Where Did That Come From? Indigenous Activists Discuss the Creation of Canada’s National Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Inquiry
by

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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Introduction

Indigenous women and girls make up three percent of Canada’s population, yet have disappeared and been murdered—comprising 10% of Canadian homicides—at a rate disproportionate to their population (NWAC, 2016). A 2014 report by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) estimates the number at approximately 1200 between 1980 and 2012 (RCMP, 2014), while surveys conducted by several agencies, including the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) place the estimated number as closer to 4000 (NWAC, 2016). The frequency of these events and number of Indigenous women involved defies accurate calculation for reasons as varied as those that have created the crisis itself (Dean, 2015).

On December 8, 2015, the Canadian government announced the launch of a national inquiry to address the emergency of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) (Canada, 2015). This represented the culmination of years of activism from the Indigenous community, and a corresponding lack of interest from government and police (Kappo, 2014).

My study asked: what factors do Indigenous writers and activists believe led to the calling of the Canadian national inquiry into MMIW? To answer that question, I interviewed nine Indigenous writers, academics, lawyers, and front-line activists I met through speaking publicly about my own book on the topic (Shenher, 2015). From our discussion of these issues, I created an audio documentary (Shenher, 2017). This brief report, highlighting and reflecting on my chosen theory, research methods, analysis, lessons learned and recommendations for further study, is a supporting document for that audio project.
There is no academic research specifically asking what Indigenous people close to this issue believe about it and what specific factors they feel influenced a national inquiry as a priority of the new government. Kovach (2009) argues that society needs to listen to Indigenous people’s perspectives and not merely the dominant culture’s as propagated through mainstream media’s white colonial lens. I find no evidence of academic research exploring this particular rise in issue salience, nor have I found any statistics or media studies that document it. Through this documentary, we explore the intersections of race, gender, addiction, sex work, and marginalization—from a uniquely Indigenous perspective (Bell & Crenshaw, 1991)—that have combined to devastate Indigenous culture through the targeting of Indigenous women.

I chose critical race theory (CRT) as a means to begin to understand what happened to Indigenous peoples in Canada from the time of contact until the present day. CRT scholars believe racism is common and normalized—it is ‘the usual way society does business’ (Price, 2010, p. 153). My contention is that even this definition comes from a place of white ‘settler’ dominance and that it is white ‘settlers’ who determine both privately and through public discourse what is defined as ‘normal’.

CRT arose out of American law schools in the 1980s, a time when more progressive students and scholars were embracing civil rights scholarship and the concept of colour blindness, leading to the exploration of such policies as affirmative action and quota hiring of visible minorities, specifically black people (Bell & Crenshaw, 1995, Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT grew as a sort of counter to that brand of liberalism that sought to ignore race, treating it as an elephant in the room rather than an opportunity to explore diversity and what it could mean to legal studies and the justice system (Bell & Crenshaw, 1995).
To me, this idea of simply trying to ‘forget’ race seemed analogous to the Canadian government’s attempts at assimilation of Indigenous peoples, through the destruction of their unique cultures. This linkage made CRT a perfect fit for this project.

What did Indigenous people close to this issue think contributed to its rise? My objective was to listen to Indigenous thoughts on the genesis of this MMIW inquiry. As Delgado & Stefancic (2001) point out, “No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity. A white feminist may be Jewish, or working-class, or a single mother. An African American activist may be gay or lesbian” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 4). In my quest for Indigenous voices, respecting their vast diversity as individuals under that loose umbrella of their ‘Indigenous-ness’ in mind was of paramount importance.

My working premise was that Indigenous women—through the poverty, racism, and violence all Indigenous peoples have experienced since contact with white ‘settlers’—have been forced into the position of victim and target of sexual predators and serial killers. This companion document serves to chronicle how these interviewees’ views support my working premise and provides the theoretical underpinnings and analysis of the documentary and what these interviews uncovered.

**Methods**

Through narrative inquiry, I learned common perceptions from the interviews. As Walter Fisher (1989) states, “the narrative paradigm is a philosophical statement that is meant to offer an approach to interpretation and assessment of communication...as interpretations of aspects of the world...shaped by history, culture, and character” (Fisher, 1989, p. 57). In this way, narrative inquiry aligns with Indigenous practices of
knowing (Kovach, 2009) and allows for reflexivity based on the subjects’ views and experiences rather than the researcher’s attempt to ‘prove’ their research question.

I must acknowledge my own place as someone who held power within the justice system and continues to as a person approached to speak as an ‘expert’ on the topic of Canada’s MMIW. As the lead investigator on the original Vancouver Police Department missing women’s investigation, I occupied a place of privilege. I am a descendant of white colonial ‘settlers’, and my activist roots run back to my great-great-great-grandfather Joseph Royal (Manitoba Library Association, 1971), founder of the first French-language newspaper in Western Canada, *Le Métis*, dedicated friend to Métis politician Louis Riel, and member of his legal team. However, I occupy a place as a member of the dominant white culture and did so working for an oppressive institution, even while attempting to do right by the missing women (Oppal, 2012; Kovach, 2009).

This topic requires an alternative to the typically white-interpreted research framework, and yet, I am a white person collating this data. Nado Aveling (2013) speaks of her own whiteness with respect to researching Indigenous issues: “On a personal level, ‘being an ally’ means that I am willing to make mistakes, that I am willing to be uncomfortable and that I confront my own privileges (without necessarily being able to shed them at will)” (Aveling, 2013, p. 210). Through employing Indigenous ways of knowing, I bring my participants' interpretations forward as an ally and researcher.

