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A Look at the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Crisis: Investigation of Potential Causes and Effects

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A LOOK AT THE MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN CRISIS; INVESTIGATION OF POTENTIAL CAUSES AND EFFECTS

by

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Abstract:

In North America, Indigenous women go missing and are murdered at a rate higher than any other demographic. Scholars and governmental agencies agree that the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis is a pressing issue; it was not until a series of successful social media campaigns (using the hashtag #MMIW) and other grassroots activism took root across First Nations and Native communities in North America that the gravity of the situation became widely reported. Although many agree that the MMIW crisis is a wicked problem (in that it has many contributing factors that amplify its effect and contribute to its existence), scholars both non-Native and Native, continue to underline that the underpinning contributing factor is the legacy of colonization and its ongoing effects. Unfortunately, due to a lack of clear and concise statistics from governmental agencies, it is challenging to discern how far-reaching this crisis is. Much of the pre-existing literature does not take into account the contemporary issues regarding the jurisdictional gap that exists between tribal, state, and federal governmental agencies in the United States and more broadly across North America. This thesis strives to investigate the potential contributing factors and subsequent effects of the MMIW crisis on Native and First Nations communities. Questions posed during the research phase of the project were premised on understanding my participants' prior knowledge of the crisis, how they interpret the epidemic from their unique positionality as tribal members in specific geographical areas and their perception of the effect that the crisis has had on their community.

Keywords: Indigenous, Fetishization, Legislation, MMIW, Colonization, Tribal Government

I. Problem Statement

The National Institute of Justice estimated that 84% of Indigenous women have experienced violence in their lifetime and that 56% of Indigenous women are survivors of sexual assault (Rosay, 2016). This longstanding violence against Indigenous women has culminated into what we now know as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis. The National Indigenous Women's resource center suggests that "this long-standing crisis of MMIW can be attributed to the historical and intergenerational trauma caused by colonization and its ongoing effects in Indigenous communities' ' (2022, p.6). This crisis affects Indigenous women on and off the reservation system. Throughout the United States, "23 hotspots have the highest missing and murdered Indigenous women cases" (Joseph, 2021, p.1). As the proximity to these hotspots increases, the likelihood of an Indigenous woman going missing or becoming a victim of violence, is much greater. These staggering statistics suggest that there is a widespread crisis of violence being disproportionately directed toward this demographic.

The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate some potential causes and effects of the MMIW crisis. Persons who have been affected by the crisis but have not yet shared their stories were invited to discuss their experience. This crisis affects more than simply cisgendered women, but rather a wide array of Indigenous individuals including men, LGBTQIA+ and Two-spirit individuals, as well as youth of all gender identities. For the purpose of this thesis, I have focused on cisgendered Indigenous women. Although awareness of the crisis is growing, there is a lack of representative data regarding the number of Indigenous women who are affected by this crisis.

The research team selected participants based on their individual voice and overall potential to contribute meaningfully to the thesis with their personal stories and/or lived experience. Although I initially sought to find people carrying direct knowledge of the crisis or first-hand experience, it was not necessary. The literature review of the thesis extensively discusses legislative barriers preventing action to address the crisis. This thesis aims to raise awareness and provide a greater sense of empowerment for those who choose to share their stories.

II. Context

The National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center suggests that "the vast majority (96 percent) of American Indian/ Alaska Native female victims of sexual violence experience violence at the hands of a non-Native perpetrator" (2018 p.2). This statistic, formulated by the National Congress of American Indians, illustrates that the MMIW crisis uniquely and disproportionately affects Native communities. However, the overwhelming majority of perpetuators who commit crimes of sexual violence against Indigenous women, are non-Indigenous individuals. This disproportionate and ethnically charged violence has lasting impacts on Indigenous communities where there exists a constant influx of non-Native individuals in reservation communities and other treaty territories. Extractive land projects such as dredging, mining, and oil extraction, are often situated on or near Indigenous-held land. Author Lily Grisafi discusses how "the dangers of the jurisdictional gap are compounded on reservations near extractive industries" (2020, pp. 510-511). When pondering methods by which to address the MMIW crisis, it is important to consider the governing entities that impact the epidemic and can or should play a role in addressing the overall crisis. In the United States, when a Native individual is not enrolled with a federally recognized Tribe, seeking justice becomes significantly more challenging. A tribe becoming federally recognized "entitles the tribe to a variety of services and

benefits, which are provided exclusively to American Indian tribes" (Quinn, 1992, p. 38). Without federal recognition, tribes oftentimes face challenges in obtaining resources to address the epidemic of violence. As such, it is reasonable to conclude that a significant correlation exists between the persistent nature of this crisis and the disconnect that exists between the federal government and tribal justice systems.

Long-standing structures of colonial violence continue to exist and self-perpetuate at the institutional and governmental levels – positioning a wide array of barriers for those seeking to eliminate violence towards Indigenous women. In spite of the negligence with which many governmental agencies have operated under during the early reporting years, grassroots activism has begun to make headway in addressing the crisis. A 2022 article published by CBC News, discusses how the MMIW movement first took off. The movement started on May 5th, 2010, in Canada with the first Red Dress Day which was initially a "project by Metis artist Jamie Black" (2022). This artist chose to draw attention to the epidemic of violence, by hanging red dresses at City Hall in Vancouver British Columbia. The red dresses represented First Nations women who had been victim to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis. After this initial demonstration, a wider awareness for the crisis began to take root, thus motivating activists to foster initiatives for social change. The delivery of the message and the visible representation of grassroots activism exhibited by Jamie Black has assisted in making the movement more recognizable on a global scale. Black's work played an integral role within the movement, driving home the importance of MMIW awareness. As inferred by scholar Samira Saramo, "grassroots activism and commemoration has proven to be a powerful force for naming and unsettling the insecurity felt by Indigenous women and the communities surrounding them" (2016, p. 210). The

absence of grassroots activists' actions, the epidemic of violence perpetrated towards Indigenous women would continue on uncontested.

