

**More than Just Headlines: A Critical Examination of Media Response to Missing and
Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada**

Major Research Paper submitted to the School of International Development and Global Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

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December 18, 2015

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Abstract

The present paper examines the nature and extent of national Canadian news media coverage on the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada. It evaluates the degree to which *Globe and Mail* portrayals and coverage of the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women perpetuates discrimination and promotes stereotyping against Aboriginal women and their communities. This is carried out by employing content analysis and feminist critical discourse analysis in a longitudinal investigation of coverage in 2004, 2009, and 2014. The findings reveal patterns of victim-blaming, dichotomization, racism and essentialism, which are then deconstructed vis-à-vis the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and 'Othering'. This research endeavour then goes further in contextualizing the findings around the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in other studies that have addressed some of the multiple forms of oppression that Aboriginal women have continuously been faced with, specifically *Indian Act* gender discrimination and overrepresentation and disproportionate ill-treatment in the federal penitentiary system. The project concludes that little has changed in the way of discrimination for Aboriginal women, but remains optimistic that a better future is possible.

Keywords: missing and murdered indigenous women, media, *Indian Act*, federal penitentiary system, Aboriginal discrimination, intersectionality, Othering, critical discourse analysis.

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Acknowledgements

My sincerest gratitude to Professor Rebecca Tiessen for bringing both her expert insight and her incredible patience and encouragement to this project. You were a key source of inspiration and your constant challenge to push this study forward made all the difference.

Thank you to Professor Kathryn Trevenen for graciously accepting the role of my examiner and for offering invaluable commentary.

I would also like to thank my wonderful friend and fellow graduate student, Sadaf Kachalia, for cheering me on and enduring my “eureka!” moments.

Thank you to my parents, Karan and Gaitrie Singh, for being supportive and present throughout the various stages of this project and throughout graduate school. Your unwavering love and encouragement came through in all your gestures, big and small.

Finally, thank you to my life partner and best friend, Ryan Persaud. You saw me through the literal blood, sweat and tears that went into completing this Major Research Paper and my Master’s degree. I could not have done this without you.

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“Aboriginal women continue to be the most at risk group in Canada for issues related to violence, and continue to experience complex issues linked to intergenerational impacts of colonization... Ending violence against Aboriginal women and girls lies with both men and women, with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, as well as all levels of government. It ends with recognition, responsibility and cooperation” (NWAC, 2010, p. 39-40)

INTRODUCTION

A dark legacy of systemic discrimination against Aboriginal¹ peoples exists in Canada, but evidence suggests that Aboriginal women have been and continue to be particularly marginalized. The 2006 and 2011 Gender-based Statistical Reports on Women in Canada have consistently found that Aboriginal women have a lower life expectancy compared to non-Aboriginal women, and are significantly less likely to have a secondary school diploma or university degree compared to other female counterparts. Further evidence documents that Aboriginal women suffer unemployment rates twice as high as their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and when they do work, are generally less likely than non-Aboriginal females to be part of the paid work force.

These indicators allude to Canada’s propensity for neglecting Aboriginal women’s issues, which has contributed to the magnitude of the missing and murdered indigenous women (hereafter referred to as MMIW) phenomenon. Police have fallen short of curtailing violence against an estimated 1,017 Aboriginal women murdered between 1980 and 2012 (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). Put into perspective, this homicide rate is approximately 4.5 times higher than that of all other women in Canada (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014).

¹ Under the *Indian Act* ‘Aboriginal’ peoples refer to First Nations (a replacement word for “Indian”), Metis and Inuit. Although the term has garnered criticism for being essentialist, for the purposes of this research project, it will be used unless reference to a specific band or tribe can otherwise be made.

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This project is exploratory but begins from the starting point that Aboriginal women face particular forms of discrimination that produce distinctive outcomes for them as racialized subjects. I examine the nature and extent to which the issue of MMIW was addressed in national media coverage over a ten-year period. Using a combination of quantitative content and critical feminist discourse analyses, I assess *Globe and Mail* articles concerning missing or murdered² indigenous women from 2004, 2009 and 2014 for details on the portrayal of these women and their life experiences. I am guided by the following research question: To what extent do media portrayals and coverage of the issue of MMIW perpetuate discrimination and promote stereotyping against Aboriginal women and their communities? These findings are then deconstructed vis-à-vis the scholarly frameworks of intersectionality and ‘Othering’. The MMIW issue is then contextualized within historic and contemporary debates about two core sites of the discrimination facing aboriginal women in the Canadian context – legal marginalization under the *Indian Act* and criminality in the federal penitentiary system. The goal of situating MMIW in this broader context is to evidence how the former is the latest manifestation of oppression faced by Aboriginal women.

Before exploring the media component of the project, several historical and methodological considerations are summarized. I begin by speaking to my positionality in the research project. Following this, I introduce the other aforementioned elements separately. I take a critical look at the issue of MMIW in the context of the most recent and relevant publications on the matter. I then briefly demonstrate how the issue of MMIW is an extension of other forms of ongoing discrimination against Aboriginal women, notably under the *Indian Act* and in the federal penitentiary system. Finally, I offer a comprehensive overview of the theoretical

² Two notable exceptions to missing and/or murdered women were made in the cases of: Rinelle Harper and Marlene Bird. See page 22 for the justification of their inclusion.

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frameworks of intersectionality theory and ‘Othering’ to inform our understanding of the pervasive discrimination against Aboriginal women.

Positionality

Hall (1990) said it best when he asserted that “[t]here’s no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all” (p. 18). Acknowledging and addressing the multiple positions and overlapping identities I belong to is crucial to understanding why and in what ways this research is important.

As a scholar in the social sciences, I recognize that my research comes with its own set of assumptions and biases and that it is important to be mindful of these subjectivities (Bourke, 2014). I write this paper as a first generation, diasporic woman of colour of Indo-Caribbean descent who migrated to Canada shortly before the age of 11. My cultural identity as a Guyanese woman with Indian roots offers a glimpse into the legacy of European colonialism today. Although I have been privileged as a member of a middle socio-economic class, my complex cultural identity has sometimes led to my own experiences of exclusion and marginalization in the Canadian context.

My interest in writing about discrimination against Aboriginal women was inspired during my tenure as an undergraduate student studying International Development and Political Science. However, I recognized then, and remain aware, that my position as a non-Aboriginal woman limits my understanding and appreciation of the experiences of Aboriginal women in Canada. Throughout this project, I also bear in mind bell hooks’ (1990) conviction that “efforts by dominant groups to represent those who are oppressed can amount to a form of colonization, reinterpreting and thereby erasing the ‘voice’ of the speaking subject” (cited in Gillies &

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Allred, 2002, p. 41). Although I am a woman of colour, I am also a graduate level scholar and researcher associated with an academic institution. Therefore, I must acknowledge that this part of my identity situates me in a position of power and privilege. As such, in this project, I have made a concerted effort to refrain from attempting to speak on behalf of, or for, the affected women and their impacted communities. Instead, I have directed my focus on: media coverage and responses to the MMIW issue, and the wider literature around Aboriginal women's discrimination.

My experience working two consecutive terms for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada also has an impact on my frame of reference for issues related to Aboriginal peoples. I concede that my employment placed me in a position of power since the department retains tremendous control over the affairs of indigenous peoples despite a problematic legacy of endorsing and enforcing assimilation (See Milloy, 1999; Grant, 1996). However, I also gained useful insights due to my short-term service with the government agency and my frequent practice of self-reflection. These allowed me to make critical observations on the department's various positions on Aboriginal issues, including MMIW, and to limit my desensitization to the bureaucratic operations of the system.

"Research is a *process*, not just a product" (England, 1994, cited in Bourke, 2014, p. 1). As such, my positionality as a researcher affects the full trajectory of my project - from the development of ideas to data collection to the findings (Bourke, 2014). Given this reality, it is important that I be as consistent as possible in my approach to the research. To accomplish this, the research project under discussion has undergone several rounds of rigorous review and evaluation.

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Setting the Stage: The latest on the MMIW phenomenon

The issue of MMIW garnered public attention after studies were commissioned by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Amnesty International. The NGO published *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Violence and Discrimination against Indigenous Women in Canada* in 2004 and *No More Stolen Sisters* in 2009. These reports highlighted the continuing role of racism and misogyny in perpetuating violence against Aboriginal women, implicating law enforcement officers in the mishandling of missing persons' cases concerning Aboriginal women. This position was seconded by the Native Women's Association of Canada and Justice for Girls (2012), who articulated that:

the RCMP and other police and criminal justice agents play a specific role in continuing the colonization of Aboriginal girls and women. This is done through failure to respond to violence against Aboriginal girls and women, as well as over-policing, racial profiling, and criminalization (p. 25).

The RCMP investigated the issue and published a 2014 report whose contribution was to “supplement publicly available data with a comprehensive extract of information from law enforcement holdings from across all police jurisdictions in Canada” (p. 6). It was uncovered that there were 1,181 police-reported incidents of Aboriginal female homicides and unresolved missing Aboriginal female investigations between 1980 and 2012, of which at least 225 are considered unresolved. While the report provides insight in the magnitude of the crisis, there are many indicators that the very stereotypes and victim-blaming attitudes earlier alluded to by Amnesty International, the Native Women's Association of Canada and Justice for Girls are embedded in the system. The report openly states that Aboriginal women's disappearances are frequently categorized as non-suspicious if there is not sufficient evidence to suggest otherwise, without a clear explanation of how such a conclusion is drawn. For example, there is no indication whether family or friends of the missing women are consulted beforehand.

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Additionally, this practice draws attention because the report includes a section titled “Understanding certain risk factors of murdered Aboriginal females” (p. 17). These include being less employed, intoxicated, and involved in the sex trade. Without a sophisticated system of categorizing the women who go missing, it raises concerns over whether these “risk factors” are pitted against missing Aboriginal women in the failure to adequately respond to their cases.

