


# Unveiling the Veiled Narratives: Settler-Colonialism, Matrilineality, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls along the Highway of Tears

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**ABSTRACT:** Critical Indigenous scholars have extensively examined the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women/Girls (MMIWG) along the Highway of Tears (HoT) in British Columbia and have linked the phenomena to varying underlying colonial structures.<sup>1</sup> However, these analyses often overlook the central role of settler-colonialism in imposing patriarchal ontologies, which perpetuate ongoing Indigenous femicide. To address this theoretical oversight, this document adopts Linda Smith's framework of 'gendering' as a means of decolonial praxis<sup>2</sup> to incorporate feminist social reproduction theory into the discourse of Critical Indigenous scholars' commentary on MMIWG. The aim is to shed light on how the problem of MMIWG is rooted in the imposition of colonial, patriarchal ontologies that disrupt matrilineal social reproduction along the HoT. Furthermore, this document argues that a critical examination of how settler-colonialism disrupts matrilineal social reproduction should occupy a more central position within postcolonial discourses focused on addressing MMIWG along the HoT as per considering the higher matrilineal governance of nations along the HoT.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this document argues that a more comprehensive understanding of settler-colonialism's impact on displacing Indigenous matrilineal social reproduction should be given greater emphasis when discussing the causal factors surrounding MMIWG along the HoT. By addressing the theoretical oversights and incorporating a gendered analysis within a decolonial framework, the paper aims to advocate for more effective approaches to address the issue.

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**KEYWORDS:** settler-colonialism, matrilineality, missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, Indigenous femicide, decolonial praxis, postcolonial discourses, patriarchal ontologies

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## Historical and Theoretical Context

The Highway of Tears (HoT), stretching from Prince George to Prince Rupert in British Columbia, Canada, has become an infamous site of tragedy and injustice. This highway has witnessed a disproportionate number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG), sparking national and international concern. To fully understand the complex dynamics at play and the root causes behind this crisis, it is crucial to explore the historical context in which the Highway of Tears emerged by delving into the history of colonization, matrilineality, and settler violence.<sup>4</sup>

Critical Indigenous literature has made significant efforts to address the ongoing Indigenous femicide on Turtle Island, a term used by some Indigenous peoples of North America to refer to the continent,<sup>5</sup> by systematically examining the various colonial assumptions surrounding this issue.<sup>6</sup> Scholars like Cassidy Johnson, who adopt an Indigenous historical-materialist perspective, highlight how colonialism's imposition of inadequate material conditions on Indigenous peoples, coupled with a settler mode of production that necessitates long-distance commuting for one's occupation, leads to hitchhiking as a survival strategy. Consequently, this creates an environment in northern British Columbia that is complicit in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women/Girls (MMIWG) crisis.<sup>7</sup>

By combining this historical-materialist analysis, which views Indigenous femicide as a result of the exploitative material vulnerabilities imposed on Indigenous women, with intersectional theory, it becomes evident, and thus, is corroborated by statisticians such as Loanna Heidinger, that women and BIPOC individuals, as structurally marginalized groups, are more susceptible to violence due to policing often overlooking their victimization.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is essential to note that such analyses do not fully incorporate the unique colonial histories and phenomenologies of Indigenous peoples living in the vicinity of the Highway of Tears (HoT).

In addition, Indigenous scholars in the field of international relations (IR), such as Rebecca Tallman, argue that settler IR's state-centric, Westphalian approach, which uses the nation-state as its unitary reference object of analysis, neglects the securitization of