I purposely selected people known to me in relation to the MMIW issue whose views I wished to document (Merrigan, Huston, & Johnston, 2009). This subgroup is educated, well-informed, and in close contact with people from some of the most marginalized sectors, as well as some of the most influential members of Indigenous
Canada. I was unable to travel to complete in-person interviews as my subjects reside all over Canada and I did not want to limit research to a BC-only sample.

My participants speak about the political rise of this issue. I deliberately chose a small sample of 13 participants and ultimately interviewed nine people to obtain in-depth data from them in natural, one-on-one conversation with me as two subject-matter experts on the topic. A sample of nine ensured unique and insightful comments for the audio documentary. An additional four interview subjects were simply too busy in their own professional lives to be interviewed by me, but the door has been mutually left open for future interviews for other documentary pieces. I asked each interviewee to provide me with the name of a favoured charity to which they wished me to make a donation in their name as a token of my appreciation for their participation. I donated $20 to each charity, which included the World Wildlife Fund, National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, Carrier Sakani Family Services, Ganohkwasra Family Assault Services, Drag the Red, Butterflies in Spirit, and Native Youth Sexual Health Network.

Through one 60-to-90-minute interview with each participant, I posed the following five questions to each. Participants were given the questions in advance.

- What role, if any, do you feel Indigenous activism and empowerment played in the creation of the federal missing and murdered Indigenous women’s inquiry (MMIW inquiry)?
- What role, if any, do you feel the former Harper government’s refusal to call an inquiry played in the Liberals resolving to do so?
- What do you feel was the turning point(s) that made the MMIW inquiry a priority for the Liberal party while the Conservatives avoided the issue in the 2015 Federal election?
• Is there a specific case of a missing and/or murdered Indigenous woman that you believe ignited this increase in political interest to call the MMIW inquiry? If so, can you tell me about it?

• Can you tell me of one or more Indigenous or ‘settler’ issues or events that you feel is/are responsible for the creation of the MMIW crisis?

In drafting these questions, I inadvertently created a delineation between those issues that caused the MMIW inquiry to be called and those that created the MMIW tragedy itself. In hindsight, I would have altered my research question slightly after analyzing my interviewees’ input to read as follows: What factors do Indigenous writers and activists believe created the MMIW tragedy and led to the calling of the Canadian national inquiry into MMIW?

In my June 13, 2017 Oral Defence, I suggested separating the two similar points into two projects may have been best, but more practically, amending the question as I have done above does the most justice to the perceptions of my interviewees and makes their input more valuable to the documentary project as it stands.

I created a sound studio in my home office. I used the ECamm Call Record via Skype app to record our interviews and Adobe Audition to edit the documentary. I backed everything up to five external storage methods: three external hard drives, iCloud and Dropbox. Using the free music website Incompetech.com, I downloaded the audio music file ‘Birch Run’ (MacLeod, 2017) which provides the background instrumental for the broadcast. The audio documentary is approximately 29 minutes in length and is posted on SoundCloud.

Indigenous storywork is ingrained into my findings insofar as possible in my role as a non-Indigenous practitioner attempting to tell a story from the perspective of
collaborators who are not normally heard (Canadian Institutes, 2014). Jo-ann Archibald (Q’um Q’um Xiiem) (2008) explains the seven principles of storywork: “The Elders taught me about seven principles relating to using First Nations stories and storytelling for educational purposes, what I term storywork: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy” (Archibald, 2008, p. viii). The work of Archibald (2008) and Alfred (2009) provided a theoretical and methodical home for this project. Alfred’s discussion of Indigenous self-determination and self-definition provided me with the bridge into narrative inquiry I was looking for (Alfred, 2009).

Archibald’s work with Indigenous storywork provided me with a guidebook for how to approach my interviewees and interact in a respectful way. An appealing feature of Indigenous storywork is that the person presenting Indigenous perspectives—me in this example—should do so with little or no detailed comment (Archibald, 2008). I worked to keep my own editorializing out of our conversations, acting more as a curator of their perspectives to allow their voices to take precedence. Through her work in Indigenous storywork, Archibald teaches that oral tradition dictates that both the speaker and the listener ‘make meaning’ without interpretive guidance from each other (Archibald, 2008). An audio documentary seemed the perfect medium for this project and staying true to the principles of Indigenous storywork.
Analysis

Critical race scholar Christopher Dunbar asserts that “volumes of research have been generated about Aboriginals, but there is little research that Aboriginal people have been able to define for themselves” (Dunbar, 2008, p. 91). Delgado & Stefancic (2001) maintain, “unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). This flexibility and reflexivity within CRT seemed a good fit for this project.

The interviewees’ comments validated my sense that there are deeper, historical issues responsible for putting MMIW into a social position that created this tragedy and they spoke to several of these which prompted the creation of the inquiry, including: specific individual MMIW cases; the Harper government’s indifference; funding cuts to the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC); the Idle No More movement; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC)’s final report; the Indian Act; Indigenous self-government; and the Fur Trade. The interviewees expressed that while several influential events occurred during the Harper government’s era, many of the causes of the MMIW crisis—as well as Canadians’ increased awareness of it—are the result of colonization dating back to the European ‘settlers’ first contact with Canada in the early 1600s. The ways colonization affected Indigenous cultures in general and their women in particular laid a foundation for the MMIW tragedy to flourish. Subsequent government efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the growing white, colonial society led to the implementation of the policies and initiatives which weakened the fabric of Indigenous society and created pervasive intergenerational trauma that still exists today.
My interviewees presented a narrative much broader than that put forward by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper in a speech to college students in 2014 (Boutilier, 2014). “I think we should not view this as sociological phenomenon. We should view it as crime,” Harper said when discussing the case of Tina Fontaine, the murdered fifteen-year-old Winnipeg girl found in the Red River in August 2014, outraging Indigenous and non-Native Canadians alike. This shortsighted view is obviously counter to the premise supported by the interviewees that colonization has been the petri dish in which the MMIW tragedy has grown. Every interviewee named Tina Fontaine as a case drawing national attention to the MMIW. Many opined her case was the one that brought mainstream media and government attention to the plight of MMIW and girls.

