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Indigenous (Mis)Representation: Implications for the MMIWG2S Epidemic

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Introduction

Land Acknowledgement

This cohort of University of Montana students humbly acknowledges that we are uninvited guests in the aboriginal territories of the Salish, Kootenai, and Kalispel people, which were never conceded to us. We honor the path they have always shown us in caring for this land for generations to come.

The devastating epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people is well-documented, particularly in Canada and the United States. Yet, too often their cases receive little to no news media attention and their families face doubts and delays from law enforcement agencies. The tragic case of Gabby Petito, whose body was discovered in September of 2021 in a national park in Wyoming after a rapid-fire law enforcement response and national news media frenzy, emphasized the disparity in response to a missing white woman compared with when an Indigenous woman is reported missing. In fact, at least 710 Indigenous people, mostly girls, went missing in Wyoming from 2011 to 2020, according to a January report published by the state's Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Task Force (Wyoming Survey & Analysis Center, 2021). The lack of attention afforded to missing Indigenous persons is an intentional and predictable consequence of a shared global history of settler colonialism.

The ways in which settler colonial-based media depict Indigenous Americans has motivated prejudice, the continuation of traumatic experiences, and misalignment of power

within the landscape of western film and television. While the Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) epidemic is one of many injustices that are faced by Indigenous Americans today, this cohort has chosen to focus primarily on MMIP, its origins, and the ways in which education and reformation within the American film and television landscape may aid in rectifying the toxic settler colonialist doctrines that contribute to violence against Indigenous people. By creating opportunities within our community for education, conversation, and advocacy, we aim to support truthful depictions and creations of American Indigenous stories, as well as agitate others to take action on this issue. As aboriginal populations exist on continents across the world, we hope that bolstering accurate representation and creating opportunities to educate our community in regards to inaccurate representation will create positive change both within and beyond Missoula.

Inspiration

Literature Review

I. INTRODUCTION

In the modern United States there exists a disproportionate rate of violence against those who are not descendants of white, European colonizers; in particular, those whose ancestors inhabited American soil long before colonizers arrived. The Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) epidemic emerged at the point of contact in 1492. Sarah Deer writes that, “rape in the lives of Native women is not an epidemic of recent, mysterious origin. Instead, rape is a fundamental result of colonialism” (Deer 2015:9). Settler colonialism has promoted injustice and

white superiority that is deeply embedded, both socially and systemically, within the culture of the United States. Misrepresentations and stereotypes in media and popular culture encourage prejudice against Native Americans, especially women, thereby inciting violence and MMIP.

II. SETTLER COLONIALISM

Inequality's roots are so deeply embedded in the culture of the United States that its origins can be traced to the nation's birth; a moment taught to many Americans as a representation of independence and freedom from control and oppression. However, the reality of the American Revolution is that it represents the power-acquirement for a small and specific group who would, despite claiming to fight oppression, utilize that power to oppress. Not only was the American Revolution a power struggle against a group who was more powerful and "oppressive" than those fighting on the side of United States independence, but it was also used in order to weaken those who they would, once power was acquired, fully oppress. Once those in power began to oppress Indigenous groups it would only perpetuate into the modern United States, as oppressive measures were built into the United States system as a whole. As Patrick Wolf (2006:388) explains when describing settler colonialism, "invasion is a structure not an event". The United State"unfair treatment and oppression of American Indians is deeply embedded within its origins and built into a structure which allows it to persist today.

Disproportionate rates of violence within the borders of the modern United States began with the racialization of Indigenous peoples. According to Wolfe (2006) the original racialization of Indigenous peoples came from the idea that they were not the original owners of the land, but people that simply lived there, therefore that land was on the market. Although the land was seen as a God given right by European settlers, people still lived on it and needed to be removed, thus

racialization occurred; the Indigenous peoples needed to be projected as different from European individuals, therefore they were made a different race. These concepts began with the first Europeans to arrive around the turn of the sixteenth century who began to take Indigenous land by force and enslave the survivors. Although slavery of Native peoples declined in the following centuries, Indigenous land theft did not, nor did violence against them. Those concepts persisted until the point when talk of a revolution began within the Thirteen Colonies. Upon hearing about a revolution, the British government put forth the 1763 Royal Proclamation which "restricted western settlement and created uncertainties for speculators in Indian lands" (Ostler, 2019:444). The proclamation sparked outrage and contributed to the spurring of the American Revolution in order to ensure that settlers could attain new land; thus, in the revolution "U.S. military operations against Native nations [were] aimed not simply to defeat Indians allied with the British but to destroy Natives' resistance to colonial settlement in general and thus gain control over their lands" (Ostler, 2019:444). The concept of removal of Indians by armed force persisted until the mid-1800's; as Ostler (2019:445) describes, "by 1850, the United States had removed roughly three-quarters of the Native population living east of the Mississippi in 1830 (and had caused great loss of life in doing so)". After the Civil War however, there was a shift away from eliminating Indigenous groups to concentrating them into small areas of land and allowing settlers to live on the rest. The American Civil War marked the end of slavery, described by Mahmood Mamdani (2015:606) as the "period that introduced measures to enhance African American participation in the US saw a definitive exclusion of Indians from that same political community". Mamandi (2015) also describes the post-civil war era being marked by the concept of the frontier as a driver for white settlers to make their way west and tame the land while

“Indians were herded into semi captivity in enclosures known as reservations; initiated by Lincoln after the Civil War, the development of these reservations accelerated under President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869.” (Mamandi, 2015:607). Those reservations existed from then until the present day and have been used as a barrier between American Indians and those who are descendants of white settlers, perpetuating white supremacism throughout that time.