It is important to note that MMIW activism often includes red handprints over the mouths of Indigenous Women, Two-Spirit, and other fem-presenting individuals, demonstrating that they have been silenced and/or ignored despite being the primary victims of the crisis. The organization Native Hope understands that "a red hand over the mouth has become the symbol of a growing movement… it stands for the oppression and subjugation of Native women who are now rising up" (Native Hope, 2022). Furthermore, Scholars like Scott utilize symbols in ways that help to convey the futility of being unseen and unheard; "the red hand across her represents the silence imposed by death" (2019, p. 7). While this symbol of activism does not solely have to be utilized by fem-presenting Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, and other fem-presenting individuals, those who choose to utilize this symbol and do not fall within these binaries, may face backlash from community organizers for taking away attention from those who have traditionally had to endure the majority of the associated violence with little or no voice to cry out with.

A 2018 study sought to examine the barriers challenging the obtaining of data regarding how law enforcement tracks MMIW cases. This study was conducted by a Tribal epidemiology center study known as the Urban Indian Health Institute. It was conducted throughout seventy-one urban cities in the U.S. and the researchers within this study directly identified 506 MMIW cases. The MMIW crisis has a severe lack of quality data. The study found that the contributing factors (to a lack of representative data), are in large part due to the "underreporting, racial misclassification, poor relationships between law enforcement and American Indian and Alaska Native communities, poor record keeping protocols, institutional racism in the media, and a lack of substantive relationships between journalists and American Indian and Alaska Native

communities" (2018, p. 4). A lack of data can create many new challenges and exacerbate existing tensions that have a compounding effect on the MMIW epidemic. The institute's report explained that they had limited resources and poor data collection practices. For further research applications, it is imperative to have a strong allocation of funds. When considering all aspects of the crisis as we currently see and know them, it is reasonable to conclude that there are many factors that contribute to the lack of data collection and management thereof. The lack of quality data regarding the crisis suggests there is far more work to be done, particularly in the areas of research and tracking.

Many researchers have noted a silencing of Native voices in mainstream media. Social media users who utilize platforms such as twitter and Instagram, are creating a movement of individual accounts leveraged for a singular purpose, as a means for bringing a light to the ongoing silencing of Native voices in mainstream media and are utilizing the platforms to create social change. With a rising social media presence in activist spaces, it allows for information to travel at a much faster rate than it had in prior eras of activism. Diehl (2019) suggests that "social media is one of the tools activists frequently use because it presents new opportunities for organizing and activism" (p.2). Activism for the MMIW crisis gained momentum with a series of successful social media campaigns, while primarily using the hashtags #NoMoreStolenSisters, #MMIWAwarness, and #RedDressDay. The creation and utilization of these hashtags have played an influential role in perpetuating awareness for the crisis. Within MMIW activism, another facet that must not be ignored is the power that student activists have in creating impactful change. Since the beginning of the movement, there has been an influx of student activism trying to raise awareness for MMIW. An excerpt published by the Journal of Indigenous Research discusses how students feel they understand the power and privilege of higher education. Through this understanding, one student

stated we want to "utilize our platforms as students and experiences as tribal community members to bring awareness and help contribute to change" (Issacs and Young, 2019, p.2). Student activism has allowed many social movements to take off. The absence of student activism would simply not drive the force that contemporary activism ensues. Student activism coupled with a utilization of social media has become a powerfully dominant force within contemporary representations of activism such as the MMIW crisis.

Scholars who focus their work on uncovering potential causes of the MMIW crisis, have noticed a connecting pattern occurring between extractive land projects an uptick in acts of sexual violence. Extraction industries bring thousands of workers to rural areas and congregate them in "man camps." An article published by the Unist'ot'en Tribe, also known as the "Big Frog Clan", stated that "man camps are temporary housing facilities for up to thousands of mostly non-Indigenous male workers brought into different Indigenous communities for industrial work" (2017, p.3). These man camps stretch the physical resources as well as social services that are meant for the Indigenous people who reside in a given area. For example, In the Bakken oil region, there has been an influx in the presence of 'man camps', with a simultaneous uptick in the amount of violent crimes perpetuated against Indigenous women. A 2019 study by the U.S. Bureau of Justice found a 23% increase in violent crimes in the Bakken oil region (Martin et. al, 2019). Much of Bakken oil and drilling projects are in North Dakota, with extensions into Canadian provinces such as Manitoba and Saskatchewan. This statistic appears to peel-back the process by which extractive land projects give rise to levels of violence committed toward Indigenous women.

Scholar Skylar Joseph discusses how taking from the land in modern times is not all that dissimilar from previous iterations of the settler states, "resource extraction is a contemporary manifestation of settler colonialism" (2021, pg. 5). With an influx of 'man camps' working on

extractive land projects, there are significant changes often made to the surrounding community and through its collective impact, to its people. These changes can be measured by examining the ways in which local services such as law enforcement are becoming strained with an influx of outsiders in a previously predominantly Native area. With an influx of outsiders, there is also an increase in acts of sexual violence. Joseph further discusses that "communities surrounding fracking zones, have been shown to significantly change the demographic make-up of communities living near fracking zones, and have been connected to increased rates of violence, sexual assault, sexually transmitted diseases, prostitution, sex trafficking, and an increased presence of illicit drugs" (2021 pg. 4). The research suggests this is due in large part to the influx of non-Indigenous residents. Activist Maria Dorsey agrees that when man camps are located near our communities, Indigenous women are "constantly in fear of violence and assault from men" (Dorsey, 2018, p. 5). The associated effects of locating a man camp (and perhaps its associated extractive project) near Indigenous communities is clear, hostilities increase, and Native women are often put at odds with their personal safety. Local law enforcement is oftentimes not equipped for an influx of thousands of temporary residents, nor are these residents often familiar with the cultural traditions of our Native communities.

