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Lost and Forgotten: Sex Workers on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

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ABSTRACT: From 1978 to 2002, more than 60 women went missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, an area that has often been described as "Canada's poorest postal code". For decades, families of the area's missing women filed police reports and engaged with the media about their vanished loved ones, however little headway was made in the case until ten years later, when the Vancouver Sun began publishing a series of stories on the women that drew provincial and national attention. Motivated by citizen dissent and accusations of negligence, The Vancouver Police Department and the RCMP finally launched a joint task force, resulting in the arrest and conviction of Robert "Willie" Pickton, a pig farmer from Port Coquitlam, for the serial murders of street-involved women. The subsequent excavation of the Pickton property became the largest criminal investigation in Canadian history, spanning several years and costing tens of millions of dollars. However, the danger and violence that plagued women on the Downtown Eastside remained largely the same for many years after Pickton's arrest. While media coverage narrated Pickton as a single deranged male, this narrative effectively eliminated the context of the broader social background that thrust these women into harm's way. In this paper, I will discuss the racialization, spatialization, and class distinctions that heavily influence women's participation in the sex trade, as well the media narratives that enable an understanding of Pickton as a violent outlier. The research shows that despite these narratives, violence against marginalized women is a part of the normative social order, which is precisely what allows violent men to function without apprehension in these communities for so long. As you will read, violence against women cannot be described as simply the action of a few bad apples, but is instead a larger part of a "continuum of violence" enacted against already marginalized women.

Keywords: MMIWG, Robert Pickton, sexual violence, street-level sex work

From 1978 to 2002, more than 60 women went missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, an area that has often been described as "Canada's poorest postal code" (Hugill, 2010:11). For decades, families of the area's missing women filed police reports and engaged with media about their vanished loved ones, even establishing an annual commemorative march to raise awareness in 1991, known as the Valentine's Day Walk to Remember ("Robert Pickton Case", 2017). However, little headway was made in the case until ten years later when

the *Vancouver Sun* began publishing a series of stories on the women that began to draw provincial and national attention to the issue. Motivated by citizen dissent and accusations of negligence, The Vancouver Police Department and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police launched a joint task force known as Project Evenhanded (or the Missing Women Task Force) which eventually resulted in the arrest and conviction of Robert "Willie" Pickton, a pig farmer from Port Coquitlam ("Robert Pickton Case", 2017). Bones, DNA, and personal items belonging to at least 33 of

the missing women were found on the Pickton property, and Pickton later made a jailhouse confession to an undercover cop of a further 16 murders, bringing the total number of victims to 49 (Burgmann, 2012). The subsequent excavation of the Pickton property became the largest criminal investigation in Canadian history, spanning several years and costing tens of millions of dollars (Cameron, 2007; Culhane, 2003).

Yet the danger and violence that plagued women on the Downtown Eastside remained largely the same for many years after Pickton's arrest. Media coverage continually narrated Pickton and his attacks under the frame of the "single deranged male", a psychopathic killer driven by mental instability to cause death and destruction. This, among other narratives, effectively eliminated the context of the broader social background that thrust these women into harm's way. The news media leaned heavily on poverty, homelessness, and addiction as explanations for the women's victimization rather than reactions to their marginalization. In this paper, I will discuss the racialization, spatialization, and class distinctions that heavily influence Downtown Eastside women's participation in the sex trade, as well the media narratives that enable an understanding of the missing women as complicit in their victimization.

Known to locals as the "Low Track" for its expansive market of inexpensive sexual services, the sex worker stroll in Downtown Vancouver is an area that has long been sequestered, intended to act as a catch-all for the deviant ne'er-do-wells of the inner city, providing both a location and an explanation for Vancouver's undesirables (Greene, 2001:1). Of the Downtown Eastside's approximately 16,000 residents, it is estimated that roughly 5,000 of them are addicts or active drug users, and the intersection of Main and Hastings (or "Pain and Wastings") is often referred to as an open-

air drug market, impossible to police (Cameron, 2007; Culhane, 2003:594). While estimates as to the number of sex workers on the Downtown Eastside are unreliable at best, it is estimated that their numbers also range in the thousands, with their drug addiction regularly posited as an explanation for their cheap tricks (Hugill, 2014:137). This flood of street-level sex-trade workers to the Downtown Eastside was largely motivated by civilian movements in the late 80s and early 90s aimed at removing prostitution from residential and suburban neighbourhoods, with residents protesting the "nuisance" that sex work was sure to bring to their communities (Hugill, 2010; Lowman, 2000). As a result, instead of attempting to eliminate prostitution, police chose to displace it to more fitting locales that had already been labeled as deviant. This, alongside changing laws and police crackdowns on indoor sex work pushed more women onto the street than ever before (Pitman, 2002:179).