In the book “ The Beginning and End of Rape” Deer outlines systemic colonization of the land and the relationship to Missing and Murdered Indigenous women. The issue is rooted in settler colonialism in which “introduced a zero-sum contest over land on which conflicting modes of production could ultimately not co-exist (Deer, 2015:868),” stated by Wolfe in his article, “Land, Labor, and Difference: the Elementary structures of race.” The slow breakdown of tribal sovereignty and tribal jurisdiction over violent crimes is inextricably tied to the colonization of the land and the resulting colonization over Indigenous bodies. Wolfe points out that because Indigenous people’s relationship to their colonizers, in the so-called United States, centers on land it leads to policies of elimination and then transitions into policies of assimilation in order to reduce rival claims to the land. Deer supports this argument through her examination of federal Indian policy where she argues that “the efforts of the government were designed to extinguish the very existence of tribal nations, it is more likely that Congress intended to infiltrate and control Indigenous populations through increased legal authority (Deer, 2015:69).”

Deer outlines the breakdown of tribal legal authority with the following Supreme Court case decisions and legislation. The first official major reduction in tribal criminal authority began with the Major Crimes Act (MCA) of 1885 which provided that major crimes, like murder, rape, kidnapping and other relevant crimes, committed by Indians on reservations would fall under the

authority of the federal government and be prosecuted in federal court. The MCA then requires federal law enforcement agencies to work with U.S attorneys to prosecute violent crimes. In cases like these, only a small percentage of cases referred to the Attorney's office are actually prosecuted. These processes thus allow many victims of violent crimes to fall through the cracks ,further disenfranchising tribal communities. Following the MCA, the Indian Civil rights Act of 1968 placed a sentencing restriction on tribal nations. The sentencing cap was limited to six months and $500, then the following year it was slightly expanded to a one year sentencing cap and $5000 fine. The Oliphant decision of 1978 limited tribal authority over non-native criminals stating that only the federal government has the power to prosecute non-Natives who commit crimes on the reservation. Only in 2013 was there a win for tribal nations in which the reauthorization of VAWA allowed for non-Natives to be prosecuted if they were to commit crimes of domestic violence on the reservation. Although, the limitations were that the person who commits the crimes has to have been in a domestic relationship with their victim. It does not include child-abuse or sexual assault by acquaintances. Tribal legal authority is vital to the stability of the community. Victims of violent crime in the tribal community deserve peace and through the colonial system of justice most victims will receive little to no recourse for their case.

While the process of colonization is devastating to Native communities, it is not to say that tribal nations quietly accepted it as their fate. There are many instances of Indigenous resistance throughout history and acts of resistance that continue today, as demonstrated by the MMIW movement.

Indigenous resistance works to heal the complex and continuing colonial violence inflicted on generations of Native Americans (Steinman, 2016:219–236). Reclamation of tribal sovereignty is supported with tribal resources and cultural restorative practices. In his article "Settler Colonialism: Career of a Concept", Lorenzo Veracini supports Steinman's point that Indigenous resistance works to heal colonial violence. Veracini wrote that due to the emphasis of the devastation of Indigenous communities as a result of colonization during the 70's and 80's, and through the examination of Indigenous agency. This resulted in greater acts of resilience and success in the face of colonization.

III. POPULAR CULTURE

In the United States, and across the globe, the issue of representation is central to multitudinous conversations about the treatment of marginalized groups. The issue of representation in American Film and TV is two-fold: The first battle is to get onto the screen, the second battle is to make sure that the representations we see in the media are fair, accurate, and sensitive. For Indigenous Americans, both of these battles are still being fought. Dustin Kahmahkera, in his 2008 article "Custer's Last Sitcom: Decolonized Viewing of the Sitcom's 'Indian'" analyzes several harmful, base, and widely propagated images of Indigenous Americans that appear in American sit-coms. These images, while incredibly harmful to Indigenous people, are so indoctrinated into the American film and television landscape that many settler-descendant people hardly recognize them anymore. Kahmahkera discusses in his article the effects that misrepresentation of Indigenous lives in TV and Film has on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers. He surmises that the issues that arise from this misrepresentation are long-lasting and far-reaching. Cristina Stanciu takes a similar stance in her

analysis of Michelle Raheja's 2010 study, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*. Stanciu observes in her analysis of the study that collected data on the representations, good and bad, of Indigenous people that "Raheja argues that [...] Indian characters have perpetuated through repeated redface performances fabricated images of colonial fantasy, 'acts of representational violence'". She also observes that the issue of representation is, at its core, intersectional. Stanciu cites critical race theory, as well as feminist and queer theories in her analysis of the problem and its potential solutions. In addition, she theorizes that the issue of Native representation in American film and television is one that deeply affects both Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers and creators.