In June 2015, the RCMP supplemented their earlier report with a new publication, *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: 2015 Update to the National Operational Overview*. It states that it provides “updated statistics and analysis on new cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women...and addresses...investigative, procedural and preventative strides...taken in meeting the “Next Steps” outlined in the 2014 Overview” (p. 3). The findings noticeably eschew police responsibility for MMIW by implicating indigenous communities as the main perpetrators and chief harbingers of change (p. 15). Furthermore, not only do the main highlights focus on the RCMP’s successes with regards to MMIW, but the magnitude of the issue is significantly downplayed in the choice of statistics. Consider the following four key findings emphasized in the executive summary:

- 1) A reduction in the number of unsolved Aboriginal female homicides and “suspicious” missing person cases from 2014’s 225 to June 2015’s 204, across all police jurisdictions (p. 3).
- 2) “The proportion of Aboriginal female homicide victims within RCMP jurisdictions in 2013 and 2014 is consistent with levels of the past decade” (p.3).
- 3) “Homicides of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women had similar solve rates of 81% and 83% in 2013 and 2014...in RCMP jurisdictions” (p.3).
- 4) “RCMP homicide data from 2013 and 2014 shows a strong nexus to family

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violence...RCMP data reveals that the offender was known to the victim in 100% of the solved homicides of Aboriginal women” (p.3).

The focus on the reduction of cases in the first points implies police force satisfaction with successfully closing cases, but conveniently absent is a reference to how many of these cases saw unsettling conclusions due to the finding of remains, the opening of new homicide investigations, or the death of DNA identified suspects (p. 7). The second and third points attempt to defend the position that the number of MMIW has neither spiked nor have the relevant cases seen lower solve rates than non-Aboriginal women. However, in subsequent small-print footnotes, it is mentioned that these statistics do not account for data from over 300 non-RCMP local police jurisdictions (p.3). Finally, the fourth point is resolute in its finding that all Aboriginal women knew their aggressors, and this is tied to the prevalence of family violence. However, as Kurjata (2015) points out, while a link between family violence and missing and murdered women of all backgrounds cannot be understated, this statistic is skewed in several regards. The “100%” omits a minimum of “six unsolved cases the [RCMP] cited in [2013 and 2014] for which it is impossible to know at this point the relationship of the victim to her killer” (Kurjata, 2015). Secondly, this figure once again does not include or reflect local police precinct data, which would likely distort the finding (Kurjata, 2015). Finally, the police classification for MMIW “knowing” their killer is so broad that it would include “neighbours you might see taking out the trash, a grocery store clerk you might see on a weekly basis and...sex workers who “know” their johns” (Kurjata, 2015). Thus, “100%” is not indicative of each woman having known their killers well.

The above section has attempted to critically assess the most recent and most comprehensive reports published on the MMIW phenomenon at the time of this project. It has

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revealed many of the inconsistencies and gaps that undermine the RCMP's findings and conclusions concerning MMIW. More importantly, however, this section has exposed the sexist and racist attitudes towards Aboriginal women that permeate the justice system. The failure of the justice system to protect indigenous women is a manifestation of the group's gendered marginalization in Canadian society, the latest in a legacy of disproportionate discrimination targeted at them.

MMIW – Extension of other forms of discrimination

Other studies have examined different forms of marginalization suffered by Aboriginal women; these are vital to understanding how the MMIW issue is the latest manifestation of discrimination against this group. The two ongoing issues briefly introduced below were selected because I believe they capture the depth and pervasiveness of the core challenges of discrimination and criminality facing Aboriginal women in the Canadian context. They are sex-based gender discrimination in the *Indian Act* and disproportionate representation and mistreatment in the federal penitentiary system.

Despite amendments to the original 1876 *Indian Act*, a colonial legislative piece that sanctioned the Canadian federal government's extensive control over the lives of Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal women are still disproportionately subordinated over First Nations men in the context of the legality of their indigenous status. Today, Aboriginal descendants whose heritage originates along matrilineal lines are stripped of state-sanctioned Native status a generation earlier than those of a patrilineal line (Palmater, 2011). This has serious ramifications for those affected; being stripped of or denied "Indian" status limits one's ability to fully participate and be active in one's community and culture (Palmater, 2014).

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Aboriginal women are also overrepresented in the federal penitentiary system where they face additional tiers of discrimination and criminalization (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; McGill, 2008; Wesley, 2012). A 2012 study commissioned by Public Safety Canada show that Aboriginal women account for approximately one-third of the entire female inmate populace despite only constituting four percent of the Canadian population. Aboriginal women also represent the fastest growing offender population, with an increase in representation of over ninety percent between 2000 and 2010 (Wesley, 2012). Mounting evidence from numerous sources supports that incarcerated Aboriginal women are more frequently classified with higher security ratings, are more regularly subjected to extended periods of segregation and have reduced access to culturally appropriate support services (Dell, 2001; Monture-Angus, 2002; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2007; McGill, 2008; Wesley, 2012).

The above snapshots allude to the ongoing discrimination faced by Aboriginal women, which has resulted in their widespread labelling as the “most victimized group in Canadian society” (Ontario Native Women's Association, 2011, p. 2). Intersectionality theory and ‘Othering’ offer useful insight into why and how this legacy of discrimination endures. The following section introduces these two theoretical frameworks to inform our subsequent discussion about their applicability to the subject matter.

The Theoretical Backdrop

Intersectionality

This paper's theoretical grounding of intersectionality is rooted in Black women's studies and critical race theory, where it is believed some of the key contributions to the framework originated (Jordan-Zachery, 2012; Potter, 2013). Informed by the literature of earlier Black feminists and thinkers examining the interactions of race and gender in other contexts, Crenshaw

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coined the term intersectionality in 1989, referring specifically to the “intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). A few years later, Crenshaw (1991) added to her theoretical descriptions of intersectionality by introducing categories of intersectionality, namely: structural, political, and representational. Together, Potter (2013) and Jordan-Zachery (2012) provide a comprehensive definition of structural intersectionality as how the operation of societal systems and institutions place women of colour at a disadvantage in terms of their social needs and legal status. Kuokkanen (2015) explains that political intersectionality reflects how women of colour can be situated in multiple subordinated groups with different and conflicting political goals. Finally, Crenshaw (1991) and Jordan-Zachery (2012) define representational intersectionality as the tendency for women of colour to be culturally represented and depicted without emphasis on their intersecting interests - through text, language, images, and media.

Crenshaw (1991) acknowledges the limitation of her own work by stating that race and gender are only some of the factors shaping the experiences of Black women and other women of colour. She articulates that the concept of intersectionality “can and should be expanded by factoring in issues” such as class and sexuality (p. 1245, footnote). Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays & Tomlinson (2013) describe intersectionality as a work in progress that must always strive to move to unexplored places. The potential of intersectionality is revealed in scholars’ application to such topics as disability (see Artiles, 2013) and Caribbean historical relations (see Robinson, 2013). Keeping in line with the themes and focuses in this paper, intersectionality has also been applied in the context of indigenous peoples. Cherokee activist and feminist Andrea Smith (2005) incorporated intersectionality in her work on sexual violence and state violence against

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native women. Kuokkanen (2015) also explored gendered violence against indigenous women, but did so by drawing on Crenshaw's political intersectionality to facilitate a comparative study of Aboriginal women in Canada with Sa'mi women in Scandinavia.

Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays & Tomlinson's (2013) statement that intersectionality "is a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool" (p. 303) is reflective of some of the more critical and technical publications that have emerged on intersectionality. McCall's (2005) *The Complexity of Intersectionality* discusses the methodology of the framework – in other words, how to study it - citing three approaches: anticategorical complexity, intracategorical complexity, and intercategory complexity. Purdis-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) introduced intersectional invisibility as an even more critical subset of this framework, a concept to describe the "general failure to fully recognize people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups" (p. 381). Jordan-Zachery (2012) applies intersectional invisibility in her work on Black lesbians. She employs it as a model to encourage a shift away from a unidimensional use of intersectionality that privileges the "proper" marginalized woman over others that do not fit the norm (p. 406).

The examined academic scholarship on intersectionality indicates that the framework is complex but flexible in its applicability. Relating intersectionality to what has thus far been covered this research project and will continue to be addressed is made easier by bearing in mind Vidal's (2014) definition of the term:

[It is] [t]he view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity."

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'Othering'

The intersecting and interlocking nature of race, gender, class, and other dimensions can compound vulnerabilities of a group, making them especially susceptible to criminalization by broader society (Gilchrist, 2010). Perceiving marginalized and/or racialized groups as criminal or deviant relies on the notion of 'Othering' (Jiwani, 2001). Edward Said (1978) popularized the term in his influential work *Orientalism*, contending that European empires established and justified their dominion and dominance over periphery countries by relying on alleged differences between the former and latter. Jones et al. (2015) offers further clarity in their explanation that these differences framed colonized groups' as homogeneous and weak. Additionally, JanMohamed (1985) draws attention to what he considers Manichean³ opposition in the imperial practice of dichotomizing the colonizer and colonized. By pinning the colonizer "Self" as good and the colonized "Other" as evil, imperialists were able to further distance themselves from their "conquered". In the case of Aboriginal women, this practice of dehumanizing and demonizing the "Other" manifested in their characterization as the "licentious and bloodthirsty...squaw" (Razack, 2002, p. 130).

This "us" versus "them" mentality has persisted, becoming a fixture in the criminalization of racialized groups today. Razack (2002) argues that the aforementioned nineteenth-century perception of Aboriginal women as sexual deviants continues to prevail today. She quotes a discussion by Commissioners of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry in the 1971 murder case of Aboriginal student Helen Betty Osborne, in which they concluded that Osborne's attackers "operat[ed] on the assumption that Aboriginal women were promiscuous and open to enticement

³ Manicheanism emerged from a dualistic concept in theology, whereby the world was divided into light/good, and darkness/evil. It has since been adopted by postcolonial scholars to describe the binary structure commonly referenced in colonial literature of the 'good' colonizer and the 'evil' colonized (Ahmed & Khan, 2014)

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through alcohol or violence... [and were] objects with no human value beyond...sexual gratification” (p. 135). Razack (2002) further contends that these assumptions are also operative in police responses to disappearances of Aboriginal women. Missing Aboriginal women are pegged as “transient” and “involved in prostitution”, thereby endorsing police inaction. In fact, these assumptions are so embedded that police sergeants admit that “police don’t look for transient adults because [they] often go missing” (Razack, 2002, p. 136).