Harper went on to say, “Obviously in the particular case . . . we want to extend all our sympathies to the families and friends,” said Harper. “This is a terrible crime, clearly a crime. But first and foremost it is a crime, and the most important thing is to make sure we have a thorough police investigation” (Boutilier, 2014). Harper’s view that these cases were simply crimes, no different from any inflicted upon non-Native Canadians was not shared by my Indigenous interviewees, who brought a far more macro perspective, focusing on the historical, colonial reasons for the crisis and hence, the calling of the inquiry.

Politically, the MMIW issue grew in terms of priority from “it isn’t really high on our radar, to be honest,” as Harper replied to a question posed by Peter Mansbridge in a Dec. 17, 2014 CBC television interview (Kappo, 2014), to the 2015 federal election, during which the CBC News reported that, “The Liberal Party, the NDP and the Green Party have pledged to call a national inquiry if elected” (Ireland, 2015). Every interviewee stated that pledging to hold an MMIW inquiry if elected was a 2015 election
platform piece the Liberals seized on to differentiate themselves further from the Harper Conservative government.

Every interviewee said that Harper’s ongoing refusal to hold an inquiry galvanized Indigenous opposition to his government and campaign and presented the opposition parties with a key wedge issue to campaign against him. Each interviewee expressed anger and indignation at what they felt was Harper’s disrespectful and dismissive language around the MMIW themselves and Indigenous peoples in general and welcomed the opposition parties’ pledge to call an inquiry.

Canada’s dark history of cultural genocide against its First Peoples is now well-documented in the report of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), which recommended the creation of a national inquiry into the MMIW crisis. The TRC report is a clear and harrowing accounting of the damage residential schools have done to Indigenous peoples and their descendants. The traumatic legacy these schools created has led to increased domestic violence, substance abuse, and the disconnect from their traditional culture as the report states: “Survivors are not the only ones whose lives have been disrupted and scarred by the residential schools. The legacy has also profoundly affected their partners, their children, their grandchildren, their extended families, and their communities” (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 3).

Eight respondents expressed that the TRC report itself, released in the summer of 2015, was a validation of Indian Residential Schools survivors’ experience and an indication that non-Native Canada was beginning to awaken to the Indigenous plight. They spoke of the schools as a critical issue for understanding the colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada’s history in the context of cultural genocide and creating
negative attitudes in non-Native society which placed Indigenous women in the crosshairs of dangerous sexual and violent predators. Again, this is in keeping with tenets of critical race theory, which Delgado & Stefancic call “the voice-of-color thesis (which) holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 4). Communicating these unique views to non-Native Canadians was the primary aim of my project.

Every interviewee pointed to the Indian Act (the Act) in our conversations and on the topic in detail, enlightening me greatly in my own understanding of how this legislation has impacted Indigenous peoples in general and the MMIW in particular. Essentially, we discussed the Indian Act of 1876 as the consolidation of several pieces of legislation regulating the movement and activities of Canada’s Indigenous peoples and the ways it continues to be administered by the federal Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, retaining much of its original form as a policy of assimilation of Indigenous people into mainstream Canadian culture. The current structure for Indigenous governance, the reserve system, band structures, and control over cultural practices remains in many parts of the Act. We discussed the various ways the Act discriminates against Indigenous women, including penalizing those who marry non-Native men.

Four interviewees discussed the fur trade and its implications for Indigenous women’s lower standing in Canadian society and for alcohol abuse among Indigenous peoples. Interviewees discussed the introduction of alcohol to Indigenous men by white ‘settlers’ who used it to trade for pelts. The fur trade took Indigenous men away from their home communities for extended periods of time as they traveled to trade with the
Europeans. This break from culture, accompanied by the very real problem of alcohol dependency over time, contributed to a breakdown of Indigenous family health and cohesion. The fur trade also physically removed the men from their families for extended periods of time, leaving their loved ones vulnerable to abuse by ‘settlers’. This was another by-product of colonization which further entrenched the reality and stereotypes of Indigenous women and children as available, vulnerable victims for abusers.

**Lessons Learned**

Given the advances in online broadcast technology and my love of talk radio and podcast, I felt bringing this subject to life through the process of a documentary interested me the most, as well as provided a unique way to enable these voices to be heard. Having already written a book related to MMIW, I chose an audio documentary as a way to learn a new skill and potentially open new doors for myself professionally after policing. I wanted the tone of the documentary to be conversational and natural, but with very little of my end of the conversations and the majority from my interviewees’ viewpoint.