The National Indigenous Women's resource center theorizes that "this long-standing crisis of MMIW can be attributed to the historical and intergenerational trauma caused by colonization and its ongoing effects in Indigenous communities" (2022, p.6) The ongoing effects and practices of colonization, have included a systematic censorship of Indigenous voices within mainstream media. When censorship of a marginalized demographic occurs, the statistics can be skewed in a way that downplays the importance of addressing the crisis; thus, never allowing for a full understanding to be depicted. Ph.D. Candidate Kristen Gilchrist conducted a study regarding how

MMIW cases are reflected in the media. During this study, she analyzed newspaper articles from the National Archives of Canada to see the differences in the reporting of crimes where white women were victimized versus those of Indigenous women. Gilchrist found that Indigenous "women received three and a half times less coverage; their articles were shorter and less likely to appear on the front page" (2010, p.373). One example Gilchrist referenced and was uncovered by the Regina Leader-Post and stated, "articles discussing the memorials to remember missing/ murdered Aboriginal women were smaller in size than an advertisement offering department store credit" (2010, p.380). If advertisements for department store credit have a notably larger appearance within media platforms such as the newspaper, than news pertaining to the MMIW crisis, this suggests how this demographic is censored through acts of systemic censorship. As displayed through this locution, mainstream media outlets have seemingly disregarded this crisis.

Of the many potential causes of the MMIW crisis, many researchers have suggested that the fetishization of Indigenous women is a large contributing factor. One of the more notable examples of fetishization of this demographic is displayed within the 1995 Disney animation film, *Pocahontas.* Scholars have begun to use the phrase "Pochahontas paradox" to understand the underlying frameworks that have led to the fetishization of Native women. The Pocahontas paradox places Indigenous women into a box in which there are only two social identities someone can portray. This paradox explains how Indigenous women "began to be viewed in a dual-faceted manner: either as a strong, powerful, dangerous woman or as a beautiful, exotic lustful woman" (Portman et. al, 2001, p 190). Both identities were fused together within the film, *Pocahontas.* The duality which presents itself within these identities, causes a false depiction of Indigenous women, thus causing fetishization. When this false depiction is shown time and time again throughout the film industry, news outlets, books, and television, it only strengthens the false-hearted narrative

that Native women are proformative, two dimensional versions of *Pocahontas.* As illustrated, the fetishization of Indigenous women could also be a potential contributing factor to the MMIW crisis.

In the 1978 Supreme Court case, "Oliphant v. Squamish Indian Tribe", tribal courts were stripped of their authority to persecute a Non-Native individual for criminal behavior including but not limited to; murder, rape, assault, and domestic violence. This case was first brought when a Non-Native offender fought the tribal court persecution they were being subjected to, for the sole reason that they were a non-Native individual. They felt they should be tried within federal or state jurisdictions and non-tribal courts. As Hartman infers, this tribe attempted to hold two non-Native individuals accountable for allegedly assaulting an officer, resisting arrest, and recklessly endangering another individual (2021, 56). This ruling included both territorial jurisdiction and personal jurisdiction. In 1990, the Supreme Court extended this to "cases involving This extension left tribes the only choice but to pursue justice for acts committed against them at the federal level. Although this Supreme Court ruling eliminated tribes' jurisdiction to pursue Non-Native perpetrators, in the years following, many levels of courts and law enforcement recognizes the challenges that this ruling placed on Native communities.

Tribal jurisdiction is a sticky issue which causes great confusion, and often leads to a straining of resources on tribal land and issues in law enforcement. The confusing aspects of tribal jurisdictions are something that the United States government has acknowledged with a couple of pivotal acts. In 1994, The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed. As Hartman understands, "VAWA affirmed tribe's sovereign authority to exercise criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians who commit crimes against AI and AN victims on tribal land" (2020. p. 52). Although this act was thought to be beneficial in addressing the MMIW crisis, the jurisdiction remains a

sticky issue with confusing facets. In fact, it has caused so many to be perplexed to the point that the Department of Justice passed Savannah's act on November 26th, 2019. The enactment of Savanna's act was proposed to investigate the MMIW crisis by exchanging information between tribal law enforcement and the U.S. government. The United States Department of Justice has committed to implementing Public Law No. 116-165, Savanna's Act. (DOJ, 2022, p.8). After the enactment of this law, several consultations occurred regarding how to properly implement this measure. Sections 7 (a) and 7 (b) of the Savannah's Act, allow for the Department of Justice to offer grants to tribal governments, states, and local governments. These grants are given specifically to improve the "criminal justice responses to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking grant program" (DOJ, 2022. p. 8). Although tribal jurisdictions have proven to be a sticky issue, there have been steps taken in order to create new ways to address discrepancies in the jurisdiction.

Although much of this literature review suggests there is little momentum towards addressing the crisis, at times there are glimmers of hope. In June of 2022, California Lawmakers announced a new proposed bill called AB1314, which proposed to enact a "Feather Alert". This alert would be utilized via the same platform which the California Highway Patrol currently relies on for alerts such as the Amber Alert (used for child abductions) and the Silver Alert (used for missing senior citizens with extenuating circumstances). California Assemblymember James Ramos, who represents the 40th congressional district, stated during a press conference that the purpose of this bill is to expand "legislation to create a new tool for fighting the silent epidemic of violence against Native American people, and especially our women and girls" (Gaines, 2022, p. 4). This bill could be noted for its resourcefulness because it utilizes pre-existing platforms crafted for the sole purpose of locating individuals which would require minimal amounts of exertion. Not

only is the "Feather Alert" a cumulative step toward ending the crisis but also, its usage will inevitably raise awareness of the epidemic of violence directed towards Indigenous women. All in all, this legislation beholds immense potential to move these efforts forward, addressing the crisis and raising awareness.

