

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Razack, Sherene H. *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 310 pp., \$32.95 paper (9781442628915)

On December 8, 2015 the Liberal government vowed to launch a national public inquiry into the approximately 1,200 (as suggested by the RCMP) missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. This decision follows a prolonged reluctance by the federal government to acknowledge and examine this issue. In light of this recent turn of events, Sherene Razack's thought provoking book titled *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody* is a relevant and timely contribution to both academic and public debates. Using publicly available transcripts from inquests and inquiries in British Columbia and Saskatchewan, this book examines the official narrative that arises out of recent official investigations into the deaths of Indigenous men and women in Canadian custody.

Razack begins by recounting the story of an Indigenous man named Paul Alphonse, whose experience inspired the book. Alphonse died in a hospital while in police custody. In an inquest into his death, there was little attention paid to the large purple boot print found on his chest by his niece. Instead, the inquest focused mainly on Alphonse's alcoholism. Razack's central question in this book is why Indigenous death is always framed as something that is timely, something that is often unpreventable, and where the state actors remain blameless. Through the examination of different case studies, Razack successfully demonstrates how the inquests or inquiries present an official story of the "disappearing Indian" and the "benevolent" white settlers who try to assist Indigenous people into modernity. Through examining witness testimonies from state actors, the author argues that the narratives that emerge out of inquests and inquiries depict Indigenous people as unable to cope with modern life and that this occurs despite the numerous attempts Indigenous people make to resist this narrative in official records. She asserts that if inquests and inquiries succeed in showcasing Indigenous people as a dying race, then their deaths are seen as timely and something that cannot be prevented. In rare instances, inquests and inquiries will recognize that colonialism plays a part in the damage done to Indigenous bod-

ies, however Razack points out that “acknowledgement does not extend to responsibility” in these instances (19).

Using various theorists from the postcolonial tradition, Razack convincingly argues that the tendency for inquests and inquiries to focus on the individual pathologies (e.g. alcoholism, mental illness) of the victims deflects attention away from the deep structural issues and strained relations between the police and Indigenous people. It takes the attention away from the systematic disregard for Indigenous lives by the state, police and health-care professionals. Instead, inquests and inquiries through the use of “expert evidence” often serve to mask the ongoing violence against Indigenous people at the hands of state actors. Medical knowledge (e.g. excited delirium syndrome in Chapter 5), is often used to demonstrate how Indigenous people are a population that is hard to care for and who are responsible for their own demise. Through the use of numerous examples, including the specific stories of Paul Alphonse, Frank Paul, Neil Stonechild and other Indigenous men and women, Razack argues how inquiries and inquests find settlers as only being guilty of not knowing how to care and that this narrative is retold repeatedly. The author argues that what is rarely acknowledged through the legal performances of inquests and inquiries is the role that colonialism continues to play in the lives of Indigenous people.

This book would have benefited from the inclusion of a detailed discussion of the methodology employed by the author. It was not clear from the presented text how many transcripts were examined, which historical periods were covered, what the selection criteria was for the inclusion of texts, or the analytical approach/coding procedures used. There was also no mention of how many interviews were conducted or how they were structured. These are important issues for social scientists to address. Their inclusion would enable the reader to more effectively evaluate the claims the author makes based on this evidence. For example, did the author systematically sample inquiries? Was the coding of inquest records done manually or through computer-assisted methods (e.g. NVivo)? In the case of the latter, were procedures (e.g. coding comparison queries) executed to ensure the reliability of the findings? In light of the highly politicized nature of the issues addressed in the text, this would ensure that the important contributions it makes are viewed as legitimate not only within the academy but also within the broader public and policy community.

A wide ranging audience would benefit from reading this accessible and theoretically intricate book, not just those in academia. This book comes at an opportune time when Black Lives Matter Toronto succeeded in getting the Ontario government to call an inquest into the death of

a Black man named Andrew Loku, who was fatally shot by the police in July, 2015. While Razack's book is focused on the specific issue of Indigenous deaths in custody, it can be applied to inquest and inquiries into the deaths of racialized people more generally. The book leaves the reader questioning whether a new narrative will emerge from the future inquest and inquiries into missing and murdered Indigenous women or the death of Andrew Loku and many others at the hands of the police and other state actors. Will a new narrative that does not blame the victim for causing his or her own downfall, or one that does not cite "cultural differences" as the problem that lies between police and Indigenous or Black relations, eventually emerge? Will future inquests and inquiries acknowledge the ongoing colonialism taking place in Canada? Such questions are difficult to answer at this point, and Razack's book offers some important suggestions.

Overall, Razack's book points to the need for inquests and inquiries to meaningfully acknowledge the failure to care for by police and health-care professionals and place the violence imposed on Indigenous bodies within a context of ongoing colonialism. Otherwise, these legal performances become merely symbolic. In the conclusion, she reminds non-Indigenous people of the importance and urgency of standing in solidarity and supporting Indigenous sovereignty. She reminds settlers (both white and people of colour) of the need to recognize and confront the ways in which they have and continue to benefit from colonialism. This book calls upon the reader to imagine a new way of living, one that does not partake in the colonial project's disappearance of Indigenous people.

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