indigenous peoples of North America numbered in the tens of millions. It's nearly impossible to arrive at a quantifiable population because census data didn't exist prior to colonization and data metrics collected at the time are unreliable due to tendencies toward over- and underestimation (Woodward, 2019). A 2019 study at the University College London applied a new strategy for estimating pre-colonial North and South American Indigenous populations. By dividing the continents into 119 regions and meticulously combing through all published population data in each of them, they concluded that

approximately 60 million Indigenous people were living in the Americas prior to European westward expansion. The same study estimates that approximately 55 million Indigenous people perished from colonial violence and newly introduced pathogens (smallpox, influenza, measles) between 1492 and 1600 C.E. – a loss of nearly 10% of Earth’s total population at the time (Koch et al, 2019). Indigenous populations have never recovered and currently number approximately 2.09%, or about 6.9 million in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). To put this in perspective, that’s a little more than half of the total population of Los Angeles County, California (Data Commons, 2021).

THE EVOLUTION OF SETTLER COLONIALISM AND ITS CONNECTION TO THE MMIW CRISIS. Americans today may not be *openly* murdering Indigenous peoples by colonial standards anymore, but structural institutions that continue to perpetuate the violence against them have evolved to focus on repeated efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples into European colonial society in the modern era. These strategies once took the form of institutions that relied on the removal of indigenous children from their families, irreparably damaging the cultural family structures of Indigenous peoples and manifesting intergenerational trauma that continues to plague the families today. Until recently, Indigenous children were routinely and systematically removed from their families and placed in “residential/boarding schools” where forced repression of their culture and language and various forms of violent child abuse were common institutional practices. The last of these “schools” in the US was shut down as recently as 1990. Ground-penetrating radar technology recently unearthed the remains of more than 215 children – some of which were as young as 3 years old – in an unmarked mass grave at one Canadian residential school in British Columbia, prompting indigenous leaders to call for a thorough examination of every former site that was once a residential school (Gillies, 2021). Compulsory residential school attendance coincided with other forms of forced assimilation strategies, including the forcible removal of children from Indigenous families by government authorities and placement with White families (Jacobs, 2014). When residential/boarding schools were closed, forced assimilation evolved into the modern forms of institutional violence that contribute to the public health crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Children occurring today.

Statistics about the proportion of unsolved missing persons cases involving indigenous victims are not generally reliable due to under-reporting and the lack of inter-agency cooperation, but data compiled by NGOs indicate that there are more than 5,000 *reported* missing persons cases involving American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls that remain unsolved (Native Women’s Wilderness, 2021). Of these cases, less than 700 were logged into the Department of Justice’s database (UIHI, 2018). These disparities are evidence of the far-reaching effects of settler colonialism on indigenous communities, effects that have been impacting Indigenous peoples for more than 600 years.

Hydraulic fracking and the various activities that accompany it are currently at the forefront of the MMIW crisis. A research study published in the *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* (2021) identified all forms of extractive capitalism involving crude oil, coal, or other natural belowground resources as a significant contributing factor to the MMIW crisis because it introduces “an influx of nonindigenous males into communities with typically higher proportions of indigenous people.” American mainstream culture eroticizes indigenous people, especially women, leading to increased instances of sexual violence and human trafficking when indigenous women are forced into proximity with nonindigenous men. The same study identified a number of MMIW “hotspots” and their proximity to resource extraction sites. They found 23 “hotspots” within 156 miles of any fracking or drilling site, as well as another 12 in proximity to coal ash dumping sites, concluding that “resource extraction is a contemporary manifestation of settler colonialism,” because “extractive industrial companies come into an area, convince the people living there to give up their land (either temporarily or permanently), and then exploit the land for their own profit, in typical settler colonialism fashion (Joseph, 2021).”

Currently, no safeguards exist to prevent predatory individuals from being brought into proximity with Indigenous communities via man camps – “a slang term for the pop-up communities surrounding fracking zones (Joseph, 2021).” Researchers have identified several root causes that directly contribute to the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous women & children: “poverty, colonialism and sexism are most often cited as the key root causes (Puzyreva and Loxley, 2017).” The external manifestations of these root causes include

legacy impacts of forced assimilation, intergenerational trauma, extractive capitalism, and the cultural eroticization of indigenous bodies in mainstream media. There have been few international initiatives implemented to resolve these issues.