There have been wider discussions surrounding the possible methods by which we can address the crisis through legislative means, in particular, a significant step forward was made with the enactment of Savanna's act on November 26th, 2019. This act is aimed to investigate the MMIW issue by exchanging information between tribal law enforcement and the U.S. government. The United States Department of Justice has committed to implementing Public Law No. 116-165, Savanna's Act. (DOJ, 2022, p.8). After the enactment of this law several consultations occurred regarding how to properly implement this measure. Sections 7 (a) and 7 (b) of the acts, allow for the Department of Justice to offer grants to tribal governments, states, and local governments. These grants are given specifically to improve the "criminal justice responses to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking grant program" (DOJ, 2022. p. 8). Part of the reasoning behind why this is such a notable act, is because it beholds notable merits which encompass many facets pertaining to the MMIW crisis.

III. Research Design and Methodology

In this thesis, I sought to investigate some potential causes and effects of the MMIW crisis. While conducting the thesis, I utilized my three guiding research questions which are as follows; *(1) have you heard of the missing and murdered Indigenous women crisis? (2) if you are familiar, in what ways are you familiar/ how did you first learn about the crisis? (3) in what ways has this crisis had an impact on your community*? In order to develop my research questions, I spent a

significant amount of time watching, reading, and listening to gain better insight into the crisis; culminating these efforts into a synopsis that is included as a portion of my literature review. When it was time for the interview portion of the study, I first asked my participants some background questions relating to their tribal affiliation and gender identity. Throughout this thesis I have mirrored the language of my participants and have utilized the terms Native and Indigenous interchangeably. As a settler, and guest in these homelands, I felt it most appropriate to mirror the interchangeable use of these terms in a similar way to that of my participants. For context, although most scholars agree that American Indian is not an appropriate term for Indigenous people of North America, it remains the treaty language for Tribes in what we now call the United States and thus plays a very important role in Nation-to-Nation relations; First Nations is also a term used to describe Indigenous people in what we now call Canada.

I invited participants from my previously established social network to participate in the interview portion of the thesis. I used a modified form of the snowball sampling approach. This approach involves having one initial participant and then gaining additional participants through recommendations. Persons who have been affected by the crisis, and have not yet shared their stories, were invited to share their stories about the experience through a semi-structured interview. The thesis was conducted with the idea that it will add to existing knowledge by highlighting some stories of those who have not been asked about their relationship to the crisis. Within the interviews, no identifiable information such as names and or addresses was collected. The only information that holds potential to be identifiable, is the participants tribal affiliation, gender, and ethnicity. However, within the interview transcriptions, one may note that rather than using a tribal identification, I have decided to utilize geographic proximities.

For this thesis, I conducted four semi-structured interviews, which included a predetermined set of questions with opportunity for follow-up questions based on the participant's response. The reason I chose to use a semi-structured interview technique is because of its ability to "find patterns within cases (individual respondents or events) and themes" (Schensul, J.J. & LeCompte, 2013, 172). I sought out individuals who may be knowledgeable about the crisis either through direct experience or observed impacts to their community. Participation in the research relied on a brief interview in addition to follow-up emails utilized for clarification purposes. The information was collected from the participants only if they are comfortable sharing it. This research was done via zoom interviews and telephone calls. Taking part in the interview portion of the research entailed a researcher (myself) asking solely open-ended questions; throughout the interview process, participants were made to feel safe in declining any question and were encouraged to share only as much as they felt comfortable sharing. The project data has largely been gathered from pre-existing findings and can be found within the literature review portion of the thesis, otherwise referred to as the context. Lastly, throughout this thesis, I sought guidance as a student investigator from my faculty advisors (principal investigators).

IV. Results

The following section summarizes the results from all five interviews. The results will then be analyzed in Section V. of the thesis.

A. Interview One

Participant one is a female-identifying individual with Indigenous heritage on their maternal side. Participant one grew up on ancestral land located in the Pacific Northwest. The term ancestral was used rather than reservation as the Tribe she was a part of was not federally

recognized for some time. The participant became the most familiar with the Tribe as a teenager. Participant one is now actively involved in Tribal events and relates to community organizers who focus their work on spreading awareness pertaining to the MMIW crisis.

After prompting some background questions regarding tribal affiliation and gender, the first question I asked the participant regarding the crisis was "if you have heard of the crisis, in what ways are you familiar?" Participant one had first become familiar with the crisis in a community college setting. Soon after becoming familiar with the crisis, she noticed posters within her tribal offices that included resources for women, such as helplines, for those experiencing acts of gendered violence. The participant shared her personal knowledge regarding the existence of programming within her community which also aims to serve as a taskforce to provide services such as violence prevention services, cultural advocacy, youth development, and emergency services. All of which are connected to the MMIW crisis.

Reinforced in the participants' interview, one of the primary challenges that accompany the MMIW crisis is a lack of outsider [non-Indigenous] awareness. That said, participant one's community has taken significant steps to raise awareness of the issue outside of their Tribal community. For example, participant one shared how a woman from her tribe, named Rosalie Fish made strides to raise awareness for the crisis, by running in a state track meet with a red handprint painted over her mouth. In her 2018 TEDx Youth talk, Fish discussed that to her "highlighting this issue was not a political stance or a personal demonstration, but rather a means of survival". At the state track meet, Fish dedicated her four races to people within her life, who had gone missing or had been murdered. Fish's actions created a great sense of pride for participant one's tribe. As participant one suggested, the publicity that Fish raised with her actions, was greatly influential towards addressing the MMIW crisis.

Additionally, participant one brought up the Savannah Act, which directs the Department of Justice "to revise, and develop law enforcement and justice protocols to address missing or murdered Native Americans" (Murkowski, 2019). The participant shared how she was optimistic about the enactment of this law providing grounds for addressing the crisis. When discussing the potential causes of the crisis, participant one stated that "the MMIW crisis stems from capitalism and settler-colonial ideas." Then the participant discussed an adjacent causing factor, which is the fetishization of Indigenous women. As discussed within the literature portion of the thesis.