Amidst the battle for accurate representation in film and television, some headway is being made by grassroots efforts in order to bolster the opportunities and success of Indigenous filmmakers. The Invisibility Project is an ongoing effort by Angela Salamanca and Susan D. Dion in which Indigenous filmmakers are guided by professionals to create their own "digital stories" or short films. The project is aimed at exploring the truths of "what it means to be Indigenous in a modern context" (Dion, Salamanca, 2018:192). In the creators article, published by The Canadian Journal of Native Studies, they surmise that the complexity of Native identity is often elusive to the American film and television industry. The principles of "self-determination, sovereignty and survivance" are integral to media that is created by and for Indigenous people. The aim of the project is to create a platform for American Indian creatives to tell authentic stories about their identity, experience, and the nuances of being Indigenous in an ever-changing world. This project is one of many that aims to improve the representation of Indigenous people, lives, culture, and experiences.

Native created and centralized art has proven to be one of the few places that the general public can experience authentic Indigenous stories outside of reality. While the project itself is valiant and positive, it must be acknowledged that some theorists disagree with the idea that as long as Indigenous people are in control of what we see on the screen, those images aren't harmful. In her study from 2018, Monica L. Butler observes that there is conflict within the American Indigenous community surrounding the topic of representation in the media. While activists have worked tirelessly to fight for a myriad of rights, for which they are long overdue, there are still many questions about what kind of work is actually helping to advance the cause. Butler, in her study, analyses both the efforts of Indigenous activists fighting for better representation, and the correlated representations of Native people in the media. She acknowledges that while the efforts of these activists are surely positive, there were and are Indigenous actors, writers, producers, and others who opposed these efforts. Because of the settler colonialist mindset, is it better for Indigenous people to be compensated well for the work that they do, and be active members of the film and television community at large, even if the product of their work does not actively disprove said mindset? Or, is it better for any and all representations of Indigenous people in the media to be wholly true and accurate, regardless of the challenges that up-and-coming creatives may face? This issue is clearly multifaceted, and while the consensus among fictional film and television in recent years appears to favor media that is truthful to the fullest extent of the artist, with help from organizations like The InVisibility Project to aid in creating more opportunities for those who wish to work in film and television, a long history of settler colonialism sentiments and images in American media still present a huge challenge to overcome.

Portraying Indigenous persons as stuck in the historical past serves to make them invisible today. In the United States and Mexico, only a handful of Indigenous leaders from past centuries are even recognized by name. Folklore has taken a handful of these Native women and lifted them to the status of national icons, namely, La Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea. Critically, their transformation into folk heroines takes place primarily outside of their own culture group. In the United States, these women are mostly folklorized by Euro-Americans through what Kristina Downs dubs the "Enamored Indian Princess" narrative. This carefully constructed tale aims to frame cultural contact as a romance between a European male and an exotic Indigenous female (Downs, 2017:15). The Enamored Indian Princess narratives associated with La Malinche in Mexico and with Pocahontas and Sacagawea in the United States have been folklorized, meaning they have been embellished with incidents that cannot be verified with historical data and inconvenient details have been omitted, thus reinforcing ideologies of conquest, colonization, and Manifest Destiny associated with each narrative (Downs, 2017:1). Indeed, Sacajawea left no written accounts. The oral history of her was gathered by White anthropologists, and thus, Americans can only speculate and make up stories about her. Most histories written about Sacajawea must be read as fiction, not history, since they are not based on historical evidence and are focused instead on the mythology of Sacajawea. For example, the mythology that Sacajawea single-handedly led Lewis and Clark to the Pacific Ocean obscures how many other Native peoples along the Lewis and Clark trail assisted the Corps of Discovery (Finley, 2012:63-64). Knowing and willfully misrecognizing Natives through origin narratives is essential to imperial nation-states' ability to justify the dispossession of land from Native peoples. Additionally, Downs considers the sexual dimensions of colonization as expressed in