Razack’s (2002) evidence of present-day ‘Othering’ of Aboriginal women correlates with England’s (2004) conclusions about representations of Aboriginal women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. She (2004) argues that their depictions oscillate between hypervisibility as deviant bodies and invisibility as victims of violence. In the case of the former, and as illustrated in Osborne’s case, Aboriginal women’s race, gender and class become visible signifiers of their deviance. Ironically, in the latter case of invisibility, despite evidence that ‘Othering’ is a colonial product, inaction and neglect by police and other state authorities is accomplished by the “erasure of [Aboriginal women’s] histories as colonized others” (England, 2004, cited in Jiwani & Young, 2006, p. 899). Dell (2001) corroborates this with her experience as an activist involved with the Canadian criminal justice system, citing that Aboriginal women are further criminalized within the Canadian criminal justice system because of a failure to acknowledge the influential relationship between race, gender and class.

The concepts of invisibility and hypervisibility find analogous support in Chauhan & Foster’s (2014) research on ‘Othering’ in the context of representations of poverty in British newspapers. They find that media representations frame poverty as a problem of the “Other”, rather than of general society, concluding that ‘Othering’ occurs through: representational absence, representations of difference, and representations of threats. The first two concepts ae

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especially relevant to our discussion. ‘Othering’ poverty through representational absence refers to media’s predisposition to consider poverty in an isolated manner, devoid from context and other closely related issues as unemployment and homelessness. ‘Othering’ poverty through representations of difference refers to media’s tendency to situate poverty as a foreign affliction perpetuated by corrupt and “evil” institutions and leaders. These descriptions of ‘Othering’ through representational absence and through representations of difference bear notable resemblance to England’s (2004) conceptions of invisibility and hypervisibility, respectively.

Recapping: Theoretical Backdrop

To review, this section has attempted to unpack the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality theory and ‘Othering’ to inform our understanding of the pervasive discrimination against Aboriginal women. Intersectionality is a complex but adaptable concept that emphasizes the linkages and layered effects race, gender, class and other dimensions have on marginalized groups. ‘Othering’ is the process by which these characteristics can be used to ostracize and discriminate these very groups. We have traced some examples contextualizing these frameworks in the prejudiced treatment of Aboriginal women, and further references will be made throughout the project.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The Value of a Media Analysis

There was a two-fold justification for choosing a media analysis in this research project. Firstly, a literature review of media analyses on MMIW revealed that although some scholarly investigation has been undertaken, a need for additional study remains. Secondly, media analyses

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are important for understanding how issues are framed, disseminated and received by the public. Further elaboration on these reasonings are provided below.

In Jiwani and Young's (2006) *Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse*, they analyze *Vancouver Sun* articles from 2001 to 2006 on missing and murdered women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. They found that stereotypes about "women, Aboriginality, and sex-trade work" continued to situate these women's lives on the sidelines, even after they had died (p. 895). Jiwani (2009) conducted a similar vein of investigating in her analysis of *Globe and Mail* articles from 2000 to 2007, determining that the media's representation of Aboriginal women secured them as "abject victims of poverty" (p.6) or "drug-addicted prostitutes and inept mothers" (p. 8). In 2010, Gilchrist took a comparative approach to the study of media depictions of Aboriginal women, exploring the differences in local reporting of three missing white women compared to three missing Aboriginal women, all of whom fit the mold of the "good"⁴ woman. She concluded that the news stories about the white women were better situated in the papers, saw six times more coverage, and often offered more intimate details about the women. Each of the scholarly pieces contribute uniquely to the topic of discrimination against Aboriginal women in the media, and my research project intends to build on what exists. It provides an update on the *Globe and Mail* articles Jiwani assessed in her 2009 work *Symbolic and Discursive Violence in Media Representations of Aboriginal Missing and Murdered Women*. Moreover, it situates these media findings in the broader culture of discrimination and criminality to which Aboriginal women are branded.

⁴ Gilchrist (2010) asserts that she attempted to eliminate bias by matching both groups of women to each other. All the young women she selected "attended school or were working and maintained close connections with friends and family...had no... known connections with the sex industry nor were they believed by their families to be runaways" (p. 378).

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Media depictions are important because they provide insight into the nature of what is disseminated to the broader Canadian society with regards to particular issues. They are especially important in the context of Aboriginal issues because there is evidence that many Canadians are ill-informed about the realities and histories of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Native Women's Association of Canada, Justice for Girls, 2012). As such, media portrayals can play an important role in shaping how an impressionable public views Aboriginal peoples, including women. Carll (2005) expressed it best when she said:

The media not only reflect what is occurring in society but also reinforce stereotypes of how women are viewed, as both victims and perpetrators of violence. Therefore, how the news media cover this social problem is vitally important, as they play a major role in shaping public opinion and public policy (p. 144).

Research Design and Methods

In order to complete the media inspection of MMIW, two exercises were deemed most fitting: a quantitative content analysis (CA) and a feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA). A content analysis is a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Duffy, 2010, p. 128). Duffy (2010) indicates that content analysis is a frequently used method to discern bias in news reporting and in newspaper content. A quantitative approach to content analysis typically begins by coding print and visual texts into categories and then following up with a count of frequency and occurrence of each (Gilchrist, 2010).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), on the other hand, can be described as a form of interpretive content analysis. It is a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach that "investigate[s] critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, and legitimized by language use" (Huckin et al., 2012, p. 108). It can be a powerful tool for understanding subtle meanings and implications of text, focusing on both content and context (Gilchrist, 2010). Huckin et al. (2012)

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has affirmed that with its explicit attention to both specific text and broader context, critical discourse analysis offers “insightful critiques” into how important current events are represented in news coverage (p. 115). Feminist CDA derives from CDA, but recognizes and addresses the gendered nature of linguistics. This approach aims at critiquing text that sustain a patriarchal social order and system of power and dominance (Lazar, 2007).

For this research project, I applied Carvalho’s (2000) approach to critical discourse analysis, outlined in her work *Discourse Analysis and Media Texts: a Critical Reading of Analytical Tools*. Her paper was modelled on principles by van Dijk (1980, 1985, 1988a, 1988b) and Fairclough (1995a, 1995b), two of the leading scholars in discourse studies, both of whom have promoted discourse analyses of the media. Carvalho’s contribution was selected on the basis that she builds on the work of both aforementioned scholars and also offers a clear step-by-step approach to applying CDA to media texts. Additionally, for the feminist perspective to CDA, I considered Lazar’s (2007) paper *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis*.

Carvalho’s (2000) approach to the examination of written media texts is two-fold. Part 1, textual analysis, takes a unit approach, focusing on how to address each individual text. Part 2, contextual analysis, looks beyond each unit to the wider context, considering the “overall coverage of an event or issue in one [media outlet]” (p. 27). The following section outlines the relevant descriptors from Carvalho’s (2000) work that were applied in this media analysis:

Textual analysis

- 1. Surface descriptors:** These refer to ‘surface’ features of the text, e.g. publication date, author, location of article in newspaper, size of article. On their own, these elements can reveal a lot about the significance of the topic to the newspaper. (p. 21)

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2. **Objects of discourse:** These are the equivalent of topics or themes. Related to this are sub-events or issues associated with the broader object(s). Objects are important because they help to deconstruct the role of discourses. (p. 22)
3. **Actors:** This denotes the “individuals or institutions” quoted or referred to in the text, how they are represented, and what their influence is on the overall meaning of the text. Particular attention should be given to ‘framing power’, which is the capacity of an actor to have his/her perspective dominate in the media text. This is an important point of social influence. Equally worth noting are the actors whose voices are absent from the text. (pp. 22-23)
4. **Language and rhetoric:** This involves looking at elements such as vocabulary, metaphors and figures of style, all of which work to represent a particular reality. (p. 23)
5. **Framing:** This is a discursive strategy whereby the author “organize[s] discourses according to a certain point of view or perspective.” It usually involves selection, a discretionary exercise in determining which facts, opinions and value judgements get included and excluded; and composition, which refers to how the aforementioned elements are arranged to imply a specific meaning. (pp. 23-24)
6. **Ideological standpoints:** Relating ideology to moral judgement and values, this involves identifying “fundamental political and normative” positioning which would have an overarching bearing on the nature of the text. (p. 26)

Contextual analysis

1. **Historical-diachronic analysis:** This involves looking at changes in the representation of an issue over time. It assesses how earlier constructions of the topic impacted on subsequent texts. The historical element demands being aware of the course of history and how it may have affected the discourse around the topic in question. This entails recognizing the significance of relevant events etc. (p. 27-28).

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The above descriptors were supplemented by drawing on Lazar's (2007) model of feminist critical discourse analysis. Particular attention was given to:

1. Gendered and hegemonic ideologies and assumptions so deeply embedded in discourse that they appear as "commonsensical and natural" (p. 147).
2. The ways in which women and their experiences of gender oppression are essentialized rather than recognized as being "neither materially experienced nor discursively enacted in the same way for women everywhere" (p. 149).

The Present Study

The issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women became popularized in mainstream media after the publication of Amnesty International's first report in 2004 thus it was surmised that 2004 was an appropriate point in time to begin the media investigation. In order to execute a historical-diachronic analysis (see previous page) a longitudinal focus was applied. A ten-year window permits a comprehensive analysis of content, therefore the research project reviewed media coverage up to the end of 2014. However, given the project's required length and expected timeframe for analysis and completion, a continuous investigation from 2004 to 2014 was not feasible. Careful consideration was taken before settling on 2009 as a fitting segue between 2004 and 2014. The year 2009 not only marked the halfway point between the other two years under scrutiny, but was also the year Amnesty International published its second report on the issue of MMIW, *No More Stolen Sisters*. In regards to the choosing of a media outlet, *The Globe and Mail* was selected for the analysis because it is one of Canada's largest two national newspapers of record, with the highest weekly readership across the country (Krashinsky, 2012).

