A note on the author: Matthew is a fourth-year history major and anthropology minor. He is interested in merging the two disciplines of his undergraduate degree by focusing on the study of human cultures throughout history and linking historical concepts and situations to contemporary issues. Matthew has devoted his degree to learning about the history of Indigenous peoples of Canada. In the Fall of 2018, he will be starting the Master of History program at the University of Guelph where he will be studying identity construction and the social history of Indigenous peoples throughout past centuries. He hopes that this article will add to the current literature on the topic and spark dialogue around the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada.

Introduction
Historical plaques promote social awareness of important aspects of history and act as a form of preservation and education. The colonial legacy of European settlers in Canada has had profound political, social, and cultural effects on the Indigenous peoples of Canada and must be recognized through commemoration. Forms of social and economic control have been utilized since the early days of colonialism, and have been successful in oppressing and marginalizing Indigenous men, women, and two-spirited peoples. The effects of centuries of colonialism cannot be simplified, nor can one form of assimilation be deemed most harmful. From the attempted cultural genocide within the Indian Residential Schools system to alienation from the capitalist economy and systemic poverty purposefully executed by the Canadian federal government, the issue of sexual violence committed against Indigenous women is one of many crises plaguing Indigenous communities. Sexual violence as a form of gender regulation has been utilized globally by patriarchal governments and social structures to “keep all women in a state of fear.”

In contemporary terms, Indigenous women are experiencing an overrepresentation within the justice system for offences of sexual violence, kidnapping, and murder committed against them. This crisis has sparked an outcry from Indigenous communities that have reverberated throughout the country producing inquiries and commissions examining the causes and possible solutions.

The colonial process of oppression against Indigenous women created a socially constructed identity that attempted to normalize systematic violence. This paper will focus on the government’s role in enforcing colonial-traditional gender roles and ideals onto Indigenous women as a means of controlling their sexuality and identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through regulatory bodies and legislation such as the Indian Act of 1876 and governmental programs such as the Ontario Training School for Girls. The effect of attempted replacement of Indigenous culture has resulted in the dehumanization of women through the normalization of sexual violence. The gross issue at hand is often left out of the mainstream media outlets. However, it is one that is most deserving of being recognized and acted upon through the means of plaques, dialogue,

and direct action. By providing a public space that promotes awareness and dialogue on the topic, grassroots change can begin to form to spread awareness properly.

**Historical Modes of Oppression**

Eurocentric sexism in North America existed well before the Confederation of Canada and had continued up to today. However, following the implementation, the Indian Act of 1876, sexism and gender inequality were deeply infused into the federal government’s policies on Indigenous people. The Indian Act of 1876 implemented the official governing body for Euro-Settlers to interact, police, and control the Indigenous population.\(^{291}\) The Indian Act manifested racist ideologies into formal law and was used as an assimilation technique following its implementation and continues to today.\(^{292}\) As a tool of cultural genocide, it attempted to assimilate Indigenous people into the European framework regarding family relations and gender roles. The section of the Indian Act with the most severe consequence came from the law that revoked women’s rights and Indian status if they married a “non-Indian.”\(^{293}\) This section of the Indian Act was deliberate exploitation of Indigenous women to disenfranchise them by attacking their autonomy and by creating a dependence on Indigenous men to establish cultural identity. The Indian Act stated that an Indian woman had to relinquish their rights regarding their power within their community and sever ties with their families.\(^{294}\) This section of the Indian Act is arguably the most insidious statement that it produced.

By alienating Indigenous women from their communities and culture, they were no longer part of a specific group. This allowed for sexual and physical violence committed against them to be normalized as they were deemed a single entity with no form of community or federal protection.\(^{295}\) The Indian Act’s colonial methodologies were an instrument in enforcing racist ideologies and discourse around Indigenous women, creating a negative identity, stripping them of community and cultural power, and rendering resources provided to them as inaccessible.\(^{296}\) Furthermore, the Indian Act enforced Eurocentric gender roles within Indigenous communities that had formally utilized egalitarian models of power that valued the matriarch within their family structures.

The importance of having Indigenous people assimilate to the Euro-Settler identity was pertinent for traditional roles to survive in North America. However, many Indigenous communities structured their families and communities with an emphasis on equality through egalitarian principles. Economic and labour division was gendered with men primarily focused on hunting and warfare, while women often worked within their

\(^{291}\) Joanne Barker, “Gender, Sovereignty, Rights: Native Women’s Activism against Social Inequality and Violence in Canada,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2008), 259.