After the release of the TRC report, I sensed Canadians needed more education on Indigenous issues in order to better understand why Canada’s First Peoples continued to struggle and to be the targets of violence and racism. I wanted there to be an immediacy to the perspectives I hoped to obtain from my interviewees and I didn’t feel this immediacy would come from print. As McLuhan (1994) explained in his seminal work *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*, media can be classified as hot or cool. He defined a hot medium as information-heavy, such as radio, and cool media as less auditory and more visual, such as television or cartoon animation. Given the
amount of information I wished to convey about these Indigenous perspectives, I chose radio, a “high-definition” or hot medium, as McLuhan defined it, for my project (McLuhan, 1994).

I chose the elective MAPC Royal Roads University course, PCOM 631, Multimodal Publishing, to learn more about the documentary process. In addition to learning generalities around the genre of documentary, we created a video documentary as our class project and were taught to log our footage, mark our clips, interview effectively, and use the editing software. All of these new skills came in very handy for my project.

From a technology standpoint, I tried to envision how this project would sound on CBC Radio One or an online podcast, and geared my style and tone to that medium. I learned to use Adobe Audition through PCOM 631, You Tube videos, and subscribing to Lynda.com, a paid online software education site. My learning curve was steep, but I became proficient in time. The sound quality of my interview subjects is not optimal in some cases due to circumstances in their recording environment, but I was able to clean the audio to some degree using Audition.

If I were to do things differently, I would meet my interviewees in person, where I could better control the environment and produce recordings with higher sound quality. I will certainly employ this for future documentaries that I create. I would also devote more time to discussing the education piece inherent in my interviewees’ message. For this MMIW tragedy to end, education is key.

This documentary represents an opportunity to educate non-Native Canadians and challenge stereotypes. This project reinforced for me the importance of exposing non-Native people to the diversity and individuality of Indigenous people and allows for debunking of stereotypes so that new dialogue and healing can begin.
This project is timely and relevant. The MMIW issue continues to be a fluid one. Indigenous women continue to disappear and are murdered every day in this country. The MMIW inquiry completed the commission’s first hearings a couple of weeks before I defended this work and these very same themes—Residential Schools, colonialism, the Indian Act, poverty, racism—informed each family’s testimony of the impact of years of oppression on Indigenous communities and their women in particular.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Virtually every one of the MMIW cases could be studied in isolation from a communications context. Specifically, the case of Cindy Gladhue and the framing, messaging, and courtroom language in reference to her used by those in the justice system and the media are rich with study potential for communications scholars. Studying the messaging and language used by police and media to describe the circumstances of the case of Nicole Hoar—a non-Native tree planter who went missing along what the media called the Highway of Tears—would undoubtedly illuminate deep systemic racism and provide a fascinating contrast to that surrounding the Indigenous women who went missing in the same area during the same time frame.

Communications scholars could study and contrast instances of non-Native politicians and media placing too narrow a focus on the issues which led to the MMIW crisis, such as the example of Stephen Harper’s insistence that crimes against MMIW are merely crimes and not greater sociological phenomena. Comparing the prevalence of those comments and assertions to Indigenous assertions of the larger historical causes of the tragedy would be interesting.

I would suggest further study into Indigenous perceptions of the Liberal government’s success in delivering on promises made around Indigenous issues during
the 2015 election. Further study on political communications and framing in terms of how the Indigenous vote was mobilized in the 2015 election is also needed, as well as study around the Conservatives’ failure to address the MMIW issue specifically and Indigenous issues generally. The 2015 federal election appears rife with opportunity for communications and political strategy study.

Further discussion of the Indian Act is beyond the scope of this project, but its relevance cannot be underestimated in the lives of Indigenous peoples in Canada. More in-depth study of their perspectives on it is an area I may well explore in future work. The ongoing impact of the Idle No More movement and the growing wave of pro-Indigenous activism among non-Native Canadians are other areas where more study is needed. It should be noted that these interviews took place in October and November of 2016. Many of the participants expressed concern with the evolution of the Liberal government’s handling of Indigenous issues involving natural resources, First Nations poverty and water, and the youth suicide crisis, to name a few. Many also expressed apprehension that the MMIW inquiry seemed slow to take shape and the families and other activists were becoming fearful it would be another failed exercise.

The interviewees and I discussed at length the rise of increasingly vocal non-Native allies of the Indigenous plight, an area that would be fascinating to study in greater depth. Conversely, the recent comments made by Senator Lynn Beyak expressing her view that there were some positive experiences to be had in residential schools (Fontaine, 2017) highlight the need for continuing education of non-Native Canadians on reconciliation and the horrific conditions children faced in those schools that left lasting scars on Indigenous communities.
Finally, the MMIW inquiry itself must be studied and analyzed as it proceeds through its work to determine its effectiveness in exploring deeper causes of violence against Indigenous peoples and stopping the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. My interviewees’ observations make clear the need for Canadians to step back from the narrow focus on individual predators and specific social conditions in order to see them as merely symptoms of the wider cultural genocide that has been Canadian colonialism and its removal of Indigenous autonomy, which have created this social tragedy that targets and destroys MMIW.

**Conclusion**

Every time I listen to the documentary, I come away with something new. Recently, I realised that I didn’t create it to *allow* for Indigenous voices to be heard or to use my non-Native voice to break through to non-Native Canada. Indigenous people don’t need me to give them a ticket in order that they may ride.

When I completed this documentary, I realised I had unconsciously used words like ‘ignite’ and ‘rekindle’, ‘torch’ and ‘flame’. The Anishinaabe people, through oral tradition, passed down the Seven Fires prophecy. This was, in very simple terms, a spiritual roadmap for survival on Turtle Island, or what we now call North America. Each of the prophecies were known as a ‘fire’. The Anishinaabe prophesied that this current time in history—known as the time of the 8th fire—would be a time for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to come together in harmony (Bell, 2001).