Using the database *Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies*, I completed an advance search with the following search criteria: ((aboriginal OR native OR indigenous) NEAR/10 (woman OR women OR female OR girls)) AND (missing OR murdered OR violence) AND Exact ("The

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Globe and Mail”). The ‘NEAR/10’ specified the parameters of the search by denoting that any combination of the words in the adjacent double brackets had to be within a 10-word range of each other. For instance, if the terms ‘aboriginal’ and ‘women’ were within 10 words of each other in a newspaper article and the other bracketed search criteria was met, the database would flag that piece in the search results. The selected parameters were chosen on the basis of accuracy; a 10-word radius was expected to capture the articles most relevant to the search criteria. The search was then applied separately to the years in question: 2004, 2009, and 2014. The search yielded 20 results for 2004, 21 results for 2009, and 162 results in 2014. After review, categorization and sorting, the total number of articles considered in the analysis was 104. The following steps preceded this conclusion:

1. All articles were inputted into an Excel spreadsheet that included author, title, abstract, full text, date of publication and start page in newspaper. These items were recorded in separate tabs of the sheet for each year.
2. Each article was read and reviewed. Individual notes were taken, highlighting the article’s themes, the names of any MMIW mentioned, whether the article was a news story or an opinion-editorial, along with any noteworthy tone, word or language choices. Finally, each article was assigned a number from 1 to 3, based on the following criteria:
 - a. 1 (high relevance) – these were articles that reported on the specific case of a MMIW. Exceptions were made for brutally assaulted native females, specifically if it was stated that if they had not been otherwise found, they would have ultimately become new cases of MMIW. Types of articles included those: related to a police investigation, or family or political response; that took a definitive for or against stance on the call for a public inquiry into MMIW and; that reported on

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action being taken specifically in response to MMIW (lobbying, vigils, missing-persons police strategy etc.).

- b. 2 (some relevance) – these were articles that had some relevance to MMIW, but thematically focussed on another topic or a broader issue, such as the child-welfare system, violence against all women, a missing-persons DNA index, and the plight of indigenous peoples in Canada as a whole.
 - c. 3 (little or no relevance) – these were articles that only highlighted the issue of MMIW in a passing reference or off-handed remark or failed to reference the subject at all.
3. The Excel spreadsheet was then updated to include each article’s ranking, themes, the names of any MMIW referenced, and a note of the stance taken on a public inquiry, if applicable.
 4. The articles ranked 1 and 2 were then put through another round of reviews to verify that they were correctly ranked and sorted. Articles earmarked as 1 but comprising fewer than 110 words were removed on the basis that their short length would hinder an in-depth analysis.

Once these processes were complete, the findings were revealed and explained using the earlier elaborated theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and ‘Othering’, after which they were contextualized within historic and contemporary debates about two core features of the challenges facing aboriginal women in the Canadian context – discrimination and criminality.

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Limitations

The present study has its limitations, most notably that it considers a singular interpretation of the discourses around the issue of MMIW. By this logic, another analyst with his or her unique positionality and approach to research could review the data and reach different conclusions than the ones highlighted in this paper. One of the most vocal critics of CDA, linguist Henry Widdowson (2004), has raised this as a concern, articulating that “[i]f meanings are understood as properties of the interaction between words and contexts, interpretation is an imprecise process” (cited in Tenorio, 2011, p. 195). However, this should not be immediately construed as a weakness. Lazar (2007) has pointed out that “critical praxis-oriented research” does not claim to be “neutral” - a term she and other feminist scholars have criticized for failing to recognize that all knowledge has a social, historical and value-laden basis - but in fact adopts biases as part of its position (p. 146). Billig (2003) has explained that such biases in CDA are important and necessary for challenging the current social order, in which existing power relations are undisputed due to the dominance of non-critical approaches in academia (cited in Tenorio, 2011).

An additional and related limitation is that this research study considers a relatively small data set – that of *Globe and Mail* articles from select years. As a result, the project articulates only a snapshot of the discourse and rhetoric surrounding the MMIW crisis. To fully appreciate the complexity of the issue, consideration must also be given to how the topic is examined in other contexts and settings, namely: other news media outlets, government documents and policy papers; and non-governmental publications.

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Findings

Longitudinal observations

From 2004 to 2014, the number of articles relevant to the issue of MMIW increased eleven-fold. Further to this, the number of women mentioned or featured also saw a significant increase (see Appendix 1). Articles in 2004 and 2009 concentrated on women, mostly Aboriginal, who were suspected to have gone missing or been murdered along British Columbia's Highway 16, now commonly referred to as the Highway of Tears (Carrier Sekani Family Services, n.d). Articles in 2014 were dominated by coverage of two young women: Tina Fontaine, one of the MMIW, and Rinelle Harper, a brutalized Aboriginal victim of violence. The extent of their coverage is quantified in Appendix 1. Noteworthy attention was also given to the 2014 RCMP report (refer to pages 7-8 for details on this publication), whose findings fuelled the print media debate in 2014 over a federal inquiry into MMIW.

Themes

There were four discernable practices and categories frequently observed in the newspaper articles' portrayals and coverage of the MMIW crisis that capture the extent of discrimination and stereotyping against Aboriginal women and their communities. They included: alternating the discourse between placing blame on female victims for violence perpetuated against them and situating them as agentless victims; a proclivity towards "Othering" and framing an "us" versus "them" narrative; numerous racial markers and underpinnings; and a tendency to essentialize representations and experiences of MMIW. Each of these practices are explained below, cited and supported by examples.

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The “Victim” Oxymoron

A particular news rhetoric emerged in the vocabulary. In the context of the MMIW issue, indigenous women were frequently associated with such words and phrases as: *poverty, addiction, prostitution, runaway, hitchhiking, child welfare system, and high risk*. However, these descriptors served different purposes depending on the context. In some instances, these characterizations were used to portray Aboriginal women as making poor life choices that ultimately led to their disappearance or death. One such example was in a 2009 article, fragments of which are highlighted below:

Latest deaths of native women may be linked to crack-for-sex case

...The deaths of the two latest people added to Manitoba's tally of missing and murdered aboriginal women may be connected to a crack-for-sex prosecution in Winnipeg three years ago. Cherisse Houle, 17, was found dead in a creek bed outside Winnipeg July 2; her friend, 18-year-old Hillary Angel Wilson, was found dead last week, on the outskirts of the city. RCMP investigations into both cases are continuing. The death of Ms. Wilson has been classified as a homicide; police are waiting for toxicology results after Ms. Houle's death, currently classified as suspicious. ...In the high-profile crack-for-sex investigation, five men pleaded guilty to coercing more than 20 girls as young as 11 into exchanging sex for drugs. The five Vietnamese men, two of whom were later deported, were highly placed in the city's drug trade, according to someone who worked on the case at the time. **RCMP wouldn't comment on the case or possible links to the women's deaths.** "Clearly we're looking at all aspects of their background, and like any homicide investigation we'll be looking at all links of the cases," said RCMP media liaison Sergeant Line Karpish...

(Paperny, August 27, revised August 28, 2009)

The bolded words indicate that at the time the article was published, no actual evidence existed corroborating the news story that that Cherisse Houle and Hillary Wilson were implicated in an earlier crack-for-sex case. However, the insinuation in the headline is significant because “for the modern newspaper reader, reading the headline of a news item replaces the reading of the whole story” (Nir, 1993, cited in Dor, 2003, p. 718). Thus, a reader may look at the headline and trust that it is accurate. In this particular article, the headline conveys the notion that these “native women[’s]” involvement in exchanging sex for drugs was what ultimately led to their death. In this representation, they become hypervisible as deviant bodies (England, 2004). Strega et al.

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(2014) asserts this as a “subtle responsabilization technique” (p. 17) The aggressor and existing structural inequalities are rendered invisible and therefore void of responsibility. Instead, the victim is placed at fault by way of individualizing the consequences of colonization and racism (Strega, 2014). Another important detail is that the headline opts for framing the two females, ages 17 and 18, as women, rather than using other appropriate words like “teens”, “females”, or “young women”. This is important in the overall context of how the MMIW issue is framed differently for Aboriginal women and Aboriginal girls or young women.

Female Aboriginal teenagers and students were allotted significantly more coverage than Aboriginal women who did not fit into these categories. Across the three years considered, the most frequent references were made to Tina Fontaine, Rinelle Harper and Loretta Saunders in 2014 (see Appendix 1, year 2014). Tina was a 15-year-old Aboriginal student; Rinelle is a 16-year-old student who was brutalized and left barely clinging to life; and Loretta, although older at 26 years old, was a university student. Comparing coverage of Rinelle Harper’s story with Marlene Bird’s, another Aboriginal female that was violently assaulted and left to die by her perpetrator, contributes to understanding the differences in the extent of news coverage of younger, educated Aboriginal females compared to other Aboriginal women. In total, 11 articles made a reference to Rinelle Harper in some capacity, while there were only 2 equivalent articles referencing Marlene Bird. The stories used the following descriptors for Rinelle Harper:

“shy teenager in pursuit of a better education...a daddy’s girl with a shy smile and strong work ethic...[belonging to a] family reli[ant] on their spirituality... faith...[and] prayer”(Carlson & Mahoney, November 12, 2014; Carlson, November 13, 2014); *“fighter”, “hero”* (Carlson, November 14, 2014); *“has a mother and father who love her”* (*Globe and Mail*, November 14, 2014); *soft-spoken middle child...with a family that loves her”* (Carlson, November 21, 2014); *“soft-spoken survivor...[and]...boarding school student”* (Galloway, December 10, 2014).

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These characterizations of a family-oriented, faith-driven, innocent and ambitious young Aboriginal girl contrast starkly with the scant descriptors of Marlene Bird:

“living on the streets...after years at residential schools...acknowledged her alcoholism but could not control it” (Galloway, July 1, 2014).