each of the narratives, in which the body of the colonized female serves as a metaphor for the colonized land. This body is available for the male colonizer to explore, to possess, and to dominate. Just as Pocahontas's love for John Smith creates a narrative in which the American continent is longing for colonization by Europeans, Sacagawea's love for members of the Corps of Discovery metaphorically represents the Western frontier embracing White civilization (Downs, 2017:124). In truth, Sacajawea did not "choose" White men; she was kidnapped and enslaved by Lewis, Clark, and Charbonneau and forced to bear a child that she may not have wanted (Finley, 2012:109). In denying the truth, Americans are able to minimize the guilt and historic and contemporary mistreatment of Native Americans. Indeed, Christine April Finley (2012:46) notes that the narrative of Pocahontas and John Smith frames conquest as a love story instead of a story of settlement and violence. The Pocahontas narrative requires love and marriage between the White man and Native woman to justify the narrative of conquest and nation-building through the universal concepts of love and marriage. Yet, Pocahontas is believed to have been only eleven years old when she met twenty-seven year-old John Smith (Downs, 2017:99). Eleven year-olds do not make appealing romantic leads, and are inappropriate as objects of sexual desire. Thus, the Pocahontas who is portrayed in paintings, novels, and films is usually an older teenager or young woman rather than a child, and John Smith is sometimes made younger to further reduce the age gap. Dwanna L. Robertson (2015:132) finds that the treatment of young Native girls today bears great resemblance to the sexualized historical myth of Pocahontas—the idea that Indigenous women behave wildly, enjoy being held captive, and become sexually active at earlier ages than other racial groups of women. This stereotype fuels the fetishization of Indigenous women and girls which, in turn, creates a demand for them in

human trafficking networks. The so-called Pocahontas Paradox, with its origins in folklore, is perpetuated in popular culture. For example, Keestin O'Dell conducted a content analysis of adult women's costume advertisements with a Native American theme to investigate how aboriginal women are portrayed through costume descriptions. Results found that the majority of costume titles included words that emphasized sexuality, such as "sexy," "hottie," and "temptress." Moreover, accompanying descriptions often stated that the costume will attract men, thereby sexualizing the nature of aboriginal traditions and activities (O'Dell, 2016:1). The use of children's material and national monuments to support these sexualized, gendered, and racialized narratives make the erasure of Native people seem complete and absolute because it is something people learn from an early age.

The erasure and sensationalization of Indigenous cultures and realities is an issue so vast and far reaching that it permeates the objective truth. While the fight for the end of sensationalization and erasure begins with issues such as cultural appropriation, and accurate and honest depictions of Indigenous realities in film and television, a facet of the conflict that must be addressed came to light in the last few years. What determines which truths the mass media choses to share with us? Can objective truth become biased? While Indigenous representation in fictional media like movies, mascots, and the like largely has to do with telling authentic stories, journalism has no choice but to do just that. A complex conflict has arisen, however, about the truths that journalists chose to tell (and those they do not), and why. In 2011, the Canadian government passed legislation that effectively banned the use and sale of the pain medication OxyContin by all medical personnel. The withdrawal was quick, and in a study done by Sarah E. Nelson, Annette J. Browne, and Josee G Lavoie, the authors analyzed the treatment by the media

of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous victims of the opioid crisis. Journalism, truthfully, can be biased despite the objective reporting of facts. The authors of this study observed that the facts presented about this event were starkly different for Indigenous versus non-Indigenous people. The authors found that news coverage which concerned Canada's Indigenous population specifically was incredibly problematic; the coverage depicted individual people as spokespeople, or figureheads of an incredibly diverse community, failed to recognize the institutional challenges that Indigenous people face as a result of settler colonialism, and emphasized the use of OxyContin as a recreational drug rather than a medication used for the management of pain. This kind of treatment is, unfortunately, not unique. By sharing Indigenous stories through a heavy settler colonialism filter, the issue becomes not one of representation, but one of truth, honesty, and transparency. The authors postulate that legitimized racism masquerading as representation does just as much harm to indigenous people as no representation at all, and truthful representation cannot be achieved without first addressing the influence of Indigenous archetypes created by settler colonialists.

Depictions of Indigenous people in the media and popular culture are shaped, in large part, by legitimized racism, i.e., the phenomenon by which racist actions, discourses, and institutions are normalized (Robertson, 2015:129). In the United States, the institutions that shape social norms reproduce symbolic racial violence against Native Americans through sports associations, consumer products, national holidays, and so on. Dressing up to 'play Indian' on Halloween is harmless. Culturally appropriating sacred objects like tipis and headdresses is all in good fun. Legitimized racism is so common that it is accepted as just part of the American landscape. In her analysis of legitimized racism against indigenous peoples, Dwanna L.