Towards the end of the 20th century, the Downtown Eastside spiral into economic despair was well underway and was an issue which was only compounded by the concentration of society's most marginalized folks into one distinct geographical area. At the time of the disappearances, the average annual income on the Downtown Eastside was just over \$12,000, several points below the national poverty line. The unemployment rate in the area was nearly three times that of the rest of the city (Cameron, 2007; Culhane, 2003:596). Thanks to cuts by the British Columbia government of nearly 30% to social programs in the 1990s, welfare shelter stipends in Vancouver plummeted to just \$325 per month (Cameron, 2007; Hugill, 2010). The booming real estate prices across the city made most options for shelter unavailable, and as a result SROs or single room occupancy hotels, almost all of which were located on the Downtown Eastside, became the only feasible option for the city's poor, often charging

monthly rent at the exact value of a welfare cheque (Cameron, 2007). On top of this, only six beds were available for women in the local detox program, which was a mandatory first-step before being referred to public healthcare rehab programs (Cameron, 2007:XIII). Thus, many were left poor, homeless, and addicted, leaving them few other options than to stay on the Downtown Eastside and resort to illicit means of making money.

All of these factors, alongside an HIV epidemic that rocked the Downtown Eastside in 1997, served to pathologize the area as a site of sickness and contagion that became inherently interlinked with poverty. The establishment of this “collection zone” for deviants functioned to position the space as products of deviant people, instead of the people as products of the marginalized space. This encouraged the public to visualize the Downtown Eastside’s citizens as culpable in their own “degeneracy and [...] vile criminality,” effectively placing blame on society’s most vulnerable members for their continued and cyclical abuse (Hugill, 2010:81). The distinction of a space for these people, a colloquial “sin city”, inclines us to see them as othered from “ordinary” citizens (Hugill, 2014:131; Gilchrist, 2010:375). A prime example of this can be seen in the “Missing” posters disseminated by police, which labeled the women exclusively as citizens of the Downtown Eastside, not Vancouver (Pitman, 2002:176). Participation in “bad neighbourhoods” was identified as an individual decision, for which violence and death were appropriate consequences (Pitman, 2002:180).

It is also critical to note the gendered nature of poverty on the Downtown Eastside. It is estimated that upwards of 75% of the women working the streets are mothers, many of whom are single parents (Culhane, 2003:597; Greene, 2001:23). As a single parent having to provide for two, mothers are often even further under the poverty line than

their other Downtown Eastside counterparts—some garnering less than 50% of the poverty line figure (Hugill, 2010:38). The economic disarray provides little by way of local employment, and welfare payments cannot begin to cover exigent costs of daycare and transportation that would be necessary to attend a “normal” job. Where men can turn to drug dealing and trafficking, women are more likely to turn to sex work to subsidize what little income they get (Culhane, 2003:601). Further, those living in poverty are significantly more likely to have their children taken away, which creates the potential for a deeply traumatic separation that could push women even farther into the arms of addiction (Hugill, 2010:38).

Another critical factor in the marginalization present here is the Indigeneity of many Downtown Eastside residents. It is estimated that anywhere from 50-80% of the women who work the Low Track are Indigenous, despite comprising only 2% of the population of Vancouver (Hugill, 2010:47; Razack, 2016:294). Many Indigenous women flee their reserves or hometowns to urban centers like Vancouver to escape abuse and domestic violence. Because of this, there are equal numbers of Indigenous men and women in the community, despite the male population of the Downtown Eastside being three times the female one in size (Hugill, 2010:51). Violence is an unfortunately common reality for Indigenous women in Canada: Indigenous women aged 25 to 55 are five times more likely to die violently than any other demographic (Gilchrist, 2010:373). Culhane, Lindberg et al., and Razack all agree that this violence is a deeply ingrained side-effect of centuries of colonial domination (2003; 2012; 2016). They argue that violence is a method of imposing dominance on Indigenous bodies, and this is especially true in the context of sexual violence, where “the value of their bodies in the social order is made clear” through regular threats and physical

