

One Engagement - Moral Theory of Political Reconciliation

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Colleen Murphy, [*A Moral Theory of Political Reconciliation*](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

For anyone interested in a critical, practical, and political exploration of reconciliation, Colleen Murphy's book is a wonderful resource. It is a fast-paced and well-written book that compels the reader to keep going. And, it is useful in the everyday world.

In Canada, over the past thirty years, almost 600 indigenous women and girls have gone missing or have been slain.¹ Between 2000 and 2008, there were 153 new cases. Most of the disappearances and deaths occurred in the western provinces in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.² The majority of these women and girls were mothers. Some were students. Almost half of these cases remain unsolved. Time and time again, these women and girls are described as sex trade workers and addicts as if somehow that designation defines them all or explains them away. What is so disturbing is that their murders and disappearances seem to have become normalized – a part of Canada – but in the background or in the shadows.

Every year there are rallies and demonstrations in Canadian cities, usually small events. There are also various national legal and political actions spearheaded by groups such as the Native Women's Association of Canada, Amnesty International, and others. In BC, there is currently a highly contested Missing Women's Commission of Inquiry underway. Many criticisms have been expressed about this inquiry including the commission's narrow mandate, who the commissioner is, and limited resources and timeframe.³

Given the trend toward truth and reconciliation processes, how might such an approach apply to the missing and murdered aboriginal women? I want to draw on the work of Colleen Murphy to argue that this issue, and others like it, require two kinds of repair – political and personal.

According to Murphy, if we only focus on the personal experience of survivors of violence, which is absolutely necessary, we will overlook the external changes that are necessary for dealing systematic wrongdoing and oppression. This external perspective means thinking about a political reconciliation process that is capable of imagining the end of injustice and oppression, and of addressing the conditions that facilitate and support injustice and oppression.

In other words, thinking about reconciliation as forgiveness usually means emphasising internal changes among victims. Murphy argues that a political reconciliation process should be about both ending violence and addressing the institutional and social conditions that make violence possible.

How might Murphy's approach be applied to the missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls? First, there must be a careful and accurate understanding of the dynamics of the conflict and oppression, in this case, what is happening to aboriginal women and girls at every level from the community to the state. Second, this close analysis of the reality and experience of the oppression and violence must inform and anchor any larger political reconciliation process. Obviously, the big task is to consider and debate what a larger political reconciliation process might be, how it might be structured,

and what its possible goals.

This means that any reconciliation process must derive from and speak to the actual problems in a way that acknowledges the depth and complexity of the damage done to both personal and political relationships. Again, this work will require many conversations about the multiple relationships with and around indigenous women – family, local, and beyond. Might the obvious complexity of indigenous women’s lives require more than one political process? Should there be multiple sites and levels of reconciliation facilitated? Murphy’s book is one way to begin some of these necessary conversations.

1. Native Women’s Association of Canada, [*What Their Stories Tell Us: Research Findings from the Sisters in Spirit Initiative*](#) (2010). Over 150 of these women are still missing and over half the total cases remain unsolved.
2. See also Christine Welsh’s important documentary, *Finding Dawn* (2006) National Film Board, and Amnesty International, [*Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada*](#) (2004). For an international perspective on missing and murdered women and girls, see the *Backyard (El traspatio)*, a movie based on real life events in a Mexico-US border town.
3. The Missing Women’s Commission of Inquiry just released [four reports](#).

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