non-state actors, including Indigenous nations, and consequently fails to address the issue of (MMIWG).<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, the focus on the nation-state in settler IR can occasionally unintentionally aid the liberation of Indigenous peoples. This can be seen in the case of settler IR scholars who were unable to predict the Indigenous Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) uprising. This failure occurred, as per Enloe, partly because existing theoretical frameworks within settler IR models lacked the ability to fully grasp the political influence and power of non-state actors.<sup>10</sup> Regarding this case study, it is essential to acknowledge that Mexico's model of *Mestizaje*, which constituted the context of the EZLN crisis and emerged through exploitation-colonialism, is wholly distinct from the settler-colonialism experienced by Indigenous peoples along the HoT. Nevertheless, Enloe's central argument remains valid: orthodox International Relations' fixation on the nation-state fails to recognize the agency of Indigenous peoples as political actors. This holds true in both contexts, to varying extents, as Indigenous peoples under both colonialisms failed to utilize non-coerced Indigenous input in constructing the social contracts that presuppose those societies, and the legitimacy of both social contracts continues to validate its legitimacy via a historical "ruse of consent."<sup>11</sup> Still, despite paradoxical outlier situations such as the one described by Enloe, as Tallman observes, settler conceptualizations of international securitization tend to disregard acknowledging the political agency of Indigenous nations, thus, continue to perpetuate the disproportionate victimization of Indigenous peoples, thereby presupposing the issue of MMIWG.<sup>12</sup>

Simultaneous to these realities, critical-feminist theorists like Pat and Hugh Armstrong argue that the structural subordination of women, which inherently implies the occurrence of femicide, serves the interests of capital.<sup>13</sup> According to this line of thinking, women are confined to the domestic sphere and their bodily autonomy is restricted to maximize the reproduction of labour power, providing capital with uncompensated domestic labour. The Armstrongs expose this process as a dialectical contradiction, whereby confining women to the domestic sphere grants them the ability to produce and reproduce social norms. Consequently, capital resolves this

contradiction via a dialectic synthesis by further subordinating women, compelling them to engage in the social reproduction of norms that align with capital's interests, thus further perpetuating instances of femicide.<sup>14</sup>

### **Establishing an Argument in Amalgamating Theories**

While Johnson's critique of colonialism's material subordination of Indigenous peoples and Tallman's critical examination of colonialism's underlying ontological assumptions in the international arena are valuable in understanding the persistence of MMIWG along the HoT, both critiques appear to insufficiently prioritize gender as a central aspect of their analysis. Additionally, Heidinger's analysis may not adequately emphasize the distinct colonial histories of Indigenous peoples residing in the vicinity of the HoT. Furthermore, Pat and Hugh Armstrong overlook the need to racialize the disproportionate victimization of Indigenous women in their analysis of capital's subordination of women.

In response to these shortcomings, this document aims to draw upon the critical frameworks of both Tallman and Johnson, specifically their exploration of material and ontological colonial assumptions regarding MMIWG. By merging their perspectives with the insights of social reproduction theorists like Pat and Hugh Armstrong, this document seeks to establish a more comprehensive analysis that places gender at the forefront rather than treating it as a peripheral consideration to the persistence of MMIWG on the HoT.

To embark on this endeavour, it is worth examining Patrick Wolfe's analysis of settler-colonialism, which is the primary form of colonialism affecting communities along the HoT.<sup>15</sup> Wolfe suggests that settler-colonialism aims to disrupt and replace Indigenous societies and governance structures with settler alternatives.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, feminist social-reproduction theorists argue that both settler and Indigenous ontologies often assign the responsibility of social reproduction, which involves upholding societal norms and governance, to women.<sup>17</sup>

By combining these perspectives, we can infer that the colonial and patriarchal subordination of Indigenous women, detaching them from

their roles as knowledge keepers and cultural disseminators, serves to disrupt their participation in the reproduction of Indigenous society. This erasure of Indigenous women's agency is particularly impactful along the HoT, given that the affected Indigenous nations have a disproportionately higher matrilineal socio-political governance structure.<sup>18</sup> These nations include the Nisga'a<sup>19</sup>, Gitxsan<sup>20</sup>, Haisla<sup>21</sup>, Wet'suwet'en<sup>22</sup>, and various Coast Salish nations<sup>23</sup>, among others.