reminders of subjugation (Razack, 2016:291). Drawing on the racial slur “squaw”, Gilchrist explores how Indigenous women have historically been labeled from birth as licentious and in need of civilizing (2010:384). This perception, Razack argues, positions Indigenous women as always “on the stroll” whether they’re working or not, likening girls on the street to slaves on an auction block (2016:294). Enabled by seemingly constant media representations of Indigenous women and girls as “fallen women” of the streets, Indigenous women, especially on the Downtown Eastside, are racially marked as readily available for domination and “inherently rapeable” (Hugill, 2010:57; Razack, 2016:293). Ultimately, anywhere from 33 to 67% of Willie Pickton’s total victims were Indigenous women, and comprised four of the six murders for which he was eventually convicted (Hugill, 2010:46).

In discussing the social reactions to colonialism that are visible on the Downtown Eastside like addiction and prostitution, news media have regularly ignored the colonial background that sets the stage for marginalization. Despite the frequency of the violence committed against them, it is often Indigenous women’s identities that are completely erased in the news. Gilchrist uses the term “symbolic annihilation” to describe the ways Indigenous women are excluded and ignored in the public eye and cautions that when the abuses of Indigenous women are ignored by the news media, the message is disseminated that such women are easy to target without reprimand (2010:385). These tightly interwoven aspects of life on the Downtown Eastside, like race, class, and gender come together to position very specific categories of women in “the lower echelons of moral order”, thus providing justification for the atrocities committed against them and creating a “discourse of disposal” (Jiwani and Young, 2006:902; Lowman, 2000:1003). The

reduction of Indigenous women’s bodies to objects available for purchase, described by Alexander Weheliye as “thingness”, serves to remove the humanity of these women and condone brutality against them (Razack, 2016:295).

If all of these suffocating social factors weren’t enough, the precarious position of the women on the Downtown Eastside is only worsened by their proximity to law enforcement and the Canadian justice system. While sex work itself is not technically illegal in Canada, Criminal Code provisions enacted in 1985 applied limitations on the ways sex work could be conducted. Section 213, which stipulated that sex workers may not communicate for the purpose of selling sexual services, became a key tool for police in cracking down on sex work in Vancouver. These changes encouraged strict legal enforcement of systemic social issues as opposed to politically mandated assistance for the most disenfranchised (Hugill, 2014:154). Many advocates and sex workers have made note of the “two-tier” police system in Vancouver— “one for the Downtown Eastside and one for everywhere else” (Pitman, 2002:176). Despite only comprising 5-20% of the sex worker population, street-level prostitutes consistently receive the most confrontation from police (Hugill, 2010:43). The nature of this precarious relationship with the law encourages sex workers to move away from visible, public spaces, isolating themselves and increasing their vulnerability to rape, beatings, robberies, and death in an effort to avoid persecution. After the introduction of these legal grey zones in the 1980s, there was an almost immediate increase in the murders of sex workers in British Columbia, and the near prohibition of sexual services only furthered women’s marginalization (Lowman, 2000:1003).

When non-fatal violence occurs, sex workers are unlikely to report to the police, fearing arrest for confessing to their

solicitation (Cameron, 2007). As John Lowman writes, “Why would prostitutes turn to the police for help when the police are responsible for enforcing laws against prostitutes?” (2000:1007). Further facilitating the distrust of police is a long history of neglect and disinterest on the part of officers in the Downtown Eastside. Girls working the street told reporters of long response times to domestic and street violence that discouraged them from reporting serious offenses, and multiple women reported a flat-out refusal by officers to file missing persons reports on their friends (Culhane, 2003). One woman reported begging police to file a report on her friend for days on end, to which they replied: “No, go down to the needle exchange and leave her a message there” (Hugill, 2010:10). Sereena Abbotsway, whose remains were later found at Pickton’s residence, reported her friend Angela Jardine missing before her own disappearance. Police repeatedly refused to file the report and told Abbotsway that Jardine was alive and well and they had seen her on the streets. It was later proved that Jardine had been already been dead by the time Abbotsway made the report, proving the authorities’ view of Indigenous (or Indigenous *appearing*) women as homogenous and interchangeable (Cameron, 2007:XVI).