Furthermore, the participant shared how she believes the barriers which are preventing the MMIW crisis from being addressed are not as simple as a need for legislation to be enacted; but rather, the approach must be all encompassing of other issues that Indigenous people face. When asked the question regarding barriers to the cause being addressed the participant shared that there are "underlying issues of systemic racism." In regard to whether or not participant one felt that there was enough action being taken to address the crisis, they answered no for many reasons. One identified the reason why there is not enough action being taken to address the crisis is in large part due to the discrepancy that "tribal police cannot prosecute non-native people." Participant one shared her frustration regarding the discrepancies between non-native government agencies and native government agencies. She feels this is in large part due to a communication failure between the two agencies. When a non-Indigenous person commits a crime against an Indigenous person, "the likeness of the crime being addressed is slim to none." Participant one saw the legislative disconnect to be a likely contributor to the crisis not being addressed.

While the participant shared how spreading awareness plays a vital role in addressing the crisis, she also expressed concern how it was "not being addressed in the right places." She discussed how her tribe and other tribes are taking action, but much of the action does not leave

tribal communities. The participant later shared how "this time is a really formative time of seeing if people are listening."

B. Interview Two

Participant two is a female-identifying Indigenous individual who is part of a tribe in the Southwest region of the United States. The participant first heard about the crisis on social media. She said the crisis was discussed within the native community at her university. However, it was a gradual process of learning the many facets of the crisis. Her initial thoughts were about how the issue was not being addressed enough. She stated, "the fact that it is still so prevalent, shows that governing authorities do not care."

In terms of how and if this crisis has had an effect on her tribal community she stated, "I'm pretty separated from my tribe, but on college campuses, there are many efforts to raise awareness for the crisis." After discussing this, participant two discussed how on her college campus there is continual awareness of the MMIW crisis, but she sees a lack of initiative for addressing the crisis. Participant two discussed how there are not really any preventative measures being taken within her community, but community members are actively trying to take part in raising awareness for MMIW. Participant two shared how within her community, "it is not as much of a problem as we are not a super big Indigenous population." She felt that this might be influenced by a few factors including but not limited to, her tribe's size and proximity to non-natives. As she inferred "I think part of the reason nothing is being done in my community is that it seems not to be as relevant." Although the crisis has been gaining more awareness on college campuses, participant two suggested that "the dominant society does not really care about issues that don't affect rich white people." This is why she believes the crisis is not gaining much attention at the national level.

When discussing potential causes of the crisis, participant two shared how she feels "from the start the general American understanding of Indigenous women has been painted in a way to objectify and commodify Indigenous women." When further discussing potential causes of the crisis with participant two, she inferred how Indigenous women are portrayed within films is a contributing factor to the cause of the MMIW crisis. In particular, she stated that the "sexy Indian trope portrayed in the Disney movie Pocahontas" contributed to the fetishization of Indigenous women. Participant two further understood the addressing of the MMIW crisis as an acknowledgment regarding the colonial backdrop with the fetishization of Indigenous women. Additionally, participant two discussed how Americans like to only think of the Pocahontas narrative and not the issues Indigenous people today face because it is "whatever makes it pleasant for Americans."

When I asked a question to participant three about any barriers preventing the crisis from being addressed, she asserted how there is an added layer to the difficulties tribes face with the issue of not being federally recognized. This difficult conundrum gives tribal governments less authority over crimes that are committed on their land. Even when tribes are federally recognized, it is still a challenge to persecute non-Indigenous people. As participant two suggested, "tribal police have authority on their land, but the second it leaves the reservation, they have no power." In terms of what participant two infers should be done in order to take action addressing the MMIW crisis, she stated "there needs to be some sort of partnership and authority because this is an issue that affects Indigenous people on and off tribal land." A better partnership between tribal law enforcement and non-tribal law enforcement could ensure the crisis is addressed.

C. Interview Three

Participant three is a female-identifying Indigenous person from a tribe in the Pacific Northwest. While growing up, participant three was a part of a very multicultural family, with both of her parents being Indigenous. The participant shared how her tribe's reservation is a very rural area within the Pacific Northwest. The reservation was first decimated then the reservation was created. The participant shared how it was only very recently that they started sharing their Indigenous identity for fear of persecution. The participant did not learn about the crisis until only a few years ago, however, she said "the concept of Indigenous women always needing to protect themselves from violence was always there while growing up."

The participant first learned about the crisis in a college class. Within the class, the crisis itself was discussed briefly and there were posters on the wall aiming to raise awareness. However, these concepts within the MMIW movement are not new to her or her tribe. Much of the preventative measures within the community are not necessarily seeking to assist with the crisis. But rather there are many avenues for those experiencing domestic abuse such as a "safe house" which is fully stocked with everything a person may need. In addition, participant three shared how "the concept of protecting women and children is big in my tribe." These actions tie hand in hand with addressing the MMIW crisis.

Participant three shared how within their tribal community, the fetishization that Indigenous women face is something they are well aware of. As defined within the interview, this is a large contributing cause to the crisis. The participant stated, "there is an attitude towards Indigenous women as less than." Due to the fetishization and exotic lens that Indigenous women are viewed through by mainstream media, this gives a lack of power to Indigenous women. Another potential cause of the crisis identified within the third interview was how the many facets of racism contribute to this crisis. Participant three explained how she has found cisgendered

heterosexual white men have this attitude where they feel "crossing lines with an Indigenous person (especially an Indigenous woman), is easy for them." She reiterated further how this is not a new attitude that Indigenous women face. There is a history behind this rhetoric and every day she has to think of ways to protect herself.