Referring back to the beginning of this section of the paper where I mentioned that the highlighted descriptors served different purposes, consider how Marlene Bird is represented. Rather than being chastised for making poor life choices, she is situated as an “abject victim of poverty” (Jiwani, 2009, p. 6), a hopeless and agentless sufferer of her life circumstances, warranting limited focus and coverage. This framing situates her as an invisible victim of violence (England, 2004). Therefore, on the one hand, some women are seen as being responsible for violence perpetrated against them, while on the hand, other women are seen as being simply resigned to an unfortunate life. When both these representations are stacked against how younger, Aboriginal female students are characterized, it becomes clear that there is an implicit notion of what constitutes a “model” victim. This is reminiscent of Jordan-Zachery’s (2012) assertion about intersectionality (see page 13) - the “proper” marginalized woman is privileged over others that do not fit the norm (p. 406). As the findings have revealed, younger Aboriginal women in pursuit of an education are perceived as being the “real victims” while Aboriginal women linked to England’s (2004) concepts of hypervisibility (as deviant bodies) and invisibility (as victims of violence) are not.

“Us” versus “them”

Besides the “victim” narrative, another common practice evident in the newspaper articles was the framing of Aboriginal women and their communities as “Others”. The following examples will illustrate how this was accomplished.

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After the July 5, 2004 disappearance of Tamra Keepness, a 5-year-old Aboriginal girl in Regina, several articles appeared covering her story. One such article's headline read: "*Missing Regina girl puts focus on city's two racial solitudes*" (Hume, July 19, 2004). The story goes on to dichotomize the "hard-working, decent Prairie city [of Regina] ...with its broad boulevards, fine historical buildings and lovely, serpentine parks" with "troubled...predominantly aboriginal, exhaustingly poor inner-city neighbourhoods [like] Moccasin Flats...where front yards are beaten dirt, windows are cracked and houses are abandoned". These descriptions immediately convey an image of the Aboriginal population in Regina as separate, if not ostracized, and certainly less prosperous than the rest of the city. Moreover, by ascribing "hard-working" and "decent" so exclusively, the undertone invites a binary comparison, whereby Aboriginal communities fit the historical characterization as "licentious" and "criminal", perhaps involved in illicit activity. Many of the interviewee quotes selected for the article perpetuate this "Othering" and criminalization of the racialized group. These are highlighted below:

<p>Chantelle, a woman in her mid-30s: [E]veryone sees natives as drunks and bums...It's always been that way... We do our own thing and they do theirs."</p> <p>Elizabeth Lutz, a 75-year-old retired government worker who has lived in Regina for 44 years: "Natives think we owe them."</p> <p>Natalia Poitras, 19, was on her way to register at a business college: "Natives hold a grudge. It's like everybody owes them. "There's some sort of barrier between us."</p> <p>Wayne, a Regina cab driver, [was] [a]sked if he knows of a place called Moccasin Flats: "It is a dangerous neighbourhood at night...and some people call it "the hood." I wouldn't drive at night without a gun."</p>

Further evidence that this "us" versus "them" mentality has persisted in becoming a fixture in the criminalization of Aboriginal peoples became apparent when considering the number of articles that made a concerted effort to distance police from community. While a deference to authority in media reporting is a common approach for substantiating a news story, many news articles were written from a police perspective, depicting their challenges in working with Aboriginal communities. For example, in the news story with headline: "*Police works to build*

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trust with First Nations”, one brief quote from a relative of MMIW Tina Fontaine is the only community reference in an article that otherwise overlooks Aboriginal peoples as actors in telling a story of Aboriginal distrust of police. The other interviewees were all police personnel: Winnipeg Police Service's (WPS) Aboriginal liaison officer; Vancouver Police Department inspector; and Saskatoon Police Service's general investigations' staff sergeant. The emotional profiling of Edith Turner, a member of the Misipawistik Cree Nation and the WPS Aboriginal liaison officer, is particularly telling of how entrenched “Othering” is in discourse. Consider the following excerpt:

Patrol Sergeant Edith Turner spoke tearfully at a vigil honouring the teen...
"I feel like I have a responsibility to First Nations women. ... I felt that I needed to be there."
[She] **credits the WPS with preventing her from becoming one of Canada's missing or murdered**. At 18 years old, she left Misipawistik Cree Nation for downtown Winnipeg... [and]... soon found herself in a relationship with a man she described as a "sexual predator."
By age 22, Patrol Sgt. Turner **put her troubled years behind her**, donning a police uniform.
"That **saved my life**," she said. The **child of a residential school survivor, she grew up amid poverty, alcoholism and domestic violence**.

Turner's life is framed as a rare success story; she is revered as a native person who ‘transcended her Aboriginal heritage’ (Jiwani, 2009, p. 7). Unlike the agentless and deviant female Aboriginal victims earlier described, she overcame her “otherness” to become an “acceptable” member of society.

Even in touching news stories where the theme was one of comradeship and Canadians coming together, the “us” versus “them” binary endured in the form of benevolence. For example, in “*Canadians give Fontaine family a collective holiday hug*” (Carlson, December 6, 2014), by omitting “fellow” before Canadians in the headline, there is a subtle implication that Tina Fontaine's Aboriginal family is not Canadian, and therefore an “Other”. Throughout the article, not a single reference to “Canadians” was preceded for words such as “fellow” or “other”, which would be an indication of community. The “*what are ‘we’ doing to ‘help’ Aboriginal women?*” narrative came up in other articles as well. In “*Tory minister to ‘step up,*

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join round table”, then Minister of the Status of Women portfolio, Kellie Leitch, had her medical background as a doctor cited many times by the author in an effort to convey Leitch’s empathy with the family of MMIW victims (Carlson, September 20, 2014). The article cites that “she travelled the country...to native friendship centres though she would have visited reserves if that's what the families preferred...because she grew up in Northern Canada...to meet with victims' families, including some she coldcalled after her staff tracked down their phone numbers”, and quotes her saying “we all have a responsibility to step up”. The article focuses on her compassionate efforts to go above and beyond to “help” these families in need, but in the process of doing so, native communities’ agency is erased and they become situated as the distant “Other” to whom broader society is burdened with responsibility for.

Racism

Subtle indicators of racism were also evidenced in many of the assessed articles. One of the most outstanding examples of this was in 2009 coverage of MMIW. In 4 of the 9 articles that met this project’s research criteria, the main missing woman highlighted was Nicole Hoar, a white and non-Aboriginal female. None of the other women, all of whom were Aboriginal, believed to have gone missing or were murdered that year, were allotted the same degree of coverage (see Appendix 1). This finding is substantiated by other research done on racial media bias against Aboriginal women. Rolston (2010) reviewed media coverage of the 18 women believed to have disappeared on the Highway of Tears and noted that the first time newspapers like *The Globe and Mail*, the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Edmonton Journal* mentioned disappearances along the stretch of B.C. highway was when Nicole Hoar’s disappearance first became public (cited in Labrecque, 2014 & MediaSmarts, n.d). By rendering these missing and/or murdered Aboriginal

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women's stories nonexistent, they became "Othered" invisible victims of violence (England, 2004).

In the article with headline "*Group to dredge Red River in search for missing women*", the racial underpinnings emerged in the dismissive tone taken by several of the authority figures quoted. The article highlights a community and volunteer led effort to drag the Red River in search of bodies, bones and evidence related to MMIW cases (Carlson, September 11, 2014). A dredging specialist stated: "They'll find a lot of things, but not bodies" and a police spokesperson gaffed that "That would be crazy...That's Hollywood stuff". Although the article includes interviews with some of the leading volunteers who communicated that the group understood their search might not retrieve anything pertinent to MMIW cases, the dismissive quotes give grounding to the claim that the author framed the community volunteer committee's actions as frivolous.

Some articles showcased racism by acts of omission. The article headlined "*Legebokoff convicted on four counts of first-degree murder*" centres around the serial killer's murder of four females. A single line exposes the article's gaps and reads: "the trial did not reveal what motivated Mr. Legebokoff, who had an apparently typical upbringing in Fort St. James, B.C., but had become a frequent user of crack cocaine by the time of the murders" (*Globe and Mail*, September 12, 2014). Several points are to be made here. Firstly, attesting to Legebokoff's "typical upbringing" in the same sentence that references his use of drugs mitigates his actions. It implies that the *drugs*, rather than *he*, were actually responsible for the murders. Secondly, there was no mention of his or his victims' races in this excerpt or in the rest of the article. Legebokoff is a white male and two out of his four – and therefore 50% - victims, Cynthia Maas, and Natasha Montgomery, were Aboriginal. Given the record of systemic violence perpetuated

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against native women by white men (see pages 14-15), this is a crucial omission that may have revealed how sexist and racist notions about Aboriginal women factored into Legebokoff's actions.

Final consideration in this category of articles is given to the racist and ignorant attitudes that also appeared in opinion-editorial pieces. One notable example was in "*An inquiry is the quickest route to the slowest response*", written by Benjamin Perrin (May 21, 2014), whose credentials include being former special adviser for legal affairs and policy in the Prime Minister's Office under Stephen Harper. In the article, he responds to the MMIW crisis and argues that a federal inquiry is not the right answer. Selections from his commentary are highlighted below:

The federal government should also amend the so-called Gladue principle, whereby all aboriginal offenders are given **special treatment** at sentencing... Judges need to be made aware of these RCMP data, particularly the **fact that fully 90 per cent of missing and murdered aboriginal women knew their perpetrator** (e.g. spouses, family members and **acquaintances**) and that most of these offenders had criminal records involving prior acts of violence against their victims. **The Gladue principle should be disallowed in all cases involving crimes of a violent nature**, particularly for repeat offenders.