Robertson (2015:143) points out that all major sports channels endorse racist team names and imagery, such as the Atlanta Braves, the Kansas City Chiefs, and the Cleveland Indians. Additionally, Americans drive vehicles deriving their names from Indigenous groups without their approval, like the Jeep Cherokee, the Dodge Dakota, and the Winnebago RV. Even the federal government continues to appropriate indigenous terminology for its military weapons, machinery, and code words for combat operations, including the Apache, Chinook, and Blackhawk helicopters and the use of Geronimo as the code name for al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden. In their efforts to assess the real-world consequences of disparaging representations of Indigenous persons in the media and popular culture, numerous scholars have focused their analyses on sports associations. Indigenous persons still routinely experience overt racism in the form of horribly distorted depictions of Natives as mascots, reminiscent of the propaganda used against black, Irish, and Jewish people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Robertson, 2015:114). Moreover, sports teams' mascots are often combined with racial epithets that serve to communicate inferiority, such as redskin, savage, and squaw. This language and imagery is problematic, in part, because it inspires feelings of dysphoria in Indigenous persons and feelings of hostility in White persons. Indeed, a survey of students at the University of North Dakota, a school with substantial Native student enrollment, was conducted to determine support or opposition to the school's "Fighting Sioux" nickname and logo. The results indicated that Native students experienced higher levels of dysphoria, anxiety, and depression after viewing images related to the school's nickname and logo, and White students exhibited a major increase in hostility after viewing the images (William, 2007:449). Of course, this has major implications for the MMIWG2S epidemic, because the feeling of hostility engendered by denigrating depictions

of Indigenous persons in the media and popular culture manifests itself in the disproportionate rates of violence experienced by Indigenous women. Similarly, a study by Haley A. Strass (2016:77) finds that stereotypical media portrayals of Indigenous persons impact modern racist attitudes towards them. Yet, 'playing Indian' is still as popular as ever in the media and popular culture. Consider the prevalence of 'cowboy and Indian' parties on college campuses or Halloween costumes with exaggerated imitations of clothing and ceremonial regalia. Contrary to the representations of Native Americans in costumes, aboriginal cultures are distinct from one another in their clothing. Although it was mainly the Plains Indians that wore fringed clothing, and headdresses were not traditionally a woman's item, the majority of costumes analyzed by O'Dell (2016:1) contained both headdresses (96%) and fringed clothing (95%). Costumes rooted in stereotypes give the impression that all aboriginal cultures are the same and not their own distinct peoples. Furthermore, many depictions of Indigenous persons in the media and popular culture are directly inspired by the colonial legacy of racist discourses that stereotyped Natives as uncivilized beasts (Robertson, 2015:140). Historical myths of savagery legitimized the conquest, enslavement, and mass murder of Indigenous peoples by colonial powers in their greed for more land and natural resources. Public education continues to teach mythical narratives of naïve or savage Indians with Pilgrims, settlers, cowboys, and soldiers. Children participate in school activities with stereotypical Indian mascots. National holidays like Columbus Day, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving symbolize genocide, suffering, and a loss of culture and homelands for Indigenous peoples. This overt, legitimized racism is not confined to hate groups but is visible in everyday discourse and throughout the media and popular culture.

IV. DISPROPORTIONATE RATES OF VIOLENCE

Settler colonialism, with its establishment of systemic patriarchy, forced assimilation, and dehumanization of Native Americans, continues to influence the misrepresentation of Indigenous women and men in contemporary media and popular culture. These harmful, stereotypical portrayals encourage disproportionate rates of violence against Native Americans, especially women and girls. Professor Hilary Weaver analyzes the connection of colonialism and violence in an article published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (Weaver, 2008:1552–1563). In her examination she addresses that prior to the colonization of Native communities, women were regarded with greater respect and often held distinguished, significant tribal roles. Forced assimilation by colonizers, however, led to a gradual culture of sexism and began the trend of violence towards Indigenous women that predominates in modern times. The article details how the modern continuation of violence is a lasting effect of Manifest Destiny, which excused the expansion and atrocities committed by colonizers based on the notion that land was their divine right. With colonization came sexist ideals and gender roles, paving the way for violence against Native women.

In addition to the prevalence of sexist beliefs both outside of and within tribal communities, patriarchy has been entrenched into America's legal system. An article from *PSU McNair Scholars Online Journal* discusses the failure of U.S. law to protect Native American women from violence (Le May, 2018:1-24). Author Genevieve Le May further highlights how the colonial and patriarchal views of powerful figures in law sustain rather than alleviate the Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) epidemic. Deep-seated patriarchy stems from the first European colonizers, who devalued Indigenous women and viewed them as lesser beings who could be sexually exploited and manipulated. Even with the passage of the Violence

Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA) and subsequent Reauthorization Acts, there is incomplete protection of Indigenous women, in part due to tribal courts' lack of true sovereignty. One way to promote legislative action and decolonization efforts is phrasing violence against Indigenous women as "human trafficking" rather than "sexual exploitation" (Hunt, 2015:25–39). In her article for the *Atlantis* journal, Hunt expresses the severity of murdered and missing Indigenous women, detailing how a vast majority of aboriginal Canadian women have been victims of violence. This violence is often not reported to police, as many women have received minimal help from law enforcement officers and legal courts. The article highlights how the law further disregards Native women and uplifts colonial power through lack of action, especially when Indigenous victims are involved in sex work. Hunt postulates that using "human trafficking", rather than phrases such as "sex exploitation" or "sex workers", shifts any blame or negative notions from the victim and instead expresses the severity of the crime committed against them. In order to dismantle colonial power and the dehumanization of Native women, Hunt urges for representation to focus on humanity and autonomy of victims.

