

2018

# Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance

Gordon Alley-Young  
*CUNY Kingsborough Community College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb\\_pubs](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs)

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

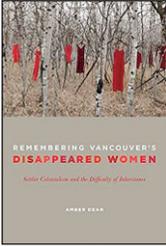
---

## Recommended Citation

Alley-Young, Gordon, "Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance" (2018). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb\\_pubs/146](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs/146)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Kingsborough Community College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

## Review



**Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance.** By Amber Dean. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 216 pp. ISBN: 9781442612754.

Public attention has spotlighted Canada's inattention to its disappeared Indigenous women/women of colour. Amber Dean's book, *Remembering Vancouver's Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance*, compiles ten years of research partly funded through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant, and reads the disappearance of sixty-five women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside between 1978 and 2001 through settler colonialism's lenses. Dean writes as an inheritor of this violent legacy rather than as a witness, as the latter position can collapse the researcher and subject. Dean claims her outsider standpoint as a White, Ontario-based scholar positioned within academia's historical legacy of exploiting vulnerable populations.

The book is organized into five chapters sandwiched between Dean's introductory and concluding remarks. I read the book as having three informal divisions where the first two chapters provide the epistemological underpinnings of the work with a socio-historical context of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside within Canada's enduring colonial legacy and the protocols for reading. Chapters Three and Four grapple with the challenges of representing these women's complex lives so that they are sufficiently humanized in the popular imagination but not homogenized in ways that obscure the queer aspects of their identities. Chapter Five concludes the analysis by considering how society should respond to this tragedy by examining the implications of different memorial texts.

In Chapter One, Dean notes that while Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is ignored by some and seen as a blight by others, it has a rich history for marginalized groups from Asian-Canadian immigrants to people from the LGBTQI communities. Dean explores the neighbourhood's colonial history as the home to many Indigenous people who lived under repressive colonial era laws that discouraged interracial relationships and conflated Indigenous sexuality with prostitution. In Chapter Two, Dean distinguishes between studying disappeared Indigenous women's lives as ghosts of the past, as this can erase Indigenous peoples from current time, and studying the hauntings that their absences make on our present time and spaces can also risk disappearing Indigenous Canadians. Dean stays focused on tracking the absences and how society has tried to erase disappeared women of various cultural backgrounds by reiterating their presence in the present. Dean delves into the poem *Missing Sarah* by disappeared Latina-Indigenous woman Sarah DeVries who both foreshadows her own disappearance and implicates middle class suburban society's unwillingness to hear or see her

as a victim of violence. This section speaks most to reversing the erasure of disappeared women and Dean's analysis would be arguably enriched by more chances to hear the women's voices through their writings and artifacts, though given the marginalized status of disappeared women such remembrances might not have been available to Dean and/or might not have been preserved.

In Chapter Three, Dean examines how visual representations of disappeared women, both in police mugshots used in missing person posters and in the artists' renderings meant to humanize the victims, deserve equal critical analysis. The former deserve interrogation because they criminalize the women, group them in ways that magnify their deviance and anonymity, and are often out of date. Attempts by the Everybody Deserves a Name (EDAN) organization to humanize the women with pencil sketches are also critiqued by Dean who notes the tendency of such works to heteronormatively feminize the women, race them as white, and situate them within the middle class. In this section, Dean draws on Roland Barthes (2010) work on the punctum (i.e., the thing in a photo that attracts our eye or punctures us) and the stadium (i.e., the ways we are trained to generically recognize and categorize photos). In a police photo of disappeared woman, Helen Hallmark, Dean sees no punctum but classifies it as a generic mugshot (i.e., stadium) while other photos of Hallmark, Dean argues, have clear puncta of family and social connection. Dean's discussion of images would benefit from reprints of the photos that she describes. However, because the photos come from family sources they might be unwilling to give Dean permission to publish personal images for fear that they could be misinterpreted, misused, and/or used to exploit their disappeared loved one. I appreciate Dean's unwillingness to accept the humanizing of the women by organizations like EDAN as an easy answer to the problem of how disappeared women are dehumanized. For as Dean explores in Chapter Four, attractive artistic portraits and depictions of the women as mothers, daughters, and sisters can erase the women's identities as sex workers on the margins of society. This erasure ties/connects into larger sexual and colonial discourses that seek to erase Indigenous women, and women in general, through sexual objectification and racial othering.

Dean's fifth and final chapter examines how memorials can avoid dichotomizing disappeared women's lives into the grievable and not-grievable. Dean approaches an analysis of different memorial texts through the theoretical lenses of remembrance on one hand as strategic remembrance, that works to identify things we can do in the present to address an injustice moving forward, and the more challenging remembrance as a difficult return, that implicates us for our role in the social injustices that lead to the losses of lives that we are remembering. For example, Dean critiques a memorial of a bench and a memorial stone to remember the women in Create a Real Available Bench (CRAB) Park to be an act of strategic remembrance because it is about remembering a loss in the present and the future, though she recognizes the value in having a physical place to go in the physical absence of a body to mourn. Similarly, Dean reads Rebecca Belmore's (2002) art/video installation, *The Named and the Unnamed*, specifically how Belmore symbolically reenacts the colonial and sexual violence by using her own body as a stand-in for that of the disappeared women, for how it, along with other elements of the performance, implicates the viewer as a par-

ticipant in an ongoing project of colonial oppression. While Dean recognizes Belmore's work as remembrance as a difficult return, she also asks how Belmore's work to cast the disappeared woman as any woman could also deprive them of individualized and racialized identities.

Dean's book could appeal to readers in Indigenous Studies, Women's Studies, History, Sociology, Popular Cultural Studies/Media Studies, (Post)colonial Studies, and Performance Studies. Dean's willingness to critically challenge various theoretical perspectives on history, identity, and memory, even when those perspectives are critically lauded, is a strength of her analysis. Dean's willingness to remain critically minded shows her to be skeptical of easy answers and of providing singular paths forward in examining the cases of the disappeared women. By leaving the door of critical inquiry open, Dean's work calls for ongoing engagement from different standpoints as we all work to better understand how the experiences of Vancouver's disappeared women speak to the larger need to look within ourselves to discover how we as a nation, a society, and as individuals allowed these women and countless others to disappear without regard as we turned the pages of our newspapers.

### References

Barthes, Roland. (2010). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*. (Richard Howard, Trans.). New York, NY: Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1981)

*Gordon Alley-Young*, Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York