ANALYSIS. From a realist perspective, the sovereignty issue is murky, particularly with regards to North America. Broadly, a realist approach would most likely separate Indigenous nations entirely from the states they are dependent on and advocate for total self-sufficiency (Pevehouse and Goldstein, 2017). Removing all moral objections to this idea, it's not illogical. If Indigenous nations have the power to survive, they'll survive. If they don't, they won't. Regarding colonial culpability for the situation in which Indigenous nations find themselves, realists would argue that Indigenous peoples wouldn't have been conquered in the first place if they had possessed the power to adequately assert and defend themselves. It's nobody's fault, it's just the way things are, conflict and struggles for power being an inherent feature of human society.

The realist perspective is an unsatisfactory approach because it is problematically unambiguous. If the realist perspective was applied to smaller-scale relationships – a monogamous romantic relationship, for example – any and all harmful behavior on the part of one or more party could be rationalized. Say one partner is habitually violent towards the other, the realist perspective would assert that the victim is responsible for his/her/their own ill-treatment. In fact, by their certainty that interpersonal power struggles are inevitable and universal, realism would assume that both parties would be violent and the only way to avoid being the victim is to be the perpetrator. Realism removes the responsibility from an offending party and places it squarely upon the victims. Some phrases that emulate a realist perspective include “dog-eat-dog world,” and “every man for himself.” It can also be said that realists bring conflict upon themselves simply by having such an “us vs. them” mentality. Overall, the realist perspective is dominated by fear and mistrust, causing realists to assume that a single central governmental power to be the only thing that could ensure international peace and security. For realists, the United Nations' initiatives are relatively free of any real value because they are unenforceable. Treaties offer some measure of security, but overall, the United Nations is ineffectual.

One example of a recent international policy initiative to resolve the cultural erasure of indigenous communities and seeks to establish the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The declaration had been “in the making for over thirty years” when it was finally passed by the United Nations in 2007 (Champagne, 2013). Despite the declaration’s problems, including a colonialist framework for establishing the civil rights of Indigenous nations, “the document provides an internationally supported statement of indigenous issues and presents a possible solution,” although it’s not technically legally enforceable (Champagne, 2013). However, it is “a significant codification of collective human rights, and gives indigenous nations a platform for national and international legal and political negotiation (Champagne, 2013).” The declaration itself proclaims that it is a “standard achievement to be pursued in a spirit of partnership and mutual respect,” but does not outline specific instruments for nations to achieve compliance with the document (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). This is the most recent initiative that’s specifically targeted towards indigenous peoples, but several preceding initiatives with broader scope include protections that complement Indigenous sociopolitical concerns. These initiatives include the Convention on Biological Diversity adopted in 1992, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and the World Intellectual Property Organization – “a UN agency with 193 member states which provides a forum for negotiating new international intellectual property laws (Mamo et al., 2021).”

For realists, UNDRIP represents nothing more than an aspirational standard (Champagne, 2013). Admittedly, the declaration leaves much room for interpretation and offers no concrete solutions to the problem. This attitude makes it easy to shuffle indigenous human rights to the bottom of the political deck in favor of a state’s exclusive interests. This attitude distinguishes the Canadian approach to the declaration from the United States’ one. In his address to the UN General Assembly in 2017, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau focused heavily on the politics surrounding Canada’s First Nations, promising that “equity for everyone, everywhere” was a central priority for the Canadian government. He pointed out that 2017 marked Canada’s “150th birthday,” but that “Canada is much older than that,” but that it was

“build on the ancestral land of indigenous peoples, but regrettably came into being without the meaningful participation of those who were there first (Trudeau, 2017).” Trudeau acknowledged the history of humiliation and abuse towards indigenous peoples that characterizes the legacy of Canadian colonialism as a “great shame” which still endures today and addressed the fact that, despite Canada having been one of four member-states that voted against the declaration initially, federal leadership has been working actively with indigenous communities to bring the country into compliance with UNDRIP’s principles. Canada’s approach to UNDRIP is inherently idealist, where the US approach is inherently realist.