This documentary merely showcases the modern face of Indigenous Canada. It broadcasts the reality of Indigenous people breaking through to non-Native Canada.
through the arts, the law, academia. These interviewees give voice to a powerful sense of activism interwoven throughout each of their chosen interconnected disciplines.

It is this breaking through that pushed the MMIW issue to the mainstream in the 2015 election. These accomplished, educated interviewees are not Indigenous exceptions. They represent a microcosm of today’s Indigenous communities.

And they are the future.

I thank them once again for their generosity. Chi Meegwetch.

Appendices

Appendix A: List of Interviewees
Appendix B: Recording Transcript & Link to Recording
Appendix A: List of Interviewees

**Julie Bomberry** is the Clan mother for Cayuga Nation, Turtle Clan of the Haudenosaunee and a manager of Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Service on Six Nations of the Grand River Territory.

**Linda Epp** is a member of the Sechelt First Nation, an organizer for Sisters in Spirit in Whistler and a child of the Sixties Scoop, the horrific, large scale Canadian government effort to forcibly remove Indigenous children from their families of birth and eradicate their Indigenous culture and language, by placing them in foster families between 1960 and the late 1980s.

**Drew Hayden Taylor** is an Ojibway author, playwright and journalist from the Curve Lake First Nation.

**Tina House** is a video journalist with APTN, the Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network and has covered Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women’s stories for years.

**Michael Hutchinson** is a former National anchor for APTN, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network and an expert on First Nations self-governance and land issues.

**Tanya Kappo** is an Alberta lawyer and activist from Sturgeon Lake First Nation.

**Dr. Anita Olsen Harper** is Ojibwa from the Lac Seul First Nation and holds a PhD in Education from the University of Ottawa. She is the widow of Elijah Harper, former Liberal Member of Parliament and Chief of Red Sucker Lake, Manitoba.

**Angela Sterritt** is an award-winning Gitxsan journalist and artist who has covered the MMIW story both as a freelancer and for CBC television and radio.

**Jennifer Wood** is the campaign manager and executive assistant to Manitoba Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson.
Appendix B: Recording Transcript & Link to Recording

**Me:** “On August 3, 2016, Canada’s Liberal government announced the start of an Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, or MMIW, making good on their promise from the previous year's election.

But, what does this mean to Indigenous people living in Canada, many of whom have waited decades for this Inquiry?

Welcome to: *Where Did That Come From? Indigenous Activists Discuss the Creation of Canada’s National MMIW Inquiry.*

I’m Lorimer Shenher. I’m a former Vancouver Police detective and the author of *That Lonely Section of Hell: The Botched Investigation of a Serial Killer Who Almost Got Away*, my own account of searching for Vancouver’s missing women.

I spoke with several Indigenous writers, artists, activists, politicians, and lawyers to hear their impressions of the conditions causing this tragedy and of the events that led to the creation of a national Inquiry.

The families of the women and Indigenous activists have been advocating for this Inquiry for nearly twenty years. I wanted to hear their voices and thoughts on how this Inquiry has come to be. I wanted to understand how this MMIW inquiry fits into the larger picture of reconciling Canada’s colonial roots with the hope of a better future for Indigenous peoples.

What events spurred the new Liberal government to call a federal inquiry? What current and historical factors place Indigenous women in the crosshairs of predators? What must change for this tragedy to end?

The people I interviewed took me deeper than the issues of the past several years, back to Contact, when white ‘settlers’ first came ashore on what would become known as Canada.

What were some of the cases that struck at the heart of Canadians to help bring this issue into the mainstream?”

**Michael Hutchinson:** For me, Helen Betty Osborne. I’m from Manitoba, I’m a Manitoba boy and growing up, that was the case I heard about growing up. To me, that was sort of like the seed that everything sprouted from.

**Julie Bomberry:** Cindy Gladhue.

**Jennifer Wood:** Helen Betty Osborne.
Tina House: I think what really struck a cord for everyone was Tina Fontaine, to be found in that sack in the Red River.

Tanya Kappo: I think definitely what happened with Tina Fontaine and Renelle Harper.

Linda Epp: The Robert Pickton investigation brought issues of missing and murdered Indigenous women to the forefront. That was world-wide news. That investigation brought everything to the forefront where it was worldwide news. It brought things to a different level.

Music.

Me: Tina House is a video journalist with APTN, the Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network and has covered Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women’s stories for years.

Tina House: When the former Prime Minister Harper said that it wasn't high on his radar, I think that just set everybody off, and it's like okay, this is ridiculous, it's now time to vote this guy out of office and let's get someone who says they want to do something.

Me: Angela Sterritt is an award-winning Gitxsan journalist and artist who has covered the MMIW story both as a freelancer and for CBC television and radio.

Angela Sterrett: The reason we have an Inquiry is a new government got in and most of the people I spoke with were voting as an activist vote. They were voting to get the old government out and get a new government in. And, in large part that had to do with the Inquiry. That shocked people. That rocked the heart of Indigenous Nations when Stephen Harper said ‘Oh, you’re not on our radar.’ For many Indigenous people, that was a huge deal.

The Liberal government got in and that was something that had to be done, as soon as he got into power, was to have the Inquiry. And then you see, moments later, Rona Ambrose - who was the one who took away Status of Women's funding and NWAC funding, saying they were now championing this issue. And that was just, you know, such a WOW moment for me.