This is not to imply that all pre-contact Turtle Island nations ancestrally located outside of the HoT geographically had adhered to patriarchal governance comparable to settler societies. Rather, it is observed that various nations, such as the Kalapuya<sup>24</sup>, practised a less profound rendition of patrilineal governance— when compared to settler-patriarchy, while others, like the Ojibwe, maintained an egalitarian, yet non-matrilineal, social structure with distinct gender roles.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, some nations, including the Apache, tended to reject gender roles altogether, while the Navajo even exhibited a fluidity of gender identity, precluding the contemporary pan-Indigenous concept of “two-spiritedness.”<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the prevalence of explicit matrilineal socio-political governance is notably concentrated amongst the aforementioned communities whose territories ancestrally intersect along the HoT,<sup>27</sup> underscoring the necessity for a specific and focal point of investigation concerning the role of patriarchal settler ontologies snuffing Indigenous matrilineality as a precursor to the ongoing issue of Indigenous femicide along the HoT.

Based on this necessitation, this paper aims to centralize the disproportionately high rate of matrilineality amongst nations overlapping with the HoT through a historical-materialist investigation. The objective is to highlight the significant role of colonial, patriarchal ontologies imposed by settlers in contributing to the issue of MMIWG. By doing so, this paper ultimately concludes that while the problem of Indigenous femicide along the HoT is multifaceted and influenced by intersectional colonial structures explored prior by the likes of Tallman, Johnson and others, a comprehensive understanding of settler-colonialism's impact on displacing Indigenous matrilineal social reproduction should be given greater emphasis when discussing the causal factors surrounding

MMIWG along the HoT. These circumstances do not inherently imply that patrilineal societies encounter diminished impacts from settler-colonialism; rather, they experience a relatively reduced manifestation of the gender-based violence inherent in settler-colonialism. This is observable through the disproportionate incidence of Indigenous femicide within the HoT region, ancestrally characterized by stronger matriarchal socio-political structures.

This document aims to support its theoretical arguments by drawing upon literature reviews conducted along the HoT, as well as exploring instances of Indigenous femicide in other regions of Turtle Island. There are two main reasons for this approach. Firstly, the lack of comprehensive documentation of MMIWG is a result of ongoing Indigenous erasure, making it necessary to supplement the theoretical thesis of this paper with additional explorations of Indigenous femicide.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, conducting a comparative analysis of Indigenous femicide across different territories within Turtle Island allows for a contrasting examination of various colonial histories and their impact on the imposition of colonial patriarchies. Ultimately, this analysis supports the argument that the imposition of patriarchy as a means of disrupting matrilineal social reproduction is a key factor in understanding the problem of MMIWG, specifically along the HoT.

## **Literature Review**

Efforts to incorporate a gendered analysis of colonialism often draw upon Marx's concept of primitive accumulation, which has been further developed by Métis scholar Steve Talbot. According to this perspective, settlers in the 'new world' are not entitled to the surplus value of production because the original capital on which such surpluses depend was stolen<sup>29</sup> and legitimized through a colonial mythos of a 'social contract,'<sup>30</sup> what other postcolonial scholars refer to as "the ruse of [colonial] consent."<sup>31</sup> Talbot emphasizes the role of colonial expansion in capitalist accumulation, stating that "westward expansion across Indian lands had its origin in the purpose of generating capital."<sup>32</sup> However, neither Marx nor Talbot adequately emphasize the subordination of Indigenous women by capital as a

crucial aspect of primitive accumulation, which serves to control both the reproduction of labour power and social reproduction.<sup>33</sup> In order to fully understand the dynamics at play, it is necessary to centralize the intersectional experiences of Indigenous women within the framework of primitive accumulation.