This paper has already briefly highlighted the issue of Aboriginal women's overrepresentation in the federal penitentiary system in Canada (see pages 11 for the overview and pages 43-48 for a more detailed analysis). A similar reality exists for Aboriginal men. While Aboriginal men constitute only 3.7% of the adult male Canadian population, they account for 19.2% of the incarcerated male population (Statistics Canada, 2008; Public Safety, 2009, cited in Helmus et al., 2012). Therefore, if Perrin's suggestions were to be acted upon, the rate of over-incarceration would be even *higher* and there would be even more Aboriginal people in prisons. Furthermore, his statement that the Gladue principle entitles Aboriginal offenders to "special treatment" is reductionist. The Gladue principle directs "sentencing judges to undertake the process of sentencing Aboriginal offenders differently to endeavour to achieve a truly fit and proper

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sentence in each particular case” (*R. v. Gladue*, 1999, cited in Wesley et al., 2012, p. 39). In other words, its aim is to encourage judges to consider more culturally appropriate sanctions for Aboriginal peoples. Finally, as we addressed earlier in the paper, the RCMP data around MMIW’s familiarity with their perpetrators are skewed because of unclear definitions (see page 9). All of these considerations allude to Perrin’s ignorance and dismissal of context and history in relation to Aboriginal peoples. He wants to apply harsher sentencing on an already marginalized group without considering the importance of cultural nuances or specific circumstances.

Essentialism

Perrin’s bias towards the application of a singular, decontextualized approach in dealing with the MMIW crisis exposes racist undertones, but is also an example of one of many instances where news stories essentialized the subjects. In the case of MMIW, the following two examples pulled from the assessed news articles show how the framing of these stories reduced these women to homogenous beings, stripped of own individual stories.

In death, three women shine light on Manitoba's epidemic of missing natives

All three of them, as children, were **hooked on crack cocaine** and locked into a **life spent selling themselves for money, drugs, food, shelter** and the illusion of protection they couldn’t get anywhere else.

All spent years **bouncing around Manitoba's foster-care, youth-correction and child-welfare systems**, from one program for at-risk minors to another.

And all were found dead, their bodies dumped on the outskirts of town. No one has been charged in their deaths, two of which have so far been declared homicides.

Cherisse Houle, Hillary Angel Wilson and Fonassa Bruyere, the teenage girls who have become the face of Winnipeg’s epidemic of missing and murdered young aboriginal women, **have a lot in common**.

(Paperny, September 7, 2009)

This snapshot reveals that these women - Cherisse Houle, Hillary Angel Wilson, Fonassa Bruyere – were reduced to the sum of their alleged “victimhood”. Throughout the article, no unique identifying information was provided by the author about any of these Aboriginal

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women. The framing of the article situates these three women's life trajectories as inevitabilities of their circumstances, resonating with the earlier findings that exposed the multiple facets to the "victim" narrative. Such essentialist tendencies attest to how desensitized society – and by extension, media - is to the disappearances and deaths of Aboriginal women. The headline from another article: *"Not again': Minister's response to another native woman's death"* emphasizes this point (Carlson, September 4, 2014). By highlighting the words "not again" and "another", the title conveys the message that this case is no different than any of the others involving missing or murdered Aboriginal women. Furthermore, opting not to specify the victim's name (Tina Fontaine) in the headline undermined her agency and story by giving the impression that her life and story was identical to all other MMIW.

ANALYSIS

The findings have revealed the extent to which media coverage perpetuates discrimination and stereotyping against Aboriginal women and their communities in their coverage of the MMIW crisis.

In the articles raised in the findings, along with most of the others that met the research criteria, minimal attempt was made to contextualize the lives of MMIW in the broader societal processes at work that contribute to their realities. In short, the media analysis revealed that very little intersectional framing was applied in the context of MMIW, exemplifying representational intersectionality - the tendency of media and other cultural forms to represent and depict women of colour without emphasis on their intersecting interests (see page 12). Although in each of the thematic focuses we saw characterizations used to describe the lives of Aboriginal women (i.e. poor, addicted) they mostly fell short of the critical next step: connecting these realities to the interlocking nature of race, gender and class, which compounds vulnerabilities, particularly in

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already marginalized groups like Aboriginal women. Instead, failing to do so permitted the print media outlet to continue the practice of “Othering” Aboriginal women and their communities. Perpetuating the cycle of blame against “criminalized and deviant” Aboriginal women; maintaining the “us” versus “them” narrative; essentializing their “destined victimhood”; heightening coverage only when white or “model” Aboriginal females are implicated – these practices all play a role in the neglect that the MMIW issue has faced.

The above considerations were representative of most articles, but some opinion-editorial exceptions were noted. In “*Two missing teens and two vastly different responses*” (Mason, October 4, 2014), the author facilitates a comparison of the immense police response to a missing white teenager in London, England with criticized police conduct when Tina Fontaine went missing in Winnipeg. Challenging the disproportionate reactions on the grounds of cultural stereotyping, racism and classism, he probes at some of the important questions:

How could two countries - England and Canada - seemingly value a single human life so differently? Would Winnipeg police had put more effort into finding Ms. [Tina Fontaine] **if she had been a well-adjusted white teenager from a middle-class family raised on the "right" side of town**, like Ms. [Alice Gross], and **not a troubled native youth with a history of running away from home and living on the street?**

In “*What unites these slain native women? An inquiry might tell us*” Renzetti (August 23, 2014) challenges former Prime Minister Harper’s position that MMIW “should not be view[ed]...as a sociological phenomenon.” Taking a sardonic tone and approach, she calls for the MMIW issue to be situated in the broader context necessary for understanding its pervasiveness:

What unites these three cases is that the victims - Tina Fontaine, Samantha Paul and Loretta Saunders - were all aboriginal women. What else unites them, besides the abysmal circumstances of their deaths? **What economic, cultural, historical or social factors?** Anything? Nothing?
...“We should not view this as a sociological phenomenon,” Stephen Harper said, yet again rejecting calls for an investigation into the deaths of aboriginal women. “We should view it as crime” ... In other words, there are only individual crimes - **no historical resonances, deep-rooted prejudices, systemic failures or structural cracks that swallow people whole. Nothing to see here, folks. Move along.**

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These pieces allude to the fact that the MMIW crisis cannot simply be construed as an isolated problem of individual crimes, but must be recognized as rooted in a legacy of deep-seated discrimination against Aboriginal women.

The following sections thoroughly explore this legacy, situating the neglect and discrimination around the MMIW crisis in the broader context in which Aboriginal women are systemically marginalized and disadvantaged. Specifically, I look at the issues around MMIW as an extension of pervasive and ongoing marginalization of Aboriginal women in other sites, namely: gender discrimination under the *Indian Act* and disproportionate representation and mistreatment in the federal penitentiary system.

***Indian Act* or Indian Axe? Gender-biased status restrictions and their disproportionate toll on Aboriginal women**

Contemporary issues of injustice and inequality experienced by Aboriginal women must be considered in relation to historical circumstances, which help to tell the story of discrimination, but also of engagement and resistance by the marginalized. In particular, the imposition of a European patriarchal system on indigenous societies had and continues to have tremendous impact on Aboriginal women, especially given that prior to colonization, many native communities were believed to be matrifocal. In a matrifocal community, women were considered especially knowledgeable about motherhood, community and kinship, and thus, were viewed as leaders (Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 1991).

It was not until the 1970s, however, that the legal ramifications of colonial patriarchy in Aboriginal communities began to garner national and international attention. From this point onwards, it is possible to discern key moments in the history and evolution of the *Indian Act* that

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contribute to our understanding of issues of discrimination experienced by Aboriginal women. These key moments in history are summarized here as: the first wave of rebellion, which challenged section 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act*; Bill C-31, which delayed gendered discrimination by a generation; and in the present day, Bill C-3, which is still being challenged for discriminating against grandchildren of Aboriginal grandmothers. I elaborate on each of these in the subsequent paragraphs/sections.

Section 12(1)(b): First wave of rebellion

Krosenbrink-Gelissen (1991) and Silman (1987) provide extensive insight into the first wave of rebellion by Aboriginal women discriminated against by the original *Indian Act*, under which an Aboriginal woman was not entitled to “Indian” status if she married a non-“Indian” but her male Aboriginal counterparts could both retain status and pass it along to their wives and children. Both authors affirm that section 12(1)(b) not only established the above tenets but also banned Aboriginal women from regaining their status in the event of divorce or widowhood. Krosenbrink-Gelissen’s (1991) and Silman’s (1987) work is advanced by Brown (2007), Lovelace, Fleming and Kinsella (1981), and the Native Women’s Association of Canada (1997), all of whom analyze the differing sentiments and catalytic events of the surrounding environment under which *Bill C-31: An Act to Amend the Indian Act* emerged in 1985.

Mary Two-Axe Earley, Jeannette Lavell, and Yvonne Bédard were some of the earliest crusaders against this gender-biased parameter associated with legal status and indigenous lineage in the original *Indian Act* (Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 1991). Each woman’s circumstances differed at the time of their protest; Lavell was married, Earley was a widower and Bédard was a divorcée. However, they all shared common ground as Aboriginal women who had married

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white men and subsequently lost their native status (Brown, 2007; Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 1991). Earley succeeded in overturning eviction from her home on the Kahnawake reserve by using her position as an activist in the Canadian and international indigenous women's rights community, but was unable to secure change to *Indian Act* legislation (Brown, 2007). Inspired by Earley's efforts and a precedent-setting court case⁵ that determined that the Canadian Bill of Rights could overturn the *Indian Act*, Lavell and Bédard later successfully challenged section 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act* in the Federal Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court of Ontario, respectively, on the grounds of sex discrimination under the Canadian Bill of Rights (Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 1991; *Attorney General of Canada v. Lavell*, 1973). The judges cited that section 12(1)(b) was "inoperative by reason of s. 1(b) of the Canadian Bill of Rights", which affirmed the "right of [every] individual to equality before the law and the protection of the law" (*Attorney General of Canada v. Lavell*, 1973, p. 1350; *Canadian Bill of Rights*, S.C. 1960). However, victory was brief. In 1973, motivated by federal concerns over the precedent Lavell's and Bédard's cases set for future Aboriginal cases, the Attorney General of Canada appealed the women's cases to the Supreme Court of Canada where it was decided in a 5 to 4 vote against the women that the Canadian Bill of Rights was "not...effective to overrule the *Indian Act*, and the fact that Indian women were treated differently upon marriage with a non-status man...was not...relevant to the cases..." (Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 1991, p. 84). The gender-discriminatory provisions of the legislation therefore continued to be intact.