Me: As a BC-based journalist, Tina House watched the Highway of Tears cases pile up with little action for years. More than twenty First Nations communities border British Columbia’s Highway 16, the province’s most travelled east-west route in the north. Since 1969, at least nineteen women and girls have gone missing or been murdered along the 720 km stretch between the towns of Prince Rupert and Prince George. Their cases received very little attention. Until a non-Native woman went missing.

Tina House: Indigenous women have been murdered or gone missing along that highway for decades. Nobody seemed to notice or nobody even seemed to care. Except the family members and the First Nations people. But the broader community didn’t
care. The media didn’t pick up any of these stories until that tree planter went missing, Nicole Hoar. And then it was almost like all of a sudden ‘oh, my goodness! What do you mean there’s more victims?’ Wow, let’s get on this.

**Me:** The Native Women’s Association of Canada or NWAC is a national organization and has provided much of the thrust for an MMIW inquiry over the years. Their Sisters in Spirit initiative—a policy, research, and education program created for and by Indigenous women—worked to push MMIW into the national conversation. Dr. Anita Olsen Harper is Ojibwa from the Lac Seul First Nation and holds a PhD in Education from the University of Ottawa. She is the widow of Elijah Harper, former Liberal Member of Parliament and Chief of Red Sucker Lake, Manitoba.

**Anita Olsen Harper:** The Harper government, of course, had shut down Sisters in Spirit by denying it its funding. And it hit NWAC by withdrawing the funds for its President’s salary. Can you imagine if the president of a national political organization was expected to do his or her job for free? That’s pretty unthinkable but that what the Harper government did. So, most of the Indigenous population was so sick of Harper by this time and clearly saw how actively Harper was working against us, for example, Harper said the MMIW issue was quote “studied to death” end of quote. Think about the choice of words, how arrogant and condescending.

**Me:** Prolific writer Drew Hayden Taylor is an Ojibway author, playwright and journalist from the Curve Lake First Nation.

**Drew Hayden Taylor:** I think it was like the proverbial snowball going down the road, you know, you had Idle No More, you had all these different things happening, that just sort of shone some light on the overall issue. Until it got to a point, as I said, there was an ignition point where it would be very, very silly not to at least respond to the increasing Native concern.

**Me:** In your travels, did you hear a lot of non-Indigenous people talking about Idle No More?

**DHT:** Not in everyday conversation, like on the subway or at the airport. You’d see it referred to by columnists in the paper and commentators and things like that but I don’t think the average person on the street had an overall, well-established knowledge of the Idle No More movement, above and beyond being stuck in traffic as there was a round dance going on at the corner of Dundas and Yonge. Some would honk in protest, others would honk in support and often times you couldn’t tell the difference.

**Me:** The history of Colonization in Canada, the creation of the Indian Act, the Fur Trade, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into Indian Residential Schools also known as the TRC—these are all big factors in the lives of Indigenous peoples. Anita Olsen Harper, how do these issues lead to violence against Indigenous women?

**AOH:** I’d like to talk about one historic reason. This one began with the imposition of colonial rule in what we now call Canada and it goes back to the Fur Trade. In these
societies, when Indigenous women were considered ideal wives by the European men and this was because they were the essential economic and linguistic link to their own nation. They were very good in meeting the survival needs of what European traders saw as harsh wilderness. Of course, they themselves never saw it in this light, this was their home. They mediated and knew the environment and this heightened their husbands’ standing as successful businessmen in the fur trade. But, in 1820, around those years, the Hudson Bay Company lifted a ban against white women in its posts so as settlement included more and more white women, Native women fell in status within the new society.

The image of who was ideal as future wife and mother had shifted in favour of single white women. White people were seen as superior to Indigenous people, then, correspondingly, white women were seen as superior to Indigenous women. And these sentiments became further entrenched and conscious efforts were extended that focused on alienating Indigenous women from respectable society.

Me: Tanya Kappo is an Alberta lawyer and activist from Sturgeon Lake First Nation. Tanya, what are some of the things over this country’s history that created this Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women tragedy?

Tanya Kappo: Well, I’ve been thinking about this a lot because Canada is celebrating its 150 years, as an Indigenous woman, I feel like what is there to celebrate? And I have to fight myself to not feel anything but resentment and rage that this 150 years would be celebrated when I feel like it’s been at the expense of Indigenous people and Indigenous women in particular. I can’t help but feel that this 150 years of colonization, the ultimate result is missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Me: Michael Hutchinson is a former APTN national news host and expert on First Nations land issues.

Michael, what issues do you feel led us to where we are today?

Michael Hutchinson: There’s a lot of historical trauma that leads to what’s happening today. And then it leads, it affects our men and who are often the source of the violence in many cases. And an unhealthy community creates unhealthy people. There is a ladder that goes from the top right from democracy and how you’re governed right down all the way down to the individual level. And there has to be feedback between those two things, in order for people to create a healthy nest and First Nations people, Indigenous people in certain areas under certain legal systems haven’t been able to create their healthy nest for 100 years.

Tanya Kappo: The dialogue around Indian residential schools didn’t exist the way that it does now, so my thinking is always that while providing adequate resources to Indigenous people is important, it’s not the only answer. There has to be some will within the indigenous communities also and part of that is becoming aware of the real history of what happened and why, which makes the Residential schools conversation a very critical one.
**Me:** Jennifer Wood is the campaign manager and executive assistant to Manitoba Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson.

