

What Lives On?

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Amber Dean. *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance*. University of Toronto Press, 2015. 188 pp.

What remembrances survive after death? For whom? In her 2015 book, *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance* Amber Dean asks what lives on after the violent deaths and disappearances of a group of women. Her text focuses on more than 65 women, most of whom were Indigenous, who lived and worked in Vancouver's downtown east side (DTES) neighbourhood over the past 30 years. This academic text covers challenging subject matter and theories best suited to higher-level undergraduate or graduate students. Her book enters a crowded fray of texts on murdered and missing women. Dean's book shares similarities with Hugill's (2010) recent critique of the print media coverage of three national daily newspapers in relation to the missing and murdered Indigenous women victims in the murder trial of Robert Picton. Dean and Hugill critique responses to missing and murdered Indigenous women, and analyze the effectiveness of these responses from broader perspectives. Both authors focus on women from the DTES who form part of a larger group of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. I discuss the similarities between these texts later on in this review, after a review of Dean's book. I begin with a basic overview of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada.

For readers who are unfamiliar with the ongoing tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, this national issue dates back to well-known cases, such as Helen Betty Osborne's 1971 murder in Winnipeg. In the intervening years, the crisis has remained mostly invisible or inconsequential in local and national press and among government officials at all levels, and by extension among the Canadian public, despite international chastisements for Canada's inaction by Amnesty International (2004, 2009) and, more recently, the United Nations Human Rights Commission (2015). Though activism around the issue began in the 1970s and has been ongoing, it has mostly been sustained by Indigenous, grassroots organizations in Canada.

Dean's intent is not to detail what happened to these 'disappeared women' (as she refers to them throughout her text), nor to critique the justice system. Both of these topics have been covered in other publications and she provides extensive lists of

resources for her readers. Instead, Dean's contribution offers personal reflections and shares examples of police and community responses to missing and murdered Indigenous women in order to theorize what we collectively learn and how we make meaning from their lives and their deaths.

Dean begins by naming sixty-five of the missing and murdered women from Vancouver's DTES to memorialize them. Then, she acknowledges the partiality of her list and the challenges that arise from listing names to memorialize those we did not know in life. Dean's juxtapositions, asserting ideas then challenging them, typifies her writing throughout the book and reflects the tensions around the representations of the women's murders and disappearances. Dean's stated purpose is to "trace *what lives on* from the violent loss of so many women who called the Downtown Eastside home" (xviii). She then engages the reader, asking, "And, what might it mean then, to come to see ourselves as inheriting what lives on from the violent loss of so many women, especially for those of us who did not know any of the women when they were living?" (xviii-xix, emphasis in original).

Also in her opening chapter, Dean lays out the theoretical framework she develops around the idea of inheriting what lives on. She builds upon her own previous academic work on missing and murdered Indigenous women and draws on theoretical work by the late memory scholars Roger Simon and Sharon Rosenberg, particularly their writings on the "practices of inheritance" emanating from human-initiated tragedies and what we learn from these events in our shared present and for the future. Dean applies the lens of settler colonialism, which she defines as "the relations of settlers for ongoing colonialism" (10), to underpin her work. She provides an extensive historical framework for settler colonialism, connecting it to present-day projects of ongoing colonialism, particularly the violence against missing and murdered Indigenous women of the DTES neighbourhood in Vancouver. She also builds on Judith Butler's definition of 'grievable' lives and her own previous work on redress, in which she frames these women's lives and deaths as ungrievable due to broader colonial contexts in Canada that make them insignificant in life and in death. Her book is a plea for deeper engagement from wider publics (including her readers) against violence that is gendered as well as sexualized, raced, and colonized as a counter to existing discourses of ungrievable lives.

Returning to the structure of the book, Dean takes up multiple responses to missing and murdered Indigenous women, including her personal reflections and police and community responses, to support her thesis. Dean's personal reflections on her time in Vancouver's DTES position her early in the text and throughout. She seeks to understand her own inheritance, while not conflating her experiences with those of the women she writes about. She succeeds in this through much of her writ-