Brown (2007), Lovelace, Fleming and Kinsella (1981), and the Native Women's Association of Canada (1997) complete the history of the first wave of rebellion against the

⁵ This was the Drybones case in which an "Indian" man was convicted under section 94(b) of the *Indian Act* for being intoxicated off-reserve but successfully challenged this infraction before the Supreme Court in 1969 by arguing that it infringed his rights against racial discrimination under section 1(b) of the Canadian Bill of Rights. See Krosenbrink-Gelissen, 1991.

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gender biases of the *Indian Act* through Sandra Lovelace, a First Nation woman who, having exhausted the Canadian legal system options her predecessors had relied on, took her status matter to the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 1977 on the grounds that section 12(1)(b) denied her rights under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. The committee eventually conceded that Canada had indeed violated her right as a minority member to pursue her culture, religion and community language with other similar individuals under the Covenant (Native Women's Association of Canada, 1997). Although the decision was only symbolic, the international community supplied the needed pressure for prompting the Canadian government to act, introducing *Bill C-31: An Act to Amend the Indian Act* in 1985.

Bill C-31 – Delaying Gender Discrimination

Palmater (2011) thoroughly deconstructs Bill C-31 using her own life experience as a Mi'kmaq Native denied "Indian" status under the law due to her native heritage originating with her grandmother rather than her grandfather. She stresses that arbitrary and convoluted 'blood quantum' rules instituted under Bill C-31 not only persist in furthering assimilatory practices, but are indicative of a deliberate effort to ensure there are fewer and fewer Aboriginals each generation for whom the government incurs costs. These rules came about with the creation of two categories of Natives: 6(1) and 6(2). Registration as a 6(1) "Indian" recognized that native heritage originated from both parents of a given individual while 6(2) registration recognized only one registered native parent (Palmater, 2011). A 6(1) "Indian" was permitted to pass their status along to their children, but a 6(2) "Indian" was required to marry another registered "Indian" in order for their children to have legally sanctioned "Indian" status. Under this new system, the pervasive gender bias surfaced in cases where a 6(1) "Indian" married a non-

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“Indian”. Female 6(1) “Indians” would have 6(2) status children while male 6(1) “Indians” could register both their wives and children as 6(1) “Indians” (Palmater, 2011). As the Canadian Bar Association (2010) explains, substantiated in a biographical piece by the Vancouver Sun (2007), Sharon McIvor became a prominent voice in the challenge against the discriminatory 6(1) and 6(2) provisions that merely delayed the earlier gender discrimination by a generation. She filed a legal case against section 6 of Bill C-31 on the grounds that a second-generation cut-off rule - which stripped her grandchild of Native status - exhibited sex discrimination by contributing to the earlier termination of indigenous status in matrilineal families. Eventually, McIvor’s case reached the British Columbia Court of Appeal, where a decision was passed that Parliament was obligated to make further amendments to the *Indian Act*, culminating in *Bill C-3: Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act*.

Bill C-3 – Conditional Gender “Equity” and ramifications

The latest amendment to the *Indian Act*, *Bill C-3: Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act*, still perpetuates sex discrimination against Aboriginal women, notably onto those born before 1985 to Native grandmothers (Palmater, 2011; Poverty and Human Rights Canada, 2011). This bill was enacted to rectify all previous forms of gender discrimination under the *Indian Act*, primarily through the addition of section 6(1)(c.1), which aimed to register eligible grandchildren of women who lost their status after marrying non-“Indian” men (Poverty and Human Rights Canada, 2011). However, a paternal preference persists. According to the Canadian Bar Association (2010), under this latest bill a grandchild born before 1985 to an “Indian” grandfather would be able to transfer “Indian” status a generation further than a grandchild whose “Indian” status descended from his or her grandmother. In light of this perpetuated

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discrimination, McIvor has filed a case with the United Nations, pending a ruling (Palmater, 2011; Poverty and Human Rights Canada, 2011).

The ramifications of losing or being denied Native status are tremendous. Palmater (2014) explains that it “impacts one's ability to belong to one's First Nation community, to run for or vote in First Nation governments, to live and attend school on reserve, to access treaty rights, and to access one's elders, cultural gatherings and the language speakers.” This attests to how deeply rooted the *Indian Act* is in the lives of indigenous peoples, especially women. The state's arbitrary determination of who constitutes Aboriginal consequently discriminates against the estimated 200 000 Native women and descendants wanting to be active in their own communities (Day & Green, 2010).

Final comments on gendered discrimination in the *Indian Act*

The media analysis conducted for this research allowed me to see the extent of discrimination in the coverage of the MMIW crisis, but to fully understand why neglect around the MMIW issue is sustained, consideration had to be given to the historical and contemporary gender discrimination described in this section. I argue, as do authors Kubik, Bourassa and Hampton (2009) that “multiple oppressions faced by Aboriginal women [are] a result of Canada's sexist and racist colonial past” (p. 18). The timeline detailing the evolution of the *Indian Act* provides indisputable evidence that discrimination against Aboriginal women is historically rooted. As a group, they have suffered disproportionate status discrimination since the *Indian Act* was first passed, and many continue to be marginalized today by this form of discrimination, along with the MMIW crisis and other recent issues, one of the most pervasive of which is explored below.

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Overrepresentation in the Federal Penitentiary System

The wealth of information (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Dell, 2001; Hylton, 2001; Jiwani, 2001; MacDonald, 2003; McGill, 2008; Monture-Angus, 2002; Wesley, 2012) that exists on disproportionately represented and discriminated federally sentenced Aboriginal women in Canada contributes to deconstructing the issue of MMIW. This is due to the fact that the former is another contemporary example of how deep-seated prejudicial attitudes disproportionately marginalize Aboriginal women and warrant dismissing calls for action to address the neglect.

The research undertaken exposes three discernable themes, which are described below: evidence of discrimination; current alternatives for Aboriginal women within the criminal justice system; and legal mechanisms for enacting change in the federal penitentiary system.

Aboriginal women's double incarceration

As earlier mentioned, Aboriginal women constitute more than a third of all federally incarcerated women, an especially significant figure when compared to their small population size (Wesley, 2012). Attention towards Aboriginal women in prisons first came about when the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women produced their report *Creating Choices* in 1990. For the first time, the voices of federally incarcerated women were taken into consideration, and the report articulated a vision for transforming a correctional system designed for males into one tailored to the specific needs of women offenders, including Aboriginal women (Sparling, 1999; Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003). However, Monture-Angus (2002) has argued “more than a decade after the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, it is clear that for

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many women...the opportunity to build a better future has been lost” (p. 47). The Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003) evidences this in its analysis of the Custody Rating Scale used to classify all inmates during the Offender Intake Assessment. Originally designed for male, white offenders, the scale uses seven domains to determine risk factors in order to classify inmates as minimum, medium or maximum security. This determination increasingly limits access to core programs and services the closer to maximum the inmate gets. Because the tool does not consider gender-responsive variables or systemic factors specific to Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal women are disproportionately classified as higher-risk. The Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003) found that in 2003, Aboriginal women accounted for 46% of female inmates classified as maximum security, 35% of medium security and only 23% of minimum security. Non-Aboriginal women, on the other hand, accounted for only 54% of the maximum security women, 65% of the medium security women and 77% of the minimum security (p. 28).

Aboriginal women are also segregated more frequently and for longer periods of time, according to Wesley (2012). She gives insight into a controversial process called the Management Protocol, now rescinded by Correctional Services Canada. It was specifically used for high-risk women offenders to elevate their classification to a “super maximum designation” (p. 27). These women’s movements and interactions in the months they were subjected to this designation were so intensely controlled that they were always required to be accompanied by three staff members, and often forced to wear physical restraints in the form of handcuffs and leg irons. In March 2011, all of the women on Management Protocol were Aboriginal. Wesley (2012) further concludes that the over-reliance on segregation as a tool is largely to compensate for a severe lack of support in the area of mental health services.

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Existing cultural alternatives for incarcerated Aboriginal women

Gaps in gender-specific and culturally appropriate programs and services was identified as a concern by incarcerated Aboriginal women participating in the Native Women's Association of Canada's (2012) dialogues on gender and reconciliation between 2011 and 2012. While Aboriginal men currently have access to 8 healing lodges, Aboriginal women only have one (Wesley, 2012). As a result of *Creating Choices* in 1990, Correctional Services Canada opened the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge for Aboriginal female offenders in 1995. Removed from the traditional prison system and located on Cree territory in Saskatchewan, Sparling (1999) explains that the lodge offers Aboriginal women a blend of healthy lifestyle programs with a focus on Aboriginal culture, including access to Elders. Johnson and Wiebe (1998) attest to the real support offered by the Lodge in their collaborative autobiography, whereby readers are able to discern a positive change in the behaviour of Cree woman Yvonne Johnson when she is moved from a conventional women's prison to the Okimaw Ohci Lodge.

However, authors such as Monture-Angus (1999) have vehemently expressed that we should not overestimate the power of healing lodges such as Okimaw because there are significant shortcomings to consider. Monture-Angus (2002), the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003) and Wesley (2012) remind us that the lodge is only accessible by minimum and medium security classified female offenders. Given the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal women in maximum security designations, many Aboriginal women are therefore barred from accessing the lodge. Furthermore, while the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003) praises that the majority of the staff at the lodge are of Aboriginal descent, Monture-Angus (2002) takes a more critical stance, noting that few of the senior staff positions have been consistently held by Aboriginal people. Coupled with this, Monture-Angus (2002) notes that

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Aboriginal women offenders at the Lodge have described the insufficiency of Elder services. Often Elders appear so overworked that the women feel unable to ask for support. In many cases, the Elder's traditional practices belong to a different Aboriginal band than the incarcerated women at the lodge, thereby failing to accurately meet the specific cultural needs of these women.

Legal mechanisms for changes in the federal penitentiary system

Ultimately, eliminating discriminatory treatment of federally sentenced Aboriginal women is a complex process that must be rooted in recognition of the gendered impact of Canada's colonial legacy, but there are numerous legal mechanisms available in the interim to begin shifting this landscape.