When discussing potential barriers affecting the crisis being addressed, participant three discussed how the U.S., unlike Canada, still has not acknowledged colonization. No one will take this crisis or other Indigenous struggles seriously "if they don't even know we exist." In order to do so, there needs to be first and foremost, acknowledgment of the crisis. The acknowledgment part of the crisis being addressed is imperative and poses the first step to fully addressing the crisis. Another barrier that is preventing the issue from being addressed is a lack of resources for Indigenous communities. Participant three shared how their tribe has almost unlimited resources for addressing domestic violence. But this is not true for every tribe and speaks great measures to the tribe's federal recognition. Participant three shared an additional barrier that prevents the MMIW crisis from being addressed, and that is how many Indigenous women who are victims of sexual assault, are also living in poverty. In terms of there being enough action being taken to address the crisis, the participant shared how "we can't even have barely a say in anything, so how can we have a say in this." One of the first things she shared that could assist in addressing the crisis is an acknowledgment of the crisis. However, as stated above, many tribes including participant three's, are fighting for their autonomy and sovereignty. As participant three shared "no one will take us seriously if they don't know we exist." She shared how this crisis is impactful on her community, but it can be hard to bring light to the crisis when they are fighting for many other rights simultaneously.

D. Interview Four

Participant four was a male identifying Indigenous person from a tribe within the Pacific Northwest. His Dad was born in the Indian agency, and this influenced participant four to be actively involved within his tribal community. Participant four stated prior to the interview that he was not too familiar with the crisis, however, he provided a wide array of insight.

The fourth participant had first heard about the crisis when a colleague had mentioned it. He said that "MMIW was a surprise to me at first". But once he had learned about the inaction being taken towards the crisis, it was not as much of a surprise. When discussing the legality of the crisis he stated that "this is how they handle us in the legal system." During our interview, the participant shared how frustrated he was that it took him so long to first learn about the crisis. He expressed how challenging it is to learn more about the crisis and it almost feels hidden. What makes it even more challenging is that the crisis is being ignored. As the participant stated, "they seem to be ignoring it, which means it's all the more important." Participant four discussed that if government entities and law enforcement ignore the crisis, it will continue to persist the crisis at large. Shortly after first learning about the crisis, participant four spoke of the first media coverage he had noticed in regard to MMIW. This media coverage was exhibited in a 2017 film starring Graham Greene titled *Wind River*. As discussed by the communications officer for the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, "Wind River raises a general awareness surrounding the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and touched on the complexities that tribal law enforcement face when seeking justice for victims" (Red Corn, 2017, n.p. 2). Participant four shared how this film made a lasting impact on him and helped him understand the circumstances which create the MMIW crisis.

Within participant four's tribe, they are working to raise awareness of the crisis. One theme which arose when discussing the barriers that keep the crisis from being addressed was an "us

versus them mentality." When referencing this mentality, the individuals representing "us" are Indigenous people and the references to "them" encompass non-Indigenous communities as well as government entities. The participant shared that "the only time they see us is in handcuffs" when referring to law enforcement. As he had inferred, the disconnect between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous authorities is one of the barriers that keep the crisis from being addressed. Within the "us versus them" mentality, participant four inferred how religion plays a role in crafting this mentality, especially in rural areas. He stated, "they think God gave them the land and we are just in the way." This sentiment is ever more prevalent within rural areas where both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people live. As the participant inferred "there is a fight over two identities within the same area." Another sentiment that persists when seeking to address this issue, is the aspect of prejudice. That being said, an additional barrier preventing the MMIW crisis from being addressed within the participant's own community and nationally is the crisis not getting enough media attention.

The next question I asked during the interview was, do you think there is enough action being taken to address the crisis? The participant was quick to say no when asked the question. He inferred that a society that will deny things that are fundamental to our way of life, is a society that will easily ignore this crisis. He later stated, "the blatant willful inaction does not just include murder." When participant four was stating this, he was inferring that the murder of Indigenous women, is not the only crisis that his community is faced with. The participant brought up what is potentially necessary when thinking of what the next step should be in addressing the crisis. He stated, "we're really going to have to come up with an agency that has the funding and is equipped to tackle this crisis." For him, he feels that the crisis should be addressed by a whole new task force.

V. Discussion

In this section, the data from the interviews are assembled and juxtaposed, relating the data back to the guiding research questions: (1) has the participant heard of the MMIW crisis? (2) if they have heard of the crisis, how did they first learn about the crisis? (3) the potential impact of the crisis on the participant's community.

Have you heard of the missing and murdered Indigenous women crisis?

Throughout all of the interviews I conducted, the participants had heard of the MMIW crisis. Two of the participants had identified that the acronym used to describe this crisis was new to them. However, they both inferred that they have always been aware of ensuring that they needed to take steps in order to protect themselves. All four participants in the thesis had some prior knowledge and or firsthand experience pertaining to the crisis.

If you are familiar, in what ways are you familiar/ how did you first learn about the crisis?

My interviews showed that participants first heard about the crisis in a variety of ways. A couple of participants first heard about the crisis in academic settings and within tribal offices. Social media was another way in which participants were able to get an understanding of the crisis. All of the participants who had shared the ideas within the MMIW movement have always been known, but the acronym is news to them. One participant shared how she knew people within her tribe who identified as organizers of the movement.

Nested under this main research question, there were about four other questions that fueled conversation surrounding potential causes and effects of the crisis. Two of these questions were as

follows; *can you identify any potential barriers that prevent the crisis from being addressed? Can you identify any potential causes of the crisis?*

Can you identify any potential barriers that prevent the crisis from being addressed?

When discussing the barriers that prevent the crisis from being addressed, most of the participants had similar answers. All four participants shared how the disconnect between tribal law enforcement and non-tribal law enforcement, allows for MMIW cases to slip through the cracks. This factor was identified as a barrier that prevents the crisis from being addressed. An additional barrier is the lack of awareness of the crisis. When there is not adequate awareness of a crisis, it then creates a snowball outcome that affects other facets of the crisis. The lack of awareness a contribution to the lack of research being conducted. It was also discussed within the interviews that there is simply not enough awareness being directed towards the crisis. All four participants inferred how racism embedded in the colonial legacy of the United States is one of the leading contributions to the crisis. The participants conclusions about the potential barriers which prevent the crisis from being adressed; relates back to Andrea Smith's understanding that colonialism is the root cause of the MMIW crisis.

