

Review Essay: Gendered Bodies and Necropolitical States

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Books Under Review

Bromwich, Rebecca. 2015. *Looking for Ashley: Re-reading What the Smith Case Reveals about the Governance of Girls, Mothers and Families in Canada*. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press.

Dean, Amber. 2015. *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and The Difficulty of Inheritance*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

We encounter dead women when flipping through magazines, newspapers, television channels, or web pages. Some stories are embedded in newspaper columns while other stories are told through a Netflix series. Do we linger on these narratives or keep moving? Do we recognize ourselves in their stories? Do their stories haunt or stick to us (Ahmed 2004; Gordon 1997)? Do we feel pity, sadness, anger, or nothing at all?

These questions inspired scholarship on social death. Michel Foucault (2003 [1976]) and Giorgio Agamben (1995) analyzed the State's role in preserving live or recognizing one as having a life that can be killed. Achille Mbembe (2003) and Judith Butler (2004) assessed necropolitics and grievability. Activist provocations often question whose lives count too. One need only trace Black women's history from Sojourner Truth and Mamie Till to Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors to understand the tradition of making violent racialized erasure visible. Hashtag memorials #SayHerName and #MMIWG2S, as well as vigils like Transgender Day of Remembrance and Women in Black, also question disposability under militarism, transphobia, and "imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 2004). This intellectual landscape provides the setting for Rebecca Bromwich's *Looking for Ashley: Re-Reading What the Smith Case Reveals about the Governance of Girls, Mothers and Families* (2015) and Amber Dean's *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance* (2015). In this review essay, I discuss what these books contribute to necropolitics and memorialization. These texts are essential monographs¹ that deliberate the ethics of grievability and the incitement to act accordingly. *Looking for Ashley* and *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women* are outstanding meta-texts because they question how we are implicated in necropolitical world-making.

Looking for Ashley: Resisting the Tabula Rasa

Looking for Ashley's instantiates a gendered analysis of necropolitical governmentality. Using formal legal documents, docudramas, and print media texts, Rebecca Bromwich (2015) argues criminal justice, child welfare, and mental health systems turned Ashley Smith into a "case" to be managed to death, literally. These "discursive sites" produced Smith as a carceral subject ("Inmate Ashley"), an immature girl-child ("Child Ashley"), and a pitiable patient with unmet psychiatric needs ("Patient Smith"). Smith was criminalized, infantilized, and psychopathologized. *Looking for Ashley* is a deft Foucauldian analysis of the collusion between the prison industrial complex, the child-reformer movement, and the mental health industry. Over the course of three substantive chapters, the author critiques a villain/victim binary that leaves little room for Smith's complexity or agency.

The most intriguing part of *Looking for Ashley* is Bromwich's refusal to let advocates and activists off the hook. In their attempts to humanize Smith, she became a "noble victim" (212) unlike "other" people (i.e. non-white, racialized, Indigenous, and working class). By producing Ashley as a "saveable" figure, meant to draw on public sympathies, progressives reinscribed social death to Others. Bromwich cautions against politicizing or memorializing death if it reinforces necropolitics elsewhere.

Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Taking Stock of Inheritances

Whereas *Re-Reading Ashley* subtly invites reader reflexivity, *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women* tackles settler complicity explicitly. Amber Dean (2015) uses public memorials, artistic works, activist discourse, documentary film, missing posters, and other ephemera to address witnessing and remembering. Dean contends some memorial practices collapse the divide between observer and murdered subject (i.e. "that could have been me"). She argues this assumed intimacy obscures histories of colonial violence directed towards Indigenous women. An improved response is to wrestle with the "practice of inheritance" (7), which requires asking, "where and how I am" implicated in the disappearances of marginalized women (10)? Rather than over-identifying or distancing, Dean invites readers to contemplate interdependence, a cen-

tral concept for Indigenous peoples.

The book's strength is Dean's citational conscientization through reflexive engagement with Indigenous thought. In one chapter, she weighs the ethical and methodological uses of haunting theory against Indigenous theory while wrestling with her own unsettling after a documentary viewing. In other chapters, Dean evaluates memorial practices meant to evoke grievability such as artistic updates of missing posters or park dedications. One of the most useful sections is the last chapter where Dean compares "strategic remembrance" and "remembrance as difficult return." Through "strategic remembrance," artists and activists focus on concrete action to effect change, but give short shrift the colonial past. "Remembrance as difficult return" critiques existing necropolitical conditions that disproportionately affect women who are Indigenous, poor, sex workers, or use drugs/alcohol. Encountering this type of memorialization (e.g. Valentine's Day Women's Memorial March in the Downtown Eastside) requires participants to reckon with complicity as well as their inheritance of violent histories.

Conclusion

Looking for Ashley and *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women* critique both necropower as well as responses to necropolitics. They interrogate how the State makes certain gendered lives illegible and they indict the public too. Bromwich questions public projection: what discourses were projected onto Smith to make sense of her life and death? Dean centralizes colonialism: why does one need to reckon with colonial inheritances before they/we can push for justice? These books show we are all implicated in governmentality and necropolitics. We should proceed cautiously in our desires to humanize the dead, as a counter-necropolitical action, because such efforts may reinscribe normative gender, sexuality, class, mental health, or colonial formations. These books remind that, while we should remember the dead, we should fight against the living-death of others.

Endnotes

¹ At the 2017 Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) conference, Amber Dean shared the WGSRF Outstanding Scholarship Prize for *Remembering Vancouver's Dis-*

appeared *Women* and an Honourable Mention went to Rebecca Bromwich for *Looking for Ashley*.

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