Although available to all Aboriginal peoples, Hylton (2001) reminds us that section 718.2(e) of the Criminal Code can be especially beneficial for Aboriginal women because it explicitly requires judges to consider cultural factors when sentencing Aboriginal offenders. If law enforcers are made better aware of this provision, the general history of Aboriginal women in Canada, and the specific life trajectory of the accused, section 718.2(e) may help to reduce the disproportionately overrepresented number of Aboriginal women over-classified and underserved in the justice system.

MacDonald (2003) explains that the Canadian government and by extension, its representative body Correctional Services Canada, also has a fiduciary⁶ duty to both federally sentenced women and Aboriginal peoples, one which has been breached due to the continuous

⁶ A fiduciary relationship affords protection for the rights and interests of beneficiaries in a fiduciary relationship, in addition to protection from discrimination provided by the *Charter* or human rights legislation. Correctional Services Canada has this relationship with federally sentenced women. See decision in *Frame v. Smith*.

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failure to apply relevant provisions of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (CCRA) and the Canadian *Charter*. This includes CCRA's principle that:

correctional policies, programs and practices respect gender, ethnic, cultural and linguistic difference and be responsive to the special needs of women and aboriginal peoples, as well as to the needs of other groups of offenders with special requirements (MacDonald, 2003, p. 19).

MacDonald (2003) further cites Canada's failure to adhere to numerous international instruments it has endorsed along with the specific tenets it has "violated through its discriminatory treatment of FSW [federally sentenced women] and its ongoing failure to remedy the discrimination" (p. 33). Below is a list of these international guidelines, along with a brief summation of the sections most relevant to federally incarcerated Aboriginal women in Canada:

- 1) *UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* - s. 6(1), s. 8(a), s. 51(3), s. 59, S. 66(1), s. 67: these sections attest to the gender biases of the classification system and the failure to have services and programs specifically tailored to the needs of women;
- 2) *Body of Principles and Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners* - Principles 1, 3, and 28 and s. 2, s. 5, respectively: these tenets recognize the discriminating nature of maximum security risk assessment and the lack of adequate, gender-specific and culturally appropriate programming;
- 3) *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* – Articles 7 and 10: these articles supports that maximum security segregation contravenes prisoners' rights to be treated with dignity and to be free from torture;
- 4) *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) – Articles 2 and 3: the articles (similar to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*) also support that maximum security segregation contravenes prisoners' rights to be treated with dignity and to be free from inhumane treatment;
- 5) *Declaration and Convention Against Torture* - Articles 3 and 6, and articles 11 and 16, respectively: these articles all consider maximum security segregation in

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contravention of prisoners' rights against torture and other inhuman or degrading treatment;

- 6) And finally, the *Declaration and Convention on Elimination of Racism* - Article 4 and Preamble, respectively: these sections highlight that Canada has consistently failed to act on the disproportionate effect its assessment practices have on aboriginal women and has also negated to recognize the “constitutionally protected right of Aboriginal peoples to administer their own forms of justice” (p. 33).

Building on MacDonald's findings, McGill (2008) stressed the potential value of mobilizing the tenets under the *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), specifically the Optional Protocol. This is a mechanism embedded in the doctrine to ensure compliance. She argues that Sandra Lovelace's successful earlier status complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* “set an important precedent for assessing the possible impact that a complaint to the CEDAW Committee under the Optional Protocol could have in increasing awareness about the issue of discrimination against federally sentenced Aboriginal women and igniting the beginnings of change in this area” (p. 104).

Final remarks: Federal penitentiary system

The above evaluation of the state of the federal penitentiary system in Canada has evidenced how pervasive this issue is in perpetuating disproportionate racial and gendered discrimination against Aboriginal women. Together with status restrictions under the *Indian Act*, they contribute to understanding the broader context in which the issue of MMIW exists. Rather than concluding that the MMIW phenomenon is the sum of individual crimes, we instead trace a continuous pattern of marginalization and neglect against Aboriginal women across different periods and different sites.

CONCLUSIONS

Media analysis and contextualization

The purpose of this Major Research Paper was to examine the nature and extent to which the issue of MMIW was covered in news media in a longitudinal study - over the years 2004, 2009 and 2014. Specifically, I sought to evaluate the degree to which *Globe and Mail* portrayals and coverage of the issue of MMIW perpetuated discrimination and promoted stereotyping against Aboriginal women and their communities. To do this, I completed advanced searches in the database *Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies* and applied quantitative content analysis (CA) and feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the 104 articles carefully selected for closer examination. The findings from that research endeavour demonstrated that although media coverage saw an eleven-fold increase from 2004 to 2014, the selected media outlet often:

- a. resorted to victim-blaming Aboriginal women for living “high-risk lifestyles” that ultimately led to their disappearances or deaths, or situated Aboriginal women as destitute, abject victims of poverty fated for this life trajectory;
- b. made Aboriginal women and their communities out to be “Others”, framing them as deviant, criminal and poor, “burdening” society with responsibility over them
- c. engaged in the use of subtle racial rhetoric that reinforced a failure to consider cultural, social and historical context or the intersections of race, gender and class;
- d. reduced Aboriginal women affected by the MMIW issue to the sum of their victimhood.

To deconstruct the findings, I drew on the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and “Othering”. They contributed to making sense of the way the media perpetuated discrimination

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against Aboriginal women and their communities; and clarified how the newspaper downplayed the scope of the crisis by means of stereotyping and framing.

The findings of neglect and discrimination around the issue of MMIW was contextualized in other studies that have addressed some of the multiple forms of oppression that Aboriginal women have continuously been faced with, specifically *Indian Act* gender discrimination and overrepresentation and disproportionate ill-treatment in the federal penitentiary system. These two particular issues were chosen on the grounds of their pervasiveness: the *Indian Act* exerts significant control over the lives of indigenous peoples, notably over women because status is intrinsically linked to participation in community; and Aboriginal women not only make up one-third of the entire female inmate populace despite only constituting four percent of the Canadian population, but also have higher rates of maximum security classification than other groups (Wesley, 2012). Together, these two sites of discrimination contribute to understanding the broader context in which the issue of MMIW exists. It offered an insightful analysis into other modes of discrimination historically and currently faced by Aboriginal women which in turn, elucidate a continuous and similar pattern of marginalization and neglect against Aboriginal women in different time periods and in distinctive settings.

Aboriginal women as more than victims

The pattern of discrimination against Aboriginal women in media responses to MMIW, in the *Indian Act*, and in the federal penitentiary system leads me to the conclusion that little has changed for Aboriginal women. The MMIW crisis remains an unfortunate and unresolved extension of past practices of injustice and discrimination. However, Aboriginal women have not

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sat idly by while this and other issues have unfolded. As this project detailed, numerous female Aboriginal women forged the way for change under the *Indian Act*. The reaction to MMIW has been even more tremendous given the lives lost and at stake; I will briefly mention just a few of these passionate responses. The *Sisters In Spirit* Initiative, which began in 2005, emerged as a research, policy and education program driven and led by Aboriginal women to raise awareness about high rates of violence against Aboriginal women. On the research end, it has developed a 200-variable sophisticated database for tracking MMIW cases, while on the community front, it has given affected families a space to share and voice their thoughts (Native Women's Association of Canada, n.d.). *Sisters In Spirit* member Bridget Tolley, an Algonquin from the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg in Quebec, initiated the annual March and Vigil for Missing and Murdered Native women, which marked its tenth anniversary in 2015 (CBC, October 4, 2015). In addition to the other rallies and vigils organized by indigenous women and girls, projects of a different nature have also emerged. Jaime Black, a Metis artist in Winnipeg, created the REDress Project in 2010. She collects red dresses from the community and hangs them in different public spaces, including universities and museums, as a visual reminder of all the indigenous women that have disappeared or been killed (Rieger, September 29, 2015). Each of these examples is evidence that Aboriginal women are actively resisting and responding to the MMIW crisis.

Recommendations

Further studies into MMIW are needed. As discussed in the earlier "Limitations" section, there are several related areas that still require investigation. More media analysis can offer additional insight into the extent of coverage, particularly news outlets for which research has yet to be undertaken. A potentially useful analysis could come out of an examination of the CBC's

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recent project on individual cases of MMIW, which looks at unsolved investigations and cases and provides a platform for families to tell their stories (See <http://www.cbc.ca/missingandmurdered/>). Additionally, it was beyond the scope of this particular project to draw conclusions about any material impacts media representations might have on the MMIW phenomenon and on other issues considered herein: *Indian Act* gender discrimination and overrepresentation and disproportionate mistreatment in the federal penitentiary system. This represents another potential area for research.

An inquiry into MMIW is needed. While we have explored some of the systemic factors behind the prevalence of violence against indigenous women, this is a very limited examination. Commissioning a national study with significant scope would determine the root causes so that appropriate action can be taken to address them. It would also hold the federal government more accountable to following through with the study's recommendations when completed. As CBC's Connie Walker (2015) emphasizes: "We can't ignore the patterns that are being repeated again and again in the lives of these women. Until the root causes are addressed, the violence will continue."

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Comparison of number of articles that mention victims in any capacity, by year

Name	Year		
	2004	2009	2014
Marlene Bird			2
Yvonne Boen			1
Daleen Kay Bosse	1		
Fonassa Bruyere		1	
Tamara Chipman		2	
Loretta Capot-Blanc	2		
Chrisma Denny			2
Lana Derrick	1		2
Tina Fontaine			33
Pamela Jean George	1		
Rinelle Harper			11
Nicole Hoar*		4	
Cherisse Houle		2	
Tamra Keepness	4		2
Bella Laboucan-McLean			1
Myrna Letandre			1
Cynthia Maas			2
Natasha Montgomery			2
Helen Betty Osborne	1		3
Claudette Osborne		1	4
Samantha Paul			1
Angela Poorman			1
Ramona		1	
Loretta Saunders			11
Elsie Sebastian			1
Felicia Solomon	1		
Brandy Vittrekwa			3
Hillary Angel Wilson		2	
TOTAL	11	13	83

* Nicole Hoar is a non-Aboriginal, white female, notably featured in pieces referencing MMIW.

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