The VPD also consistently and decidedly refused the presence of a serial killer trawling the Downtown Eastside, and refused recommendations to utilize geographic and psychological profiling services based in Ontario, which had been compared in prestige to the Behavioural Analysis Unit of the FBI (Jiwani & Young, 2006:897; Greene, 2001:6). Instead, the pushback from police often positioned the women as responsible for their victimization. Frequently they utilized the dog whistle phrase “high-risk lifestyle” to explain away the harm that met them as a by-product of their predetermined life’s path (Razack, 2016:

297). This perspective enables an understanding that “those women are disposable and violence can be committed against them with impunity” (Pitman, 2002:175).

These conceptualizations of the Downtown Eastside as inherently criminal and unworthy of police protections were echoed by government officials, including Vancouver Mayor Philip Owen. When asked if he would consider providing a reward for information about the missing women, Owen stated that it was “inappropriate” to use public funds to provide “a location service for prostitutes” (Culhane, 2003; Hugill, 2010; Lowman, 2000). In contrast, just months before the Mayor’s comments a \$100,000 reward was offered in an effort to solve a series of non-violent break-ins and thefts in neighbourhoods outside of the Downtown Eastside (Hugill, 2010:11).

All of this is compounded by the systemic colonialism often intertwined with authoritative agencies. The imposition of a largely white police force on a largely Indigenous population only accentuates the adversarial nature of police and citizen contact on the Downtown Eastside. As Lindberg et al. discuss, the Canadian justice system is not structured around the needs and conditions of Indigenous peoples. Thusly, the appointing of a non-Indigenous authoritative body that utilizes non-Indigenous personnel is “a relevant fact” when it comes to analyzing how the women of the Downtown Eastside were able to be ignored and forgotten (Culhane, 2003:105).

The negligence and apathy of police can be further exemplified through an exploration of Willie Pickton’s arrest in 1997. For years Pickton had driven the roads of the Downtown Eastside after visiting the rendering plants in Vancouver’s industrial district. He would sit in local pubs and talk to the working girls, offering them money for drugs and inviting them back to his trailer in

Port Coquitlam to “party” and stay the night. As Stevie Cameron described him, “He knew everyone and liked to be the big spender” (2007:150). In the Spring of 1997, Pickton brought a woman back to his property and after plying her with drugs, he refused payment and began to apply handcuffs to her wrists. Preparing for the worst, the woman panicked and took a knife from the kitchen, slashing wildly at Willie, slitting his throat. A struggle ensued, and the woman was stabbed repeatedly, sustaining severe injuries. She was able to run to the road naked and hail a passing motorist who took her to a nearby hospital. The woman died while in care but was revived by medical professionals. In a discomfiting turn of events, Pickton had brought himself to the same hospital and was being treated only a short distance away. He was fingered for the crime when a member of hospital staff found the keys to the woman’s handcuffs in his pocket. Pickton was arrested and charged on three counts, though the charges were later dropped because the witness was deemed an unreliable witness due to her regular drug use and “junkie” status. Pickton walked free, and later bragged to friends that it only cost him \$80,000 to shrug the charges. He later told police he was traumatized by the incident and said he never brought another prostitute to his trailer again after that night (“The Pickton Case”, 2017). Due to the failure of police to act on a glaring potential suspect, Pickton continued to kill for five years before a warrant was acquired and the farm could be investigated by police. Details of that night were later deemed inadmissible in court for Pickton’s murder trial because the charges had been dropped (Burgmann, 2012).

We see a similar narrative in the case of Lynn Ellingsen. Ellingsen had reported seeing a woman’s body in Pickton’s barn, skinned and hanging from a meat hook. Though her story was discounted because she was “‘crazy,’ cocaine addicted and hallucinated” and her information was

deemed unreliable by police (Hutchinson, 2012).