Participant three suggested a potential barrier to the crisis being addressed is how many Indigenous women are living below the poverty line. As Wahab and Olsen suggest "the research indicates an overlap between risk factors associated with IPV and sexual assault, including oppression, poverty." (2004, p. 362). The participant suggested how she feels the issue of living below the poverty line is an added barrier to the crisis being addressed. Additionally, participant three indicated that so many issues regarding Indigenous rights are not being addressed, so this

crisis not actively being addressed is not a surprise. Furthermore, when basic needs are not being met, it can pose a challenge to raise awareness for larger systemic issues.

The Savannah Act of 2019 was identified as a step which could properly address the crisis. The Savannah Act is aimed at directing the Department of Justice "to revise and develop law enforcement and justice protocols to address missing or murdered Native Americans" (Murkowski, 2019). This act is a significant stride towards the MMIW crisis being addressed in its entirety at the national level. The participants shared hope for the potential this act had to raise awareness and act toward an addressment of the crisis.

Can you identify any potential causes of the crisis?

To the second question, three out of the four participants identified the fetishization of Indigenous women as one of the potential causes of the crisis. As the scholar Bridget Keating conquers, the Pocahontas "narrative fuses excessive or deviant sexuality and Indigeneity thereby marking Indigenous women as violable" (2008, p. 51). This animated character has shaped many narratives pertaining to Indigenous people through media presence. Synthesizing back to the literature portion of the thesis, I will further cite Portman when discussing this paradox as it relates to the potential causes of the crisis identified within the interviews. Portman concurs with Harris 1989 and states the Pocahontas paradox, "has persisted throughout the US. history and the mass media continue to per- perpetuate stereotypes of Native American Indian women" (2001, p. 190). A consistent perpetuation of a deleterious stereotype such as this one, could lead to warped conceptions of Indigenous women. With three out of the four participants inferring how the fetishization of Indigenous women is a contributing factor to the MMIW crisis, it illustrates how much of a role this narrative plays into the greater understanding of what has caused the crisis.

An additional identified cause of the MMIW crisis relates to the impact of mainstream media. The participants within the thesis shared how it seems almost purposeful how little is shown within mainstream media in regards to Indigenous relations. Researchers Pickering et. al have suggested "traditional mainstream media (in particular, newspapers) have been a powerful force in perpetuating biases and stereotypes about Indigenous people" (2018, p. 57). In contrast, a couple of the interviewees shared how social media has played a significant role in raising awareness for the MMIW crisis, as well as creating more genuine media representations pertaining to Indigenous women. Pickering et al. further suggests the vital role that social media plays in raising awareness to Indigenous issues such as the MMIW crisis. As suggested, the "power to change the political landscape of the media has been used as an opportunity by Indigenous peoples and is fast becoming the norm for portraying Indigenous perspectives and issues quickly" (2018, p. 58). The impact of mainstream media can be momentous in shaping social narratives as well as political landscapes. Indigenous people have utilized social media as a way to counteract mainstream media's censorship of Indigenous issues. Mainstream media's censorship of Indigenous issues such as the MMIW crisis, was identified in the interviews as a contributing cause of the crisis. Social media was identified within the interviews as a positive opposition to the mainstream narrative and a platform which can create positive social change.

Author, historian, and scholar Kelly Hernandez has come to understand the "us. versus them mentality" as it relates to white settlers and Indigenous people. She states in her 2017 book "the United States as a settler society, namely a white settler society, premised on the elimination of Native peoples as sovereign communities" (2017, p. 10). Hernandez also included John Gast's 1872 painting *American Progress,* in order to reflect on the idea of manifest destiny (2017, p.11). The Smithsonian American Art Museum describes the content of this painting as a "woman with

long blond hair, dressed in a classical style in a flowing white gown… she is the figure of progress… below her, three trains travel westward… in the left side of the painting, Indians and buffalo are retreating westward from progress, leaving behind buffalo skeletons." The scholar Matthew Baigell reflects on the work of the 6th President of the U.S., John Quincy Adams. The idea of manifest destiny as Adams stated is "the whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be populated by one nation, speaking one language, professing one general system of religion… and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs" (Baigell, 1990 p. 12). This mentality goes back to some of the themes identified within the interviews as well as the literature review portion of the thesis. Most notably the form of othering within the "us vs. them mentality."

Based on my interviews with the participants and the literature review with Native and non-Native scholars, the United States' longstanding and often tumultuous history of colonial violence is a major underpinning of the MMIW crisis. Much in the same way that the United States and Canadian governments have objectified Native communities through acts of forced assimilation and outright acts of colonial violence, scholar Andrea Smith further distills this argument of practice by claiming that in the same way that Native lands have been consistently violated, "the project of colonial sexual violence establishes the ideology that Native bodies are inherently violable" (2005, p.12). Participants one, two and three all discussed at length, the objectification of Native bodies (predominantly Native women) and the unique challenges that Indigenous women face in North America. In addition, participant four further discussed how racism has been braided into these acts of colonial violence against Indigenous peoples and discussed how racism, in his view, played a significant role in the rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women within his community. Furthering the interconnectedness that exists between

inherent racism and sexism that Smith and participant four both discuss regarding the colonial history of the United States, participant two also suggested "from the start, the general American understanding of Indigenous women has been painted in a way to objectify and commodify Indigenous women." If we take the concepts of commodification, violability and bigotry as presented by Smith and the participants, we can begin to understand the wickedness of the MMIW crisis and how all of these factors underpin the framework for why these acts of violence go uncounted, unprosecuted and ignored.