Despite the obvious perpetuation of murder and abuse towards Indigenous women and girls, there continues to be a lack of research into causes, effects, and prevention measures. While the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis has been researched in 71 countries, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUS) is the only reported study that has been conducted in the United States in regards to MMIW. Skylar Joseph dissects the methods of data analysis conducted by the Urban Indian Health Institute and shares cities or counties with three or more cases that are considered "hot spots" (Joseph, 2021:102-136). The discovered hot spots were then compared with fracking locations considering the impact it has on

nearby communities. The work force consisted mainly of white men and there is a large impact on “poor, rural, and predominantly Indigenous communities.” Research has shown that within this blending of cultures there has been increase in violence, sexual assualt, drug use, sex trafficking, sexually transmitted diseases, and prostitution.

In both mixed and primarily Native communities, violence against Native women can manifest into intimate partner violence (IPV). According to a research article in the *Social Service Review*, high rates of IPV disproportionately affect Indigenous women, as statistics reveal 46-91% of Native American women have experienced IPV compared to 7-51% of non-Indigenous women (Burnette, 2015:532). However, attention to the problem remains minimal. In an effort to remedy this research deficit, Burnette collected interviews and data from 49 victims to reveal the common themes behind the perpetuation of violence. Burnette discovered that “experiences of oppression, historical and contemporary losses, cultural disruption, manifestations of oppression, and dehumanizing beliefs and values" were the five most prevalent issues experienced by these women. Colonialism and its prevalence in contemporary times has led to the silencing and debasement of Indigenous women. Burnette discusses how patriarchal colonialism and historical trauma and oppression promote lesser treatment towards Native Americans, especially women. Despite such glaringly high rates of violence, women are simply ignored as an ongoing means of oppression. Intimate partner violence itself further increases rates of PTSD, depression, and substance abuse, yet awareness and drive to action continue to falter.

When research fails at inclusivity, as is true with MMIW, human rights issues persist and can transgress into severe physical and mental health concerns within neglected communities. A

national telephone survey, published in *Health Services Research*, sought to investigate experiences of Native Americans with oppression, harassment, and violence and how they develop into health issues (Findling et al., 2019:1431–1441). Data was collected from 342 Native Americans and 902 white Americans via a telephone survey. Upon examination of the data, it was determined that a great number of Native Americans experienced violence and harassment in their daily lives, as well as unjust, prejudicial treatment in health care settings. Of the 23% who had such experiences, 15% expressed that their fear of discrimination caused them to avoid health care services altogether. This article postulates that historical and present day trauma greatly contribute to physical and psychological health conditions in Native Americans. Continual dehumanization and discrimination, paired with neglect from health care institutions, results in high mortality rates, substance abuse, sexual violence, and overall poor health.

Due to systematic racism occurring across generations, the MMIP crisis has been denied time, energy, resources, and protection. Montana's Department of Justice, in hopes of sharing efforts to improve reporting and minimize cases, recently directed a “Report to the State-Tribal Relations Interim Community” to address the cases of MMIP specifically happening in Montana. The report focuses on detailed specifics organized by age, gender, race, duration of time missing, currently missing, missing more than once, and more in Indigenous communities of Montana. Also included in the report is history of state Legislation that specifically identifies bills such as *Hanna's Act*. This law provides funding to the state department for specific funding for a position to investigate MMIP cases in addition to sub bills signed into place by Montana legislation. The report focuses on the Missing Montana Indigenous Task Force, which provides recommendations to the State-Tribal Relations Interim Committee via a stepwise plan. The plan provides the reader

with a greater understanding by differentiating the goal (combating violence and addressing violence against MMIP) and where the goal is derived from (the injustice experienced by MMIP). On the trajectory of dismantling the losses within the missing Montana people and legislation, the assembling of "The Looping in Native Communities Grant Program" is also shared.

Furthermore, federal laws have been created within the last few years in efforts to alleviate violence towards Native Americans. An article from the U.S. Department of the Interior discusses "using an all-of-government approach to address this crisis" referencing the MMIP epidemic. Secretary Deb Haaland took the leadership role when it came to advocating for the *Not Invisible Act* and co-led the passage of *Savanna's Act* during her time in Congress. According to the Seattle Indian Health Institute, the intent of these laws is to increase data collection, transparency, and coordination between tribes, tribal organizations, urban Indian organizations, and law enforcement agencies. *Savannas Act* requires that all MMIP statistics that have been obtained are to be reported and collected by the Justice Department. The updating of the Federal pool of data is intended to rectify law enforcement and acts of justice (SIHB, 2020). It also focuses on delegating responsibilities of federal, state, tribal, and local governments.