ing. In her later chapters, Dean broadens her approach to explore representations of missing and murdered women as an ungrievable group and through an analysis of the ‘missing persons’ posters created and distributed by police. Dean critiques police representations for aligning the women closely with criminals and suggests that these images “fail to either signal a wider social context for the lives of the women pictured or redirect our attention to the social conditions and normative frameworks that facilitated their disappearances and greatly delayed an official response” (95). Dean also critiques artistic representations and memorials intended to humanize the women. She critiques this memorializing work for “the oft-repeated reclaiming of the women as ‘mothers, sisters, and daughters’, a politically strategic remembrance practice, [that] also risks distancing the women from sex work or indeed from any form of sexuality at all” (31). She discusses these examples of police and cultural representations as a means to think through our collective responses to the disappearance of so many women as our shared inheritance to what lives on. She explains that practices of inheritance might encourage us to share this inheritance as a collective responsibility—to see ourselves in relation with these women, as a means to stopping the legacy of ongoing colonialism and thus the ongoing violence. While many of these cultural representations, the tributes and memorials, may be familiar to anyone following the ongoing situation of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Vancouver and across Canada, the conclusions that Dean draws expand on the idea of whose lives matter and to whom.

Dean’s book shares similarities with David Hugill’s *Missing Women, Missing News* (2010), which critiques print media coverage in three national daily newspapers in relation to the victims in the murder trial of Robert Picton. Both authors look at the role of ‘humanizing’ approaches in the contexts of ongoing colonial violence for Indigenous women and both seek new lenses to view the murders and disappearances of a group of women who are mostly ignored or forgotten. The two books seek to go beyond the mantra of ‘never again’ and ask what would happen if these women’s lives were considered grievable. Through their difficult questions and examples of indifference, both authors engage with societal complicity in these women’s deaths and disappearances as these relate to the future of Vancouver’s DTES and justice for its residents.

Dean’s book is not without weaknesses. Nearing the close of her final chapter, Dean reflects upon the “social and intellectual importances of Indigenous epistemologies and political thought and histories” (149), to show how she has neglected her own inheritance through writing the book. She comes to understand how Indigenous scholarship has informed her thesis insufficiently. She states,

This is a realization I have just come to through reckoning with my own implica-

tions in this story, as I have (slowly, too slowly) begun to realize that the changes in how we understand the relations between self and other and among past, present, and future, that I came to believe are necessary for ending the violence, injustice, suffering, and loss that concern me throughout this book are already understandings that are extremely well-developed in much Indigenous thought.” (149)

She continues, “But for the ideas I develop about the necessity of transforming self-other, and past-present-future relations, it is also possible to draw insights from numerous Indigenous scholars, writers, and activists (as I have, belatedly, also attempted to do)” (150). She cites Mi’kmaq scholar Marie Battiste (on relations) as one of a smattering of citations from Indigenous scholars throughout the book. Elsewhere (not cited by Dean), Battiste explains that Indigenous knowledges are marginalized through Western scholarship. She writes, “While the disciplines and discourse of Eurocentrism quibble with each other about their accepted theories and methods, they actually remain allies in the construction and maintenance of Eurocentrism” (xxii). Dean identifies this reliance on non-Indigenous ways of knowing as working against the purpose of her book and her thesis and as a significant flaw in her work and yet she does not activate her newfound insights. What message does she convey to readers about her own inheritances of the ongoing project of settler colonialism? How does theory inform the ongoing project of settler colonialism in her work? Dean’s response is obscured by her use of Western scholars (the term she uses to describe the academic scholarship that she employs [149] predominantly through her writing and to conclude the book, contrary to the lens of settler colonialism she seeks to apply and her insights.

In her conclusion, Dean describes her inheritances from the missing and murdered Indigenous women. She writes,

Finding ways to be in relation to others beyond the constrictions of identity but never forgetful of the ways identity matters: finding ways to stay in relation not just with the dead and with those who continue to contend with and resist the social conditions and arrangements that leave some more vulnerable to violence than others, and also with people like my neighbours who continue to recoil from those whose living and dying is so frequently cast as less grievable—such challenging alterations of one’s ways of being in relation to others are the “terrible gifts” I inherit from my own reckoning with De Vries’s poem [one of the cultural products of a DTES resident who was murdered].” (46-47)

In this book, Dean achieves her stated purpose. She uses multiple examples to show how the stories of Vancouver’s disappeared women have been conveyed using lo-

cal cultural productions, tracing what lives on, and drawing attention to the ways in which various publics might be implicated. From the perspective that their lives mattered and we inherit something from their deaths, Dean challenges her readers to consider their own inheritances from the missing and murdered Indigenous women of Vancouver's DTES. Dean looks at a topic that has been ongoing for the past 45 years, since a Manitoba inquiry found that, "Betty Osborne would be alive today had she not been an Aboriginal woman" (cited in Amnesty International, 2004, 22). Yet, the traces of what live on from the lives and deaths of missing and murdered Indigenous women and our ethical relations to them remains a timely question for the present and our shared futures. Dean's questions will provoke readers of her book for their answers.

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