**Jennifer Wood:** When I was doing the Residential Schools file for six years, I had to understand what I was doing before I could really roll up my sleeves and have the passion on this file where I came across that paragraph where John Dobbs said, “a child’s self concept emerges from the way he thinks you see him.”

So the nuns and the priests and the brothers and the superintendents and the lawmakers and everybody, if I’m a student in a school and I can feel how you think of me, that’s gonna do a lot of damage on my worth as a person. So, a lot of our people came out of those schools not feeling worthy of anything.

Okay, I’m a woman, and I want to find a person that’s going to, that I’m going to relate to, that’s gonna control me and then I’m gonna find a man, to tell me what to do, and I’m going to still go under that glove of not feeling worthy. And then I have children and then they don’t feel worthy, that’s the whole intergenerational impact.

**Me:** Linda Epp is a member of the Sechelt First Nation, an organizer for Sisters in Spirit in Whistler and a child of the Sixties Scoop, the horrific, large scale Canadian government effort to forcibly remove Indigenous children from their families of birth and eradicate their Indigenous culture and language, by placing them in foster families between 1960 and the late 1980s.

Do you feel that because of your being placed in the family that you got placed in, do you feel privilege? Do you feel that your have come from some privilege or is that sort of negated by the circumstances of how you got there?

**Linda Epp:** That’s a really hard question because I’m a twin, my twin sister and I – even though we’re twins – we’re very opposite. And she went one way and I went another. So, I feel privileged in terms of the fact that I have a voice, I’m here, I’m First Nations, and I advocate on behalf of Aboriginal people, First Nations people, so I feel privileged because of that. My twin sister, she gave up her status, she says she’s Filipino, she doesn’t, she thinks totally different. Though we’re subject to whatever happened to us, it’s no fault of mine, it’s just how I was. I don’t really feel privilege because the life I have had with the family I was adopted into wasn’t great. I was taught certain things that made me the human I am today.

**LE:** When I went to school, at the Native Education college, I met all these aboriginal people, it was, you know it was the first time I actually felt good, you know? And who I was. It was really powerful. And that’s what made, that’s what inspired me. I had no idea about a lot of stuff. I felt in my heart this is who I was, this is where I belonged and this is who I am.

**Me:** Julie Bomberry is the Clan mother for Cayuga Nation, Turtle Clan of the Haudenosaunee (Hoe din o show nee) and a manager of Ganohkwasra Family Assault
Support Service on Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. In non-Native Canadian culture, stereotyping of Indigenous peoples continues, affecting the way missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls are viewed. Julie Bomberry, what are some examples of this?

Julie Bomberry: You think about all these different forms of colonization that have occurred and the beliefs and the stereotypes have been created from these events and they’re still in existence today, it happens in sports, it happens everywhere. One of the examples as far as stereotypes is those labels and how different it is. I was in Vancouver when that big riot was, because of the Stanley Cup. We were watching the news and there was this young fella, non-Native fella and he set this police car on fire, but before that, he was jumping up and down on it, like on the hood and then they caught it on fire. And then the media portrayed him as a “hooligan”, “the hooligan was arrested” and I thought about the Caledonia land claim issue when our men set the tires on fire and they were considered terrorists in the media.

Me: And they’re just a pile of tires.

JB: We have a hooligan in Vancouver over the Stanley Cup and a terrorist in Caledonia. It goes to those places of “savages” – we still hear that terminology, “oh, they’re a savage” and think of those terms, they’re so degrading. And even our women, they’re calling them squaws and this is very insulting.

I’ll use one of the drunk Indian, because alcohol was introduced during the Fur Trade and again, from teachings, alcohol wasn’t part, we didn’t have alcohol, it was considered their medicine, this wasn’t our medicine. When you think about how that alcohol split families, because our men would come back and they maybe would have used their money, or used whatever resources were given to them in exchange for alcohol, use those resources for those pelts, and then again coming home under the influence, and again, that’s where I believe family violence, sexual violence has occurred. But also while they were gone, right? There were different ‘settlers’ that abused our families that were left there, right? And one of the things we still hear is the Drunken Indian, that stereotype.

Me: Indigenous men and boys have historically faced levels of violence far higher than their non-Native Canadian counterparts, but only recently has the call to investigate this tragedy reached beyond Indigenous communities. Now, some activists are suggesting men and boys be included in the national MMIW Inquiry, while others are resistant, citing the unique factors Indigenous women face in their lives that expose them to gender-based violence.

Despite the fact that Residential Schools no longer operate in Canada, Indigenous boys in the Thunder Bay area who have left home to attend schools off reserve form part of a growing unsolved murder mystery as several have been found drowned in local rivers surrounding the area.
**Me:** You were talking about missing and murdered Indigenous men and from your perspective, in your view is it a much bigger problem than people are aware of?

**Drew Hayden Taylor:** I think people are becoming more and more aware. It’s a gradual growing awareness, it was the same with Residential Schools, it was the way with the Scoop Up, it was the way with this, it’s just like peeling back the onion, or unwrapping the present, you find out about it and you look closer and closer and the issue begins to grow and grow and grow until you can’t believe that you did not know about this or that you had neglected to observe this. I don’t know so much if it was a growing issue, it was always there. Sometimes, Canadian society is somewhat myopic and the gaze needs to be directed toward individual issues.