In providing the first—albeit phenomenologically-western, attempt to gender the concept of primitive accumulation, Silvia Federici argues that Indigenous women were disproportionately targeted by the colonial project due to their role in reproducing Indigenous social norms and controlling their bodily autonomy, thereby maximizing the reproduction of Indigenous labour power.<sup>34</sup> According to Federici, “women became the main enemies of colonial rule—refusing to go to mass, to baptize their children” or engaging in other practices of colonial social reproduction favourable to settler replacement.<sup>35</sup> She describes how the subordination of Indigenous women ranged from limiting “the spheres of activity in which Indigenous women could participate”<sup>36</sup> to state concessions regarding sexual violence victimizing Indigenous women,<sup>37</sup> to carceral/torturous disciplining of women who continued to reproduce Indigenous theologian norms under the pretext of practising devil worship.<sup>38</sup> This is despite the concept of the devil itself being a colonial imposition with no equivalent in most Indigenous theologies.<sup>39</sup> Building upon Federici’s analysis, a similar argument could suggest that colonial impositions of heteronormativity, which contribute to disproportionate violence against LGBTQ2 Indigenous peoples,<sup>40</sup> are also imposed as a means of incentivizing the reproduction of Indigenous labour power.<sup>41</sup>

However, the accelerated reproduction of Indigenous labour power by tying Indigenous women to the domestic sphere and exerting state control over their bodily autonomy as a means to incentivize reproduction<sup>42</sup> was primarily a characteristic of Luso/Hispano extraction-colonialism.<sup>43</sup> In such colonies, Indigenous labour power sustained their colonial economies.<sup>44</sup>

In comparison, it is important to note that along the Highway of Tears (HoT), which stretches from Prince George to Prince Rupert in Northern British Columbia, Indigenous femicide primarily affects territories impacted by settler-colonialism<sup>45</sup> rather than under

extractive-colonialism's "enslavement of the indigenous population" to maximize the reproduction of Indigenous labour power for capital procurement.<sup>46</sup> This assertion does not negate the existence of additional distinctions pertaining to Indigenous femicides between the northern and southern regions of Turtle Island, such as substantial population disparities, persistent caste-based politics, and the influence of a miscegenated cultural paradigm known as *mestizaje*. Instead, it highlights the limited geographic utility of Federici's analysis, which currently represents the predominant, and perhaps unitary, endeavour to understand the gendered aspects of primitive accumulation. These analyses are found to be insufficient for comprehensively examining the occurrences of Indigenous femicide within distinct historical-material colonial frameworks, such as those taking place along the HoT under settler-colonialism.

In stark juxtaposition to the exploitative nature of colonialism found within Federici's analysis, the preeminent colonial framework known as settler-colonialism along the HoT region is chiefly focused on eradicating and supplanting Indigeneity rather than capitalizing on Indigenous labour power. This suggests that the colonial and patriarchal impositions along the HoT were primarily aimed at disrupting and replacing Indigenous social reproduction, as opposed to the exploitation-colonialism's focus on maximizing the reproduction of Indigenous labour power for capital acquisition.

In the context of the HoT, settler-colonialism exerted state control over Indigenous women's bodily autonomy to restrict the reproduction of Indigenous labour power. This is evident in British Columbia's history of forced sterilization of Indigenous individuals,<sup>47</sup> justified through colonial discourses of female hypersexuality,<sup>48</sup> although such examples also reflect the broader proclivities of medical racism within settler-colonialism.

Thus this suggests that while feminist primitive accumulation theorists like Federici primarily examine the subordination of Indigenous women in Luso/Hispano extractivist colonies as a means to maximize the reproduction of Indigenous labour power, the subordination of Indigenous women along the HoT under settler-colonialism aims to disrupt the reproduction of Indigeneity, given the adherence to heightened matrilineal socio-political governance in the



territory and settler-colonialism's purpose of Indigenous displacement and replacement.<sup>49</sup>

To further corroborate this point, it is worth noting that settler-colonial prescriptions often explicitly challenge Indigenous matrilineality. For instance, the Canadian Indian Act's Band Governance system restricted Indigenous women's ability to exercise inter-tribal political agency and asserted that Indianness or the right to Indian status was hereditarily patrilineal, directly contradicting Indigenous practices and traditions, resulting in the disproportionately female loss of status "between 1876-1985".<sup>50</sup>