The United States’ views UNDRIP as something of an idealist dream that is low on the list of priorities given its nonexistent stake in state interests. Indeed, the demands of Indigenous nations for the basic protections outlined in UNDRIP would require a convincing alternative to capitalistic reliance on fossil fuel extraction. This presents something of a paradox, because it’s the perpetuation of a realist perspective which informs realist approaches which continues to perpetuate the realist perspective. Thus, UNDRIP is an aspirational standard because realist world powers view it as such and are thereby uninclined to rise to the declaration’s standards. The US has voiced a theoretical support for UNDRIP, but maintains that Indian reservations fall under the sovereignty of the US government and to provide the autonomy demanded by UNDRIP would violate the United Nations’ Charter and constitute “dismemberment” of the state’s territorial sovereignty (Ryser, 2010).

It’s not just Indigenous peoples that suffer from these insidious cultural milieus, the same study that attempted to calculate pre-colonial indigenous population estimates also found a direct correlation between the systematic extermination of Indigenous peoples during early colonialism and a global temperature increase of approximately .15 degrees Celsius due to the resulting neglect of arable land area that was previously farmed by Indigenous nations. As large swaths of arable land were dispensed of their inhabitants, reforestation of flora and fauna caused a decrease in atmospheric carbon dioxide, a conclusion supported by the examination of Antarctic ice cores dating back to the late 1500s and 1600s. Although this episode of climate change cannot be wholly attributed to human impact during early colonialism, the researchers estimated that “the death of 55 million indigenous Americans explained about 50% of the

overall reduction in atmospheric carbon dioxide,” coinciding with other environmental factors such as volcanic or solar activity (Koch et al, 2019). Thus, the systemic violation of Indigenous peoples directly coincides with damage to Earth’s life-sustaining systems.

Recent international initiatives indicate that the MMIW crisis is slowly infiltrating mainstream attention, but much work is left to do. The complicated history of colonialism and its modern iterations result in several jurisdictional issues that have yet to be overcome. One particularly thorny issue in solving the crisis lies with sovereignty. Indigenous nations whose occupied land area is confined to a “reservation” are classified as “domestic dependent nations.” Thus, sovereignty is ambiguous and used discretionally when addressing indigenous issues. The United States government seems perfectly capable of overcoming this hurdle, particularly where they have vested capitalist interest as is the case with resource extraction. Yet, when it comes to missing persons cases, it becomes “too complicated” for federal investigative agencies to cooperate constructively with Tribal authorities and governments. Those who live on reservations are technically US citizens, yet their basic civil rights do not appear to be a priority for the US federal government. For its part, Trudeau’s government in Canada has attempted to prioritize decolonialization.

COVID-19 has brought to the fore the glaring inequalities and disenfranchisement suffered by indigenous peoples. Large swaths of inhabited reservation territory are without running water, forcing people to physically carry potable water from a distant well to their home. Without an abundance of clean water, families are unable to adhere to many CDC guidelines, particularly the guideline to wash one’s hands frequently. This puts Indigenous people at a higher risk of contracting the virus that causes the COVID-19 illness. By extension, what medical resources indigenous communities have access to are overwhelmed with patients and unable to care for many who are suffering from the infection. The Navajo Times reported in July 2021 that “the total number of positive cases is now 30,269” including 1,262 deaths on the Navajo Nation alone (Becenti, 2021). This represents approximately 19% of the “156,823 Navajo in combination individuals living on the Navajo Nation” in the 2010 US Census (Shije et al., 2013). Although this percentage is smaller than the proportion of total US residents who have contracted Sars-CoV-2 (31% according to Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public

Health), the proportion of deaths among the infected is twice as high at .4% among the Navajo Nation as opposed to .2% of the total US population (Pittman, 2021).

CONCLUSION. Indigenous nations have suffered from the long-lasting and far-reaching effects of settler colonialism for more than 600 years. Today's iterations of colonialism follow patterns including structural racism, extractive capitalism, and the eroticization of indigenous bodies in mainstream media. Recent events and diligent efforts at data collection on the part of indigenous researchers have been working to bring indigenous human rights into the mainstream consciousness, but much more work remains to be done. This can be achieved by striking a balance between state interests from a realist perspective and an idealistic resolution to the MMIW crisis. Such an effort can only be achieved by recognizing and confronting the historical plague of settler colonialism that infiltrates modern society to this day and produced a power imbalance that left indigenous peoples shortchanged and traumatized.