\(^{294}\) The Indian Act, R.S.C. 1876, Office Consolidation.

\(^{295}\) Ibid.

communities as “reproducers and producers.” This notion of overlap is not to be undervalued. With the absence of either men or women, Indigenous people learned the skills and roles of both sexes. Women learned how to trap and hunt as they were responsible for providing for their family, meanwhile, men were taught to cook and maintain households. With the introduction of the “settler economy,” women’s roles in finance and authority were deemed to be incorrect, with men being situated to assume the responsibilities outside of the homes. By removing Indigenous women’s power within their communities, this began the vicious process of segmenting their identity and controlling how they existed in economic, social and political contexts. Removing them from their roles in their communities stripped them of their power, which helped federal governments to disenfranchise them as contributing members of society. Ultimately, this gave government agents more power in controlling and regulating Indigenous women.

**The Legacy in Modern History**

The Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) utilized its colonial control during the twentieth century and began to regulate women’s gender and sexuality by applying racial discourse within Canada. Controlling Indigenous women’s sexuality was imperative as it helped to ensure that traditional European gender roles were abided. Brownlie stated that government agents had the power to “deny women their right to treaties and interest payments on the grounds of sexual transgressions, they could take away their children, [or] they could grant or refuse relief in time of need.” As a tool of oppression, government agents of control punished women for their sexuality on unsubstantiated acts of crime which only further demonized their character.

All aspects of the colonization process encouraged a common belief that Indigenous people were dirty, impure and invadable. All of these beliefs situated Indigenous women as targets for sexual violence as their sexuality and bodies were associated with the colonizer's perception of their people. Smith and Ross explain that patriarchal thinking encouraged the idea that the rape of those impure was no longer a criminal offence, similar to the discourse surrounding the rape of sex workers. In order to fix Indigenous women’s “looseness” regarding their sexuality, provincial governments established the Ontario Training School for Girls (OTSG) in 1933. The OTSG was

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298 Ibid.

299 Ibid., 63.


301 Ibid., 163.


303 Ibid.

“designed to re-socialize neglected and delinquent girls [on the grounds of] theft, truancy, and sexual promiscuity.” This correction facility acted as a vice for the federal control of young girls that resisted traditional gender norms; purity and sexual morality.

This form of control acted as a way to moralize both Canadian and Indigenous women. However, the racial rhetoric used within the facility reflected on the prescribed identity of Indians according to Euro-Settlers. Within the facility, various reports were released for examination, giving a glimpse into the worker’s and the institution’s principles. One report stated that one girl was “a typical Indian who [did] not understand our moral standards [and] although in a supervised home and treated like one of the family, she [still] became pregnant.” This excerpt offers insight into the concept of “othering” in which Indigenous women’s identity was synonymous with the other that continues to alienate and dehumanize her from the European society.

The Outcome: Indigenous Identity
The OTSG employee who completed the report very deliberately described the correct moral standards as ours. Ours being associated with white and European values, meanwhile, sexual immorality and impurity being characterized as “typically Indian.” Carrie Bourassa, Kim McKay-McNabb and Mary Hampton analyzed the concept of othering and stated that this process “[left] [Indigenous women] more vulnerable to assaults on their welling being than if they suffered from one form of oppression.” Othering in itself acts as a tool of oppression as it legitimizes colonial authority in encouraging racial inferiority of Indigenous women.

Language and identifying terms were used to pursue the creation of a negative identity of Indigenous women. Indigenous women, aside from being deemed sexually deviant and impure, were targeted with accusations of being dirty and lazy and referred to with derogatory names such as “squaws.” Women were systematically oppressed, lacked opportunities and marginalized from dominant groups of society. However, the society that had dismantled their prospects had then stereotyped them as lazy and unable to provide for their family, although they were systematically restricted from access to economic opportunities. Indigenous values allowed women to possess sexual autonomy and the participation in economic and subsistent tasks, whereas European women were encouraged to be docile, sexually chaste, and uphold the traditional roles of domesticity. Eurocentric ideals had demonized Indigenous women for their cultural differences from European women.

Indigenous women were pitted against European women and could be used as a display of immorality. The colonizer was successful in constructing the negative identity of Indigenous women that placed her as less than the European woman, making them the

305 Ibid.
306 Ibid., 187.
309 Ibid., 103-4.
example of what to avoid as an ideal woman. Kim Anderson explains that “if we treat Native women as easy or drunk squaws in the court system, we feed negative stereotypes that will further enable individuals to abuse Native females.”