### **Centring the Displacement of Indigenous Social Reproduction Within Discourses About the MMIWG Along the HoT**

The final report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) along the Highway of Tears (HoT)—the foremost authority on Indigenous femicide along the HoT,<sup>51</sup> recognizes the importance of gendered and intersectional analysis, acknowledging that Indigenous women and girls were impacted by colonialism "in distinct, though related, ways"<sup>52</sup> when compared to Indigenous men and boys. However, the report falls short of fully addressing settler-colonialism's gendered elements and including settler-colonialism's disruption of Indigenous matrilineal social reproduction. Given the prevalence of increased matrilineality among Indigenous nations along the HoT, it is crucial to centralize the role of settler-colonialism in disrupting matrilineal social reproduction within postcolonial discourses addressing MMIWG along the HoT.

This centralization proves critical in addressing the persistence of MMIWG along the HoT since recognizing the subordination of Indigenous women as a means of disrupting matrilineal social reproduction is essential in understanding the specific colonial histories of the territory. Given that nations along the HoT, which disproportionately experience Indigenous femicide,<sup>53</sup> are also disproportionately matrilineal. This suggests that the disruption of matrilineal social reproduction plays a more significant role in the colonial histories of these territories compared to non-matrilineal and less-matrilineal ancestral territories or territories subjected to wholly

different variants of colonialism such as exploitation-colonialism, which dominates the contemporary literature regarding gendered analysis of primitive accumulation. Indeed, while Indigenous femicide within exploitation-colonialism subject territories may be motivated by the reproduction of Indigenous labour power, the distinct colonial histories of the HoT region indicate that settler-colonialism's disruption of matrilineal social reproduction disproportionately motivates the issue of MMIWG in that region thus, must be fully grappled with in addressing the issue.

In summary, the issue of MMIWG along the HoT is influenced by various intersecting colonial mechanisms outlined in this document. However, in attributing the problem of MMIWG to the imposition of colonial patriarchal ontologies, this document argues that settler-colonialism's motivation to disrupt matrilineal Indigenous social reproduction plays a distinct and primary role in explaining the particular struggle with Indigenous femicide along the HoT, given the affected nations' disproportionate adherence to matrilineality. Existing critical frameworks exploring material and ontological colonial presuppositions, such as those by Johnson and Talbot, Pat and Hugh Armstrong, and Federici, contribute to understanding MMIWG along the HoT but lack a sufficient gendered analysis. Therefore, while these arguments collectively explain the persistence of MMIWG along the HoT, the imposition of colonial patriarchal ontologies as a means of disrupting matrilineal Indigenous social reproduction is often overlooked despite its primary role in the HoT context. Hence, this document argues that such context should occupy a more central position in contemporary discourse addressing MMIWG and the HoT. Overall, this document attests that a comprehensive understanding of settler-colonialism's impact on displacing Indigenous matrilineal social reproduction should be given greater emphasis when discussing the causal factors surrounding MMIWG along the HoT. By addressing the theoretical oversights and incorporating a gendered analysis within a decolonial framework, the paper aims to contribute to the understanding and discourse on MMIWG and advocate for more effective approaches to address the issue.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Lawrence, "Gender, race, and the regulation of native identity in Canada and the United States." 4-31.
- <sup>2</sup> Smith, "Twenty-five indigenous projects." 75-90.
- <sup>3</sup> Nyce, "Family of Louisa Oyee: A Matriarch in the Nisga'a Nation." 5-15.
- <sup>4</sup> Martin, "Jessica McDiarmid, Highway of Tears: A True Story of Racism, Indifference, and the Pursuit of Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls"
- <sup>5</sup> Bowra, Mashford-Pringle, and Poland. "Indigenous learning on Turtle Island: A review of the literature on land-based learning." 132-140.
- <sup>6</sup> Lawrence, "Gender, race, and the regulation of native identity in Canada and the United States." 4-31.
- <sup>7</sup> Johnson, "Willing Victims."
- <sup>8</sup> Heidinger "Violent victimisation and perceptions of safety: Experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women in Canada."
- <sup>9</sup> Tallman, "Representations of Security and Insecurity in the Highway of Tears"
- <sup>10</sup> Enloe, "Margins, silences and bottom rungs." 186-202
- <sup>11</sup> Simpson, Audra. "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal'. 19.
- <sup>12</sup> Tallman, "Representations of Security and Insecurity in the Highway of Tears"
- <sup>13</sup> Armstrong and Armstrong, "Theorising women's work."
- <sup>14</sup> Armstrong and Armstrong, "Theorising women's work."
- <sup>15</sup> Mcdiarmid, ""Highway of tears."
- <sup>16</sup> Wolfe and Kauanui. "Patrick Wolfe on settler colonialism." 343-360.
- <sup>17</sup> Federici and Jones. "Counterplanning in the Crisis of Social Reproduction." 153-164.
- <sup>18</sup> Dangeli. "Pandemic Potlatching on the Highway of Tears."
- <sup>19</sup> Nyce. "Traditional Nisga'a leadership."
- <sup>20</sup> "Terrace Kitimat Gitxsan Booklet." Indigenous Health NH.
- <sup>21</sup> "Haisla Nation Council. "About the Haisla."
- <sup>22</sup> "Global News. 'Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs meet with Mohawk matriarchs in Kahnawake."
- <sup>23</sup> Peck. "Mariners, Makers, Matriarchs."
- <sup>24</sup> Juntunen, May, and Ann. "*The World of the Kalapuya*". 17.
- <sup>25</sup> Buffalohead, Priscilla K. "Farmers warriors traders". 236.
- <sup>26</sup> Thomas. "Navajo cultural constructions of gender and sexuality". 263.
- <sup>27</sup> Dangeli. "Pandemic Potlatching on the Highway of Tears."
- <sup>28</sup> Wegner, and S. Lawless. "The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls National Inquiry". 1-30.
- <sup>29</sup> Wainwright. "Book Review: Karl Marx's Grundrisse"