The MMIP crisis discussed in the US. *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* notes while this law is a step in the right direction, the task force is more focused on researching the problem, as opposed to finding a solution for it, and ignores systemic racism and sexism. As a government official, Haaland also focused on prioritizing and ending MMIP through creating a new Missing and Murdered Unit within the Bureau of Affair Office of Justice Services. The unit goal is to provide "leadership and direction for cross-departmental and interagency work

involving missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives". The *Not Invisible Act* is working on reducing violent crime against MMIP with a commission of at least 27 federal and non-federal members, who come from a variety of backgrounds, and represent different experiences and geographical beginnings. Diversifying the commission was an effort to bring together and unify the Bureau of Indian Affairs in coordinating all efforts, grants, and programs relating to MMIP (SIBH, 2020). The hope of this commission is to, "provide balanced points of view with regard to the duties of the Commission." The Commission holds hearings, receives testimony, and collects evidence to develop suggestions to the federal government and combat the systemic violence against Native people.

Further activism is seen on a community level, such as with Restoring Ancestral Winds tribal coalition's recent publication titled *Background and Summary of the Murdered & Missing Indigenous People Crisis in Utah* (Benally, 2020). This document not only focuses on the issue in Utah, but provides a broader analysis of MMIP in the United States and shares statistics of violence against Native women and men in Alaska. Statistics and the methods of collecting data for homicides and missing cases are identified. The article recognizes the pathways to becoming a victim of either homicide or going missing and shares contributing factors among those who go missing, including trauma, identity, socio-economic status, genetics, history, health. Disproportionate violence is described through historical trauma, structural violence, and contemporary trauma, all experienced together and by an Indigenous person. These ingrained and inherent wounds are considered risk factors for MMIP. The Sovereign Bodies Institute states that "far too often these 'vulnerabilities' are painted as the reason why MMIWG2 are taken or murdered, yet critical theorists instead assert the 'multiple jeopardies' experienced by Indigenous

women by virtue of their gender, ethnicity, and very Indigeneity. Linking back to the constant onslaught on Native lands and therefore Native bodies, MMIWG2 scholars underscore the connections between the violence experienced by Indigenous women to the continued subjugation of such bodies by the colonial state." These conclusions recognize both systemic racism and colonization that Native people have experienced continuously throughout history.

V. CONCLUSION

The disproportionate rates of violence against Native Americans in the United States persists into the modern day due to the fact that racism against Indigenous peoples and land theft was baked into the system that is the United States from its very beginning: the American Revolution. Tribal nations that existed since time immemorial had their own systems of justice and were women-centered societies before the arrival of colonizers. After contact, Europeans supplanted an oppressive patriarchal system that resulted in rape and murder of Indigenous women that was congruent with the goal of the dispossesion of land. Vine Deloria, Jr., contends that stereotypical "movie Indians" dominate the public's idea of what Indigenous people are, to the point that no one listens to "real Indian people with real problems," (Robertson, 2015:116). Make no mistake: distorted depictions of Indigenous persons in film and television, folklore, news and sports media, and popular culture are intentional. They function to justify the dispossession of land from Native peoples and further the notion of a post-colonial society. The struggle that Indigenous Americans face for accurate, truthful, and all-encompassing representation stems from the inability of settler descendants to recognize the total truth of the Indigenous reality in America. From stereotypical archetypes in television and film, to consciously or unconsciously biased journalism, the issue of representation is the direct result of

the sentiments indoctrinated into American society since our inception as a country. In order to begin solving this issue, we must first understand the true reality of Indigenous Americans, and create truthful, honest representations that accurately reflect that reality. It is imperative to also recognize that a lack of sustainable and tangible research methods has greatly escalated the MMIP crisis. For systemic and strong change to occur in the dismantling of disproportionate rates of violence among Indigenous people, the discovery of the United States must be re-told to recognize the honest founders of the land we reside and bury our feet upon; Indigenous people.

Project Implementation

Our project to combat misrepresentation of Indigenous people in the media ultimately unfolded into two parts; the first entailed partnering with the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival to assist in the screening of two films that were included in the festival's Native Filmmaker Initiative, which was established in order to share and appreciate Native American stories; the second part consisted of creating a media literacy toolkit designed to help high school educators encourage critical thinking in their students, as well as for use by any individual who hopes to further their media literacy and ability to recognize misrepresentations.

The films that we assisted in screening included *Bring Her Home*, directed by Leya Hale, which follows three Indigenous women, an activist, an artist, and a politician in Minnesota as they fight against the MMIP epidemic and work to honor their missing and murdered relatives. The second film is *The Trails Before Us*, directed by Fritz Bitsoie, which follows the story of Nigel James who is a 17 year old Diné mountain biker in the Navajo Nation. Our role in the screening of the films was to watch the films and then create questions for a panel discussion which occurred after the screening. Upon reflecting on the films and speaking with numerous

experts in the film industry and community members who work as activists and allies on Indigenous issues, we eventually formulated the following discussion questions and outline.

