

# Book Note: Dying From Improvement: Inquests And Inquiries Into Indigenous Deaths In Custody, by Sherene H. Razack

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## Book Note: Dying From Improvement: Inquests And Inquiries Into Indigenous Deaths In Custody, by Sherene H. Razack

### **Abstract**

INDIGENOUS DEATHS IN CUSTODY have long told a story of alcoholism and mental illness, suggesting a fundamental incapacity of Canada's Indigenous populations to survive and prosper in modern society. In *Dying from Improvement* Sherene H. Razack tells a different story, one of colonial aggression which constructs the state as a body that secures its own legitimacy through encounters with Indigenous bodies. Running parallel to this examination is a question for all Canadians: In the face of police aggression and the profound indifference that underlies so many Indigenous deaths in custody, "why do we fail to care?"<sup>2</sup> By examining inquests and inquiries into Indigenous deaths in custody in British Columbia and Saskatchewan, the author shines a light on the oft-subverted discussion of the racial animus that colours police interaction with Canada's Indigenous peoples. Razack is primarily concerned with challenging the Canadian public discourse that defines Indigenous deaths in custody—the story of a group of people unfit for modern life who exist somewhere "between life and death," as prisoners of their own dysfunction and dependency.<sup>3</sup> The book is divided into six chapters. Each chapter examines the death of a particular person or group, and state response to the associated tragedy, running alongside an exploration of what the author believes lies beneath the surface.

## Book Note

***Dying From Improvement: Inquests  
And Inquiries Into Indigenous Deaths In  
Custody*, by Sherene H. Razack<sup>1</sup>**

DAPHNE PAPADATOS

INDIGENOUS DEATHS IN CUSTODY have long told a story of alcoholism and mental illness, suggesting a fundamental incapacity of Canada's Indigenous populations to survive and prosper in modern society. In *Dying from Improvement* Sherene H. Razack tells a different story, one of colonial aggression which constructs the state as a body that secures its own legitimacy through encounters with Indigenous bodies. Running parallel to this examination is a question for all Canadians: In the face of police aggression and the profound indifference that underlies so many Indigenous deaths in custody, "why do we fail to care?"<sup>2</sup>

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1. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015) 309 pages.
  2. *Ibid* at 70.
  3. *Ibid* at 6.

In chapters one and two Razack details the death of Frank Paul, who died from hypothermia resulting from acute alcohol intoxication in the alleyway of a detox centre after being turned away from custody and returned to the street. Paul was unable to walk or speak from intoxication. The author uses transcript evidence from the Paul inquiry to advance a claim that police treated Paul as a mere remnant of a whole body whose condition required a completely different set of criteria for evaluation by police.

In chapter three Razack examines the death of Paul Alphonse, who died in a hospital while in police custody. The official causes of death were pneumonia and alcohol withdrawal. However, Alphonse also had a boot print on his chest and several broken ribs at the time of death. The transcripts of the ensuing inquiry characterize the boot print and related injuries as a peripheral issue that threatens to detract our attention from a death that was more or less inevitable.

Chapter four looks at pervasive indifference by police officers, medical professionals, and prison personnel as a possible cause of death. Razack examines the refusal by these groups to credit Indigenous peoples in custody as meriting attention and equal treatment, and how alcoholism functions to discredit their genuine medical needs.

In Chapter five the focus turns to the death of Anthony Dawson and the history of excited delirium syndrome. Razack demonstrates how law and medicine unite in these inquiries to cloak the conversation in objective terminology in order to evade the “obvious” question: “what if police use too much force?”<sup>4</sup>

Finally chapter six turns to inquiries into freezing deaths in Saskatchewan. Neil Stonechild, Rodney Naistus, and Lawrence Wegner were all Indigenous men found dead in isolated areas on the outskirts of Saskatoon. For Razack, who views the modern relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples as “spatially and racially organized as one between modern subjects and those who must be assisted into modernity,”<sup>5</sup> freezing deaths represent the constructive eviction of the Indigenous subject from the colonial city. The author demonstrates how the narrative of these inquiries repeatedly begins with the individual in the back of the police cruiser, and not with the broader context of dispossession and dehumanization.

Razack concludes her work by proposing a direction for the future: the development of “anti-colonial pedagogies that would invite students to examine their complicity in an ongoing colonialism.”<sup>6</sup> This shift would enable a new

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4. *Ibid* at 144.

5. *Ibid* at 32.

6. *Ibid* at 208.

starting point for all Canadians to approach the question: Why don't we care? Only then can Indigenous sovereignty, which Razack deems "necessary and urgent," become a realistic possibility.<sup>7</sup>

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7. *Ibid* at 210.