Stories like these illustrate the willingness of law enforcement to assign drug addiction as the master status of people in the Downtown Eastside. The surviving woman’s legitimacy was questioned due to her social and geographical relation to Downtown, and her experience was invalidated by way of subsuming it into a world of addiction where she is seen as “too consumed by addictions to take personal precautions” (Hugill, 2010:92). Thus, again shifting the blame back to the victim and propagating a perception of drug-using women as at fault for their suffering.

As Pickton’s arrest loomed and news of authoritative shortcomings began to spread, what resulted has been described as a “legitimacy crisis” between the public and the police (Jiwani & Young, 2006; Pitman, 2002). The public refused to continue accepting the excuses and redirections of the Vancouver Police and the Mayor’s office, and the media began reporting in high volume on the variety of blemishes in the authoritative structure. However, the media coverage that posited police negligence as the primary cause of the women’s disappearance is problematic in nature. As with individualizing the experiences of women on the Low Track, framing the police as solely responsible for the miscarriage of justice removed from public view the larger context of marginalization (Hugill, 2010). Prior to Pickton’s arrest, news coverage tended to focus on police, speculating their incompetency to be a result of short-staffing or a relatively inexperienced force, as opposed to a protection bias that favored the wealthy and the white (Jiwani & Young, 2006:903). Despite this, police still fell high on the “hierarchy of credibility”, regularly being interviewed by news media to weigh in on cases long before families and friends of victims or other street-based women were invited to the table (Hugill, 2014:139). This narrative erased the nuanced but

important aspects of the women's lives, like how they were regularly treated by police and the men who "shop" on their block, and the difficulties they had in accessing resources to escape the street life (Jiwani & Young, 2006:904). Individual cases neglected by police made for a much more interesting and instantaneous story than centuries of systemic oppression, and the speculative frenzy continued to grow with time.

On February 5th, 2002, a warrant was finally authorized for the search and seizure of the Pickton property in Port Coquitlam. Despite years of suspicions and a plethora of word of mouth warnings about the Pickton farm, the warrant that was issued was in relation to firearms: a former employee had called in to report illegal weapons on the property, an issue deemed critical when dozens of missing women had not ("Robert Pickton Case", 2017). Pickton was released on bail but not for long, as less than two short weeks later he was re-apprehended and charged with 15 counts of first-degree murder. The number grew to 26 as the investigation went on (Cameron, 2007:157).

Despite a tight publication ban, details slipped out that questioned if the famous Pickton pork had anything to do with all the carnage on the farm. In 2004, the British Columbia provincial health officer issued a statement that pork from the farm may have been mixed and contaminated with human flesh, requesting that anyone who had received the meat and still had some in their possession bring it forward for DNA testing (Armstrong, 2004). The rumor mill spun grim stories speculating on whether there truly was human flesh in the meat that Pickton had gifted to acquaintances and friends. As Jiwani and Young point out, the attachment of the media to the gruesome dismemberment of these bodies indicates that these events are a rare spectacle in need of coverage. In doing this, the media also indicates the typical, run of the mill murders of Indigenous women are

not newsworthy until they have a component as horrendous as mutilation (2006:909). This normalizes the murder of Indigenous women. In the context of Cindy Gladue, Razack argues that the visceral representations we see and hear of Indigenous women's bodies in the news, especially in the case of death and mutilation, serve to position those bodies in the social order and explicitly describe exactly whose bodies have "value" (2016:291).

Confirming the old saying "if it bleeds it leads," homicide is the most newsworthy of crimes, and this fascination is amplified in the instance of multiple victims to one perpetrator (Jiwani & Young, 2006:900). Society has a fascination with the bizarre, and in this case, the story gained traction because it went beyond the typical violence enacted in the "mundane brutality of everyday poverty" (Culhane, 2003:595). Gilchrist postulates that viewers and media producers are motivated by "cultural proximity"—that is that we engage and connect with material that hits close to home (2010:374-375). For most, it is impossible to imagine the day to day violence and tragedy that comes with being a member of the Downtown Eastside community, but it is easy to understand the terror enacted by a crazed sexual predator on the loose. Because this is the content we most readily engage with. "Typical" stories of murder and violence against marginalized persons are erased, further contributing to the "symbolic annihilation" of an entire group of women (Gilchrist, 2010:385). This leads authors like Lindberg et al. to ask questions about how victim and perpetrator statuses come to be: "whose community is represented and relevant in this discussion?" (2012:93).