Discussion Points for Native Voices Speaker Series

Our intentions with the panel discussion are to create an honest representation of Indigenous issues without exploiting the trauma of Indigenous communities. We hope to highlight opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous partnerships when confronting social justice issues, and becoming activists and allies. Our goal is to display the multi-disciplinary backgrounds of each participant and the breadth of experiences within our many diverse Indigenous communities.

1. In Leya's film we see the scaffold exhibition and the negative response it elicited from the Native community. Despite the artist's good intentions, he put the Dakota people's trauma on display before consulting them. Moreover, in Fritz's film, we are invited into a thriving community of Indigenous-centered outdoor recreation which empowers adults and children alike. Can each of you discuss why it is imperative that filmmakers and artists create a partnership with the community whose story they are telling?

2. Watching these beautiful films and listening to this panel discussion may be the first introduction that some audience members have to Indigenous social justice issues. Mike and Lauren, could you share your advice for people who may be looking for opportunities to learn more and learn how they can become activists or allies?

3. For non-Indigenous filmmakers or Indigenous filmmakers working with a non-Indigenous crew, how do you approach topics like MMIWG2S without furthering the 'White savior' narrative?

4. Often, when we see media about Indigenous communities that is created by non-Indigenous people, it falls into pornography of violence, trauma, and poverty. Why is it important for story-tellers to portray the richness and kinship of a community, especially with an issue as deep and devastating as MMIW?

5. Leya and Fritz, can you share with us your process in creating a documentary film? How did you create your vision for the cinematography, aesthetic, and through-line of the film's story?

6. In Leya's film, we see multiple instances of community members engaged in protest. Can you speak on the challenges that come with filming such emotional moments? How do you navigate the balance between getting the footage you need and remaining sensitive to emotional/traumatic situations?

We were also tasked with choosing and inviting two of the four panelists. In addition to the filmmakers, we invited Mike Jetty who is an Indian education specialist at the Montana Office of

Public Instruction and is a Member of the Spirit Lake Dakota Nation and a Turtle Mountain Chippewa descendant. Lauren Small Rodriguez was another panelist we invited who is a community expert on the MMIP epidemic, a trauma advocate, a public health advisor and is a member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe and is Chicana.

In addition to our role with the panel, we took it upon ourselves to hold a raffle for a gift basket, which included items such as shirts, stickers, water bottles, and jewelry, which viewers of the films could purchase before or after the event. We then donated the proceeds to All Nations Health Center's Project Beacon which helps to assist in services for American Indian and Alaskan Native survivors of human trafficking, and The Snowbird Fund, which focuses on the immediate and direct support of Native families in Montana affected by the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous people; it allows community searches to be conducted in both urban and reservation areas, as well as providing direct monetary support for families experiencing the loss of a loved one.

The second part of our project, the media literacy toolkit, is an infographic created using *Canva* and saved on a *Wix* website. The infographic is comprised of six sections which consist of: historical context surrounding treatment of American Indians as well as their portrayal in American media historically, an overview of Indigenous storytelling and oral history, how to consume Indigenous based media, representation of Indigenous people in the media today and historically, the global impact of Indigenous representation in media, and a list of book and movie recommendations which accurately portray and represent Indigenous ideas and characters. The toolkit ultimately explains the most important take-aways from our findings in the media literacy toolkit: settler-colonialism informs the portrayal of Indigenous people in popular culture

today and perpetuates the disproportionate rates of violence that contribute to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples epidemic. The toolkit will hopefully serve to help high school aged students to be able to consume Indigenous based media in a more informed manner.

We could not have formulated the questions for the panelist discussion nor our media literacy toolkit without the numerous experts who took the time to meet with us and give us guidance on both parts of our project. We were fortunate enough to meet with administrators of the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival who helped us to organize our role in their event as well as allowed us to be a part of their event, filmmakers who helped us to create more informed and thoughtful questions for the discussion panel, experts on education and graphic design who helped us to be sure we included the appropriate and necessary content and proper formatting for our media literacy toolkit, and local community experts and activists who helped us to understand the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People.

Conclusion

We hope that through our partnership with the Big Sky Film Institute and distribution of our media literacy toolkit, our group has played a role in supporting the dismantling of settler colonialism and opposing misrepresentation of Indigenous people in media. We hope our audience of community members, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, has gained a deeper appreciation of true Native stories from the films presented at the festival. Furthermore, the media literacy toolkit will cultivate critical thinking within the Missoula community and oppose inaccurate depictions of Native people. As Indigenous communities are not isolated to America, but found on continents across the world, our toolkit could potentially promote thoughtful analysis of media in other countries as well. Our original document could be viewed and used as

an educational tool, or it could be used as template for a new toolkit specific to aboriginal populations in other countries. In either approach, our media literacy toolkit, coupled with a deeper appreciation of Native people in the Missoula community, has the potential to transcend the boundaries of Montana and uplift Indigenous voices on a global scale.

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