Female Indigenous scholars have written about their personal journeys with healing and fighting against oppression. Mary Hampton et al., explains that many Indigenous women often internalize stereotypes and socially constructed identities, assuming the role of the colonizer. Through the internalization of stereotypes and racism, the problem of sexual violence committed to Indigenous women has developed into the crisis occurring today.

**Contemporary Issues & MMIW**

In contemporary terms, the colonial legacy of oppression and marginalization of Indigenous women has produced a current national crisis. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police released an overview of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) stating that there were 1,181 missing and murdered women as of 2014. Meanwhile, the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) reported over 4,000. The gross disparity between the federal government’s police and the Indigenous community’s calculations highlights the lingering colonialism acting against Indigenous women. The United Nations states that this crisis is a “manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women and a means by which this inequality is maintained.” The crisis at hand is directly linked to hundreds of years of colonial powers attempting to disseminate Indigenous culture and remove their cultural and personal identities. The implementation of Eurocentric, patriarchal ideologies enforced concepts of hierarchy and gender inequalities that promoted the victimization of Indigenous women and encouraged violence.

Possible next steps in ending the high rate of Indigenous women being murdered and sexually assaulted is the elimination of their socially constructed colonial identity. The authors of *Torn from Our Midst* offer insight into two women’s stories; Darleen Kay Bosse and Amber Redman. Both of these women's stories humanize and cultivate examples of Indigenous women who have been murdered and kidnapped. They were not lazy, dirty, or impure. Darleen Kay Bosse was a strong mother who was completing her degree at the University of Saskatchewan to pursue her dream career of teaching. Amber Redman was a proud Indigenous woman who practiced her culture devotedly and was...

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310 Ibid., 112.


315 Ibid., 34.
incredibly independent and loving.\textsuperscript{316} Their stories act as testaments to the colonial legacy of oppression and marginalization that has created the contemporary crisis, but also as reminders that Indigenous women are capable of constructing their own identities. Chelsea Millman offers insight on her inability to escape the systemic marginalization: “I can never escape this issue. I cannot escape it, and even though it causes me much pain and anxiety, I do not want to run away from it. […] I do not know what the next step is. I do know, however, that I must keep pushing on.”\textsuperscript{317}

The representation of Indigenous peoples in municipal and federal governments would foster real steps towards reconciliation. This must be accomplished by governments of all levels intervene and bring justice to those missing and murdered to end the extreme trend. Amnesty International’s report concluded the following types of direct action are needed to stop violence against Indigenous women: to acknowledge the gravity of the crisis; to support research into causes of violence; to provide greater protection for at-risk women; to enact specific police training and resources; to provide funding that cause vulnerability; and, finally, to stop the oppression of Indigenous women.\textsuperscript{318} Indigenous women are unable to escape the pain and anguish but they are resilient, and their strength and power are inspiring and incredible. Their healing may never fully be complete, but they exhibit inexhaustible passion and determination to end violence against women.

**Conclusion**

In order to properly dismantle hundreds of years of systematic oppression, proper plans must be created to end violence against Indigenous women. It should be required that women are included in writing and researching reports and commissions, and are given authority and power in these situations. The government’s enforcement of traditional gender roles through initiatives, facilities, social alienation and the Indian Act of 1867 onto Indigenous communities proved to be destructive and catastrophic. Today, the Indian Act has seen amendments that have removed the section that forces women to give up their status when marrying non-Indigenous men in order to provide more gender equality.

Today, Indigenous communities are dealing with astronomical rates of missing and murdered women. Communities of all ethnicities must stand in solidarity with Indigenous women. Allies must stand in solidarity with Indigenous women rather than perpetuate the damsel in distress complex that only victimizes them further and depicts them as helpless. By putting pressure on federal and local governments, the general population can provoke change that gives justice to those missing and murdered. To help foster this change, it is important that citizens are educated on the unjust dehumanization of Indigenous women by supporting grassroots events, protests, and places for dialogue. Historical plaques placed nationally in places of high traffic will help educate the masses.

\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 34-50.


while honouring Indigenous women. Moreover, plaques will help demonstrate that people are standing alongside them in their fight for justice and equality. Current work, such as the inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women led by Justin Trudeau and his liberal government is an important start. While his party prides itself on equality and justice, he must demonstrate this through actions rather than words and make real progress towards reconciliation.
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