These narratives of the macabre and disturbing serve to position Pickton as a psychopathic monster, incapable of controlling his animal urges to kill, like a predator on the loose. His visual representation in the media as a filthy man with beady eyes and stringy hair has been

utilized to summarize the physical embodiment of lawless evil and mental psychosis (Jiwani & Young, 2006:905). However, this unhinged representation of Pickton is largely untrue, as Stevie Cameron discovered in her secondhand investigation of his character. She theorizes that Pickton is not a psychopath, as those close to him reported again and again that he cared for people and cared what they thought of him (2007:98). On the contrary, it has been argued that Willie's behaviour is not biologically ingrained but was instead formed largely by social factors, stemming from the humiliation, isolation, and abuse he reportedly experienced as a child. It has been posited by psychiatrists that Willie's compulsive and constant masturbation was a self-soothing technique to offset lingering feelings of trauma. Unlike a psychopath, Pickton craved the attention and social interaction of women, but "to get sex he had to pay for it," which thrust him into contact with the women of the Downtown Eastside, and eventually manifested in an intertwining of sexual release with violence (Cameron, 2007: 107).

Further, Pickton is often depicted in the media as "the singular, pathological, or deranged individual who violated the social and normative order," (Jiwani & Young, 2006:911). Though as discussed earlier in this paper, violence against marginalized women *is* a part of the normative social order, which is precisely what allowed Pickton to function without apprehension for so many years. Lowman argues that violence against women is never the action of a few bad apples, but is instead a larger part of a "continuum of violence" enacted against women (2000:998). Lowman believes that the circumstances that lead to violence being committed against women are steeped in culture. He argues that the criminalization of sex work has deeply ingrained a stigma into the male psyche that may make men more able to "rationalize violence against a prostitute than against other

women" because of their stigmatized position on the social hierarchal ladder (2000:1006). As such, violence against sex workers is not caused by an overarching misogyny towards women as a whole but is acquiesced by the social position of sex workers as disposable or "human waste" (Razack, 2016:299).

In the years since Pickton's apprehension, things have changed on the Downtown Eastside. In 2012, in light of the recommendations put forward in the Oppal inquiry, the Vancouver Police Department set out new guidelines for the policing of sex workers. It included recommendations to use greater discretion when dealing with sex workers, a move that has made prostitution "effectively decriminalized" in Vancouver. As a result, not a single sex worker homicide has occurred in Vancouver in the last ten years (Ling, 2018). However, there is still work to be done. Federal Criminal Code laws established by the Harper government have acted to make selling sex more difficult, despite a Supreme Court ruling in 2013 that deemed criminal prostitution laws unconstitutional, and sex workers are frustrated. The laws limit where prostitutes can work in urban spaces, again forcing them into isolated areas for their tricks to avoid detection. Although the laws were introduced by a Conservative government, Trudeau's Liberals avoided the subject through their last term, and seem to be ignoring the conversation. Activists are continuing to push the Liberals to modify the Criminal Code once again, and while we all must push to change the laws, sex workers must remain at the epicenter of activism movements (Hugill, 2010:102). Street-based sex workers have real, firsthand experience of life on the streets and all the trials and tribulations that come with it, and as such, their perspectives should be heard and respected.

In conclusion, the case of the Downtown Eastside's missing and murdered women was one that challenged the dominant

societal moral compass. It demanded reflection on why it is we gladly outcast certain groups of people from society and what impact that ostracization has on those people, which has a tendency to make us feel uncomfortable and as such, we try our best to forget it. But the people who don't forget it are the sex workers who walk the Low Track, dealing with violence, addiction and poverty, and knowing their lives are in danger, all while functioning alongside laws that make the violence tenfold more dangerous. As one anonymous *Toronto Star* columnist wrote: "the notion of prostitutes working in a safe or legal brothel offends us, while we accept the fact that they work daily in desperate and deadly situations" ("Silent Accomplice in the Pickton Case", 2017). It is due time to reflect on ourselves as a society and determine why exactly that is.

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