In what ways has this crisis had an impact on your community?

During the interviews, a couple of the participants had shared how the MMIW crisis has affected their community firsthand. Family members have gone missing, community members have been victims of domestic violence, and women have been murdered. Each of the participants shared how there had been some sort of impact within their individual communities. Participants three and four inferred how the crisis itself is not a new phenomenon, but there has always been an impact within the communities. The crisis, gaining more national attention, has influenced many organizations and Tribes to take action. As an example, one individual within participants one's tribe, Rosalie Fish has taken action to address the crisis by dedicating her state track meet races towards the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women within her life. Additionally, participant three's tribe has taken steps to further the awareness of the violence which many Native women face, by creating a "safe house" where Native women can seek needed resources in times of crisis.

VI. Future Research and Application

This thesis provides an investigation into the potential causes and effects of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis. This thesis should continue to encourage other applied studies to be done. With the extreme lack of funding for research pertaining to the MMIW crisis, it makes it challenging to obtain data which encapsulates the entirety of the crisis. That being known, there is still not an accurate representation of the magnitude of this crisis. The next step would be to further investigate the potential causes and effects of the MMIW crisis. Once there is more precise research in regard to what is causing this epidemic of violence, then more precise action can be taken. More precise action can only be taken when there is an aspect of intersectionality which incorporates grassroots activists, tribal government authorities and non-tribal government authorities.

VII. Conclusion

The pervasiveness of the crisis has no bounds; even in the time that I began to synthesize my writings, I have encountered numerous, largely obscure, or under-publicized, articles in the Pacific Northwest detailing new and ongoing stories of missing Indigenous Women, Girls and other relatives. In the past week, details have emerged both from Seattle, USA, and Saskatoon, CA, of two cases, the first, an Indigenous woman discovered on the campus of the University of Washington (2022), and the latter, as discussed by news anchor Farthing, an Indigenous woman and her young son, vanishing from a wooded area on July 22, 2022 and only their truck and belongings have been located after nearly two weeks of active searching by authorities and Tribal members (2022). I began this thesis with a basic familiarity with MMIW and the understanding that I would come into these conversations with interviewees with an open mind and an open heart to better understand how the crisis affected their individual communities and families, however, as we have seen throughout the body of this paper, the wickedness of the crisis and the multifaceted

factors that contribute to its pervasive effect on our Native communities come through much more strongly than I could have anticipated.

I made an effort to investigate the potential contributing factors and subsequent effects of the MMIW crisis on Native and First Nations communities through a series of four interviews with self-identifying Tribal members of varying ages and cultural backgrounds. The interviewees of the thesis played a vital role in the thesis and its results. Their unique positionality as Tribal members in specific geographical areas and their perception of the effect that the crisis has had on their community created a greater understanding of the crisis. My participants' prior knowledge provided a wider insight on the effects that the MMIW crisis has on their communities.

Indigenous women are murdered and go missing at a rate higher than any other demographic. Many scholars and governmental agencies have come to understand that the MMIW crisis is woefully undercounted. Unfortunately, due to a lack of clear and concise figures from governmental agencies, it's challenging to discern how far-reaching this crisis is. Social media has proven to be a powerful agent of awareness for the MMIW crisis. Awareness for the MMIW crisis surfaced after a series of successful social media campaigns with the utilization of the hashtag #MMIW on platforms such as twitter and Instagram. The success of these campaigns led the way for other grassroots activism to take root across First Nations and Native communities in North America, culminating with a more robust level of reporting surrounding the ongoing crisis. Much of the pre-existing literature does not take into account the contemporary issues regarding the jurisdictional gap that exists between Tribal, State, and Federal governmental agencies in the United States and more broadly across North America.

Although many agree that the MMIW crisis is a persistent harrowing problem (in that it has many contributing factors that amplify its effect and contribute to its existence), Native

scholars continue to underline that the underpinning contributing factor is the legacy of colonization and its ongoing effects. Much of the pre-existing literature does not take into account the contemporary issues regarding the jurisdictional gap that exists between Tribal, State, and Federal governmental agencies in the United States and more broadly across North America. This jurisdictional disconnect between tribal authorities and non-tribal authorities exacerbates the reporting, tracking and prosecutions associated with crimes committed against Indigenous women, especially in reservation areas.

Despite a national movement to address the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis, there is still a lack of sufficient data. According to scholars and legislators that have begun to unwind the wickedness of the crisis, a central theme is a lack of national awareness in the United States and Canada. Another constraint is attributed to the crisis not receiving adequate mainstream media attention. Based on my interviews and research for this thesis, I would argue that one of the root causes of the MMIW crisis is the United States' colonial legacy and ongoing practices which continually perpetuate violence against Indigenous communities. An additional cause of the crisis, as identified by my participants, is the active and ongoing fetishization of Indigenous women. Furthermore, participant four reiterated that the "us vs. them" mentality which exists for non-Native citizens of the United States, often leveraged against Tribal communities, is a significant contributing factor to the MMIW crisis.

Although one cannot expect to have a full understanding of or address such a wicked crisis from a series of small-scale projects, grassroots organizing and siloed community efforts, one element remains clear: until we come together with our communities and unite on a more national, or international level, we will not be able to unwind the complex and wicked nature of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women [and Relatives] Crisis. If there is one meaningful thing, I can

leave you with, it is that you can make a meaningful impact or difference in addressing some of the challenges facing our Indigenous communities which are disproportionately affected by this ongoing crisis. If you would like to learn more about contributing, volunteering your time, or writing a letter of support to your local representative, please visit some of the following resources:

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women USA
Portland, Oregon, USA | www.mmiwusa.org | contact@mmiwusa.org

Find your State Representative - United States House of Representatives
Washington DC, USA | www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Washington
Olympia, Washington, USA | www.missingandmurderedindigenouswomenwashington.org

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