**Me:** When I first started hearing people talking about it, I thought, oh come on, I mean, I know there is a lot of violence against Indigenous men and obviously a lot of racism. I was like you, I started thinking to myself “am I just excluding them because I think that the women are the bigger issue or am I actually closing my eyes to something that’s a real problem”? I started digging into it and realizing it is a huge thing, and again, it’s the by-product of racism and colonialism and and everything that’s happened.

**Drew:** I refer to it as PCSD - post colonial stress disorder.

**Me:** Anita some of the Chiefs have called for an exploration of missing and murdered Indigenous men as well. What are your thoughts on that? We’re seeing these young boys going missing in Ontario and ending up in the river, how do you feel about that being explored?

**Anita Olsen Harper:** I don’t believe it should be in the MMIW inquiry, I believe it should be acknowledged within the MMIW inquiry, it should be very clearly stated that this is not about missing boys or violence against men and boys and I really even can’t explain to you why I feel so strongly about this but I really think that any Inquiry, any writing, should talk about what it’s not addressing so that people don’t get all defensive and attacking and saying “well you talk about this and why didn’t you talk about that”?

**Me:** Jennifer Wood, how important is it, do you feel, for white people to add their voices to these issues?

**Jennifer Wood:** It’s really important because you have to look at things, at anything in society that yes, that if this is happening to our people, it’s happening to their people, too. It’s happening to all women. There’s a conscience out there now that I see in Canada that non-Native people are seeing that they want to become a part of it because the elephant’s exposed.

**Tanya Kappo:** For non-Indigenous people to be more open to hearing about Indigenous things, they have to hear it from their non-Indigenous counterparts that they have a lot of respect for. I could go talking about this all the time for the rest of my life and not effect any change, but someone like Gord Downie writes a book, does a new album, and the whole country is listening. People who have that kind of stature or are
even within their own communities, they don’t even have to be famous, but they could be someone within a city or town who has a lot of influence in the non-Indigenous community who can start talking about it in a way that people will listen.

Angela Sterritt: Often, I hear people say, ‘well, what can we do to help you?’ I mean, that’s so common and it seems great, well not great, but it seems like, you know, yeah we want to help you and I always say ‘what can you do to help yourself?’ You’re holding these stereotypes, stereotypes are responsible for a lot of things like racism, what can you do to help yourself understand that? I hear a lot, ‘these girls shouldn’t be hitchhiking, these girls should’ve known better’ well maybe you should educate yourself on things like poverty, I hear things like ‘oh well, my family rolled up on the shores of Cape Breton and we had nothing’. Well, you didn’t have the Indian Act to legislate every single step you took, you didn’t have the Pass System forced upon you where you weren’t even allowed to leave your home, you didn’t have people breaking down your doors literally and taking your children and sexually and physically abusing them for their entire childhood life.

You didn’t have a system of apartheid that designated that you were a person that was deemed to die through the Indian Act literally, it was to kill the Indian in the child. We were thought of as something that was to be destroyed so other people could make way in our communities.

Your common law systems are dictating what and how Indigenous women’s lives are circumscribed in that how many murders do we see that are being solved? How often are the cases being taken seriously?

Jennifer Wood: It’s slow but it’s happening. I see the example of MMIW, for instance, these groups are coming together, I attended a function down in Kincardine, Ontario with our Grand Chief and all that whole auditorium was elderly white people. Now, where the hell would you ever see that? Ever. In a little town in Ontario. In a gym. We can’t stop putting it in front of the faces of the government, and the legislators of the day, you see more first Nations people running in politics and getting inside the door. And as our late friend Elijah Harper always said, if you want change, then get inside the door where they’re making policies on your life.

Conclusion:

Me: I am deeply grateful to my nine Indigenous guests for sharing their thoughts and perceptions on the factors which created Canada’s national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

They have reiterated what is often the case with so-called overnight successes: that many years of dedication and hard work by family members and activists caused this inquiry to be called.

The Harper Government’s ignorance of the issue served as a last straw to further invigorate Indigenous activists and compel the opposition parties in the 2015 federal
election to commit to calling an inquiry. Upon election, the Liberal government pledged to hold that inquiry, which is underway now.

The tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous Women is an horrific by-product of racism, sexism, and intergenerational trauma arising from the violence and abuse in Residential Schools.

It is the culmination of Canada’s history as a colonizer of its Indigenous peoples and the Indian Act’s underlying purpose, which was to destroy First Peoples’ culture and uniqueness in the name of assimilation. The introduction of alcohol to Indigenous communities during the Fur Trade began a cycle of dependency, family violence, and substance misuse many continue to suffer within.

As John A. MacDonald said in 1887, "The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change."

Canada’s Indigenous people have fought with courage and resilience to resist this change. They have fought to survive and demand an investigation into the deaths and disappearances of their beloved mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunts. Their survival and resilience do not mitigate the damage colonialism has done to their culture and to their women who have gone missing and been murdered. Merely calling a national MMIW inquiry does not mitigate this tragedy.

The TRC ignited the reconciliation conversation, but many of that commission’s 93 recommendations have yet to be implemented. If conducted properly, this MMIW inquiry could highlight the practical positive impacts the TRC recommendations would have on the lives of Indigenous women and girls. But simply calling inquiries and enacting commissions is not enough to change attitudes.

The MMIW Inquiry is an opportunity to stop this ongoing tragedy by exploring and confronting Canada’s colonizing history and picking up the torch of reconciliation lit by the TRC. All of Canada owes it to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls to invest the time and energy in this inquiry to do it right.

**Link to Where Did That Come From?**


References


Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. (December 2014). *Tri-council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans*. 