- <sup>30</sup> Polanyi. "The great transformation"
- <sup>31</sup> Simpson. "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal'." 19.
- <sup>32</sup> Talbot. "Roots of Oppression: The American Indian Question." 24.
- <sup>33</sup> Federici. "Caliban and the witch."
- <sup>34</sup> Federici. "Caliban and the witch."
- <sup>35</sup> Federici. "Caliban and the witch." 230.
- <sup>36</sup> Silverblatt. "'Moon, sun, and witches.'" 160.
- <sup>37</sup> Berque. "Indigenous beyond exoticism." 39-48.
- <sup>38</sup> Cave. "New England Puritan Misperceptions of Native American Shamanism." 15-27.
- <sup>39</sup> Danchevskaya "Good and Evil in Native American Mythology."
- <sup>40</sup> Ristock, Passante and Potskin. "Impacts of colonization on Indigenous Two-Spirit/LGBTQ Canadians." 5-6.
- <sup>41</sup> Salzinger "Seeing with the Pandemic: Social Reproduction in the Spotlight." 492-502.
- <sup>42</sup> Armstrong and Armstrong, "Theorising women's work."
- <sup>43</sup> Barker, Adam J. "The contemporary reality of Canadian imperialism" 325.
- <sup>44</sup> Wolfe and Kauanui. "Patrick Wolfe on settler colonialism." 343-360.
- <sup>45</sup> Talbot. "Roots of Oppression: The American Indian Question." 24.
- <sup>46</sup> Marx. "Das Kapital." 501.
- <sup>47</sup> Marx. "Das Kapital." 501.
- <sup>48</sup> Leason. "Forced and coerced sterilisation of Indigenous women." 525-527.
- <sup>49</sup> Wolfe and Kauanui. "Patrick Wolfe on settler colonialism." 343-360.
- <sup>50</sup> Johnson "'Willing Victims.'" 9.
- <sup>51</sup> Rothenberg. "Not One More."
- <sup>52</sup> MMIWG. "Reclaiming Power and Place". 230.
- <sup>53</sup> Dangeli. "Pandemic Potlatching on the Highway of Tears."

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