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## Book Review Essay: Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

Heather Mark

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## Book Review Essay: Highway of Tears<sup>1</sup>

By Heather Mark<sup>2</sup>

*Highway of Tears* marries narrative storytelling with journalism to weave a contemporary social history that links the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit persons (MMIWG2S) to ongoing colonialism in what is presently known as Canada's North West. The language is accessible to a general literary audience, likely due to the Canadian author Jessica McDiarmid's background in journalism. Pertaining to the region of the Yellowhead, this book details some of the stories of those that have had their lives stolen along the Western stretch of Highway 16. Although the book focuses on the provinces of British Columbia and Alberta, McDiarmid is triumphant in nuancing how cultural genocide towards Indigenous Peoples is systemic across Canada. The book is a useful introduction to how the Canadian state depends upon both Indigenous erasure and assimilation to exist.

*Highway of Tears* can be divided into three sections. The first section of chapters one through six deals with colonial structures that anticipate the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Womxn, Girls, and Two Spirit (MMIWG2S) crisis. The ethnographic focus on the region's colonial history of extractive resource and masculine labour economies nuances the larger theme of gender-based violence as an offset of capitalism. In this section, McDiarmid convincingly argues that settler labour camps are intrinsically tied to cultural genocide. The voices of Indigenous women develop this argument with McDiarmid's use of oral testimony from personal interviews. In addition, McDiarmid engages with the findings of Indigenous-led organizations like the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) ensuring Indigenous communities are not being spoken for.<sup>3</sup> The second section of chapters seven to eleven translates structural patterns to the level of lived experience by relying on evidence from newspaper archives. The manifestation of structural racism is demonstrated through the lack of concern from settler institutions, such as police departments and media outlets, to disappeared Indigenous persons versus the drastically different responses when white settler women have gone missing. The third section, which spans chapters twelve through fifteen, juxtaposes the racism of Canada's dominant culture with demonstrations of contemporary Indigenous-led advocacy. Responses to the crisis, like the Ramona Wilson memorial walk organized by family members, showcase which communities bear the burden of ongoing commemoration.<sup>4</sup> The overarching theme of settler colonial patterns that perpetuate the crisis is contextualized with stories from family members demonstrating the conditions under which Indigenous Peoples continue to face colonial violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewed Book: A True Story of Racism, Indifference and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

<sup>2</sup> Heather Mark is recent graduate of University of Alberta, Canada where she received her Bachelor's degree, with a dual concentration in History (Colonial American) and Spanish Translation. Email: [hmark@ualberta.ca](mailto:hmark@ualberta.ca)

<sup>3</sup> Audra Simpson, "Ethnographic Refusal: Anthropological Need," in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 95.

<sup>4</sup> Jessica McDiarmid, *Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2020): 52-53.

McDiarmid establishes that while the families and communities that survive the MMIWG2S perform the emotional labour of responding to the crisis, ideological change among the indifferent majority settler society is necessary to disrupt the cycle. To make this argument, McDiarmid directly links the lack of responses from the state to the patriarchal dehumanization of Indigenous women and girls. The books targeted readership is the majority culture of Canada and thus aims to hold settlers accountable for our complacency towards and enabling of the crisis.

By showcasing how settlers play a role in the continuity of MMIWG2S, McDiarmid interweaves their own lived experiences to demonstrate how the hierarchizing of human life under colonialism has resulted in devaluation based on the intersections of race, class, and gender. Although some Canadian history authored by settlers provided context on how this crisis stems back to initial contact, McDiarmid uniquely links Canada's history to MMIWG2S by critiquing tourism. McDiarmid demonstrates how totem poles along Highway 16 appropriate Indigenous iconographies for the settler's gaze in the exact same spaces where Indigenous women and girls disappear.<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the function of public history as a tool of the state it is useful to consider the scholarship of historian Amber Dean. Dean discusses the museum as a site of narrative authority that confines colonial violence to a detached past in the settler consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Notably absent from the book is an analysis of the crisis as it pertains to peoples that identify under the blanket term of Two Spirit. This absence presents an avenue for further research outside the conventions of the gender binary rooted in colonialism and its Christian worldview. Of course, this role is likely best reserved for Indigenous knowledge holders that have a greater understanding of Indigenous genderfulness. Following Kim Tallbear (2014), ethical research makes space for and amplifies the voices of scholars that authentically stand with the communities they speak for.<sup>7</sup> In terms of ethics, McDiarmid expertly navigates working with Indigenous communities in a way that is not extractive or unreciprocated to hold the majority settler society to account.

As a book that aims to disrupt settler imaginaries about the reality of what it means to benefit from ongoing colonialism, *Highway of Tears* would be additive to the curriculum of required reading for anyone with an interest in the continuity of the Canadian nation state. McDiarmid demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging discrimination to address patterns of colonial violence and the reproduction of inequalities across Canada. By directly addressing systems of oppression, the book aspires to the potential reality of a genuinely inclusive Canada. In *Highway of Tears*, education and acknowledgement are posited as the first step towards breaking the cycle of cultural genocide. Instead of showing up from spaces of denial and guilt, McDiarmid teaches that it is the duty of settler Canadians to sit uncomfortably with the truth of intersectional oppression as it manifests in the MMIWG2S crisis.

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<sup>5</sup> McDiarmid, 78.

<sup>6</sup> Amber Dean, "The CMHR and the Ongoing Crisis of Murdered or Missing Indigenous Women: Do Museums Have a Responsibility to Care?" *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 37, no 2-3 (2015): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2015.1028834>.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Tallbear, "Standing with and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry," *Journal of Research Practice* 10, no. 2 (2014): 3.

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