Book Review

Missing Women, Missing News: Covering Crisis in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside,

by David Hugill. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2010. $17.95 CAD., paper. ISBN: 9781552663776. Pages: 1-111.

Reviewed by Ryan Boyd[1]

In Missing Women, Missing News, David Hugill offers an insightful and critical study of the national newspaper coverage of the crisis of missing women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside that followed through the proceedings against Robert Pickton, a critique of police responses to the crisis, and an analysis of the roles of the federal, provincial, and municipal governments in creating the socioeconomic conditions of the Downtown Eastside. Hugill charges journalists and police as missing in action after sixty women, most of them sex workers, from this neighbourhood were murdered between 1978 and 2002. On the one hand, he criticizes journalists because mainstream news coverage of the crisis did not appear until 1998. On the other hand, he criticizes police for their contempt and negligence: "At best, they failed to notice. At worst, they failed to care" (p. 10). Hugill argues that the narrative combining down on their luck women, a psychotic serial killer, and bad policing cannot satisfactorily explain why this crisis was ignored for so long. This prudent and topical study reveals the complexity of what was presented as a simple narrative and reassigns the culpability of the crisis to the state.

The crux of Hugill's argument is that news coverage generally offered uncomplicated reasons why these women were neglected and victimized. Media reasoning positioned the local Vancouver police as the negligent party and the women as victims of Pickton alone. Hugill's focus is to reconsider these partial yet dominant explanations by examining additional layers of complexity (p. 22). Hugill explores the historically, politically and culturally pervasive reasons why this crisis was ignored for so long. The state should be implicated as structuring and perpetuating the vulnerability of these women through the lingering impact of

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colonialism, prostitution laws and policing patterns, the lack of a federal housing plan, and continued funding cutbacks for social programs directly impacting Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. His consideration of ideology as the primary force of shaping the logic of these narratives is his contribution to several studies already covering the mishandling of the crisis.

Chapter 1 examines the initial limitations of the media coverage and explanations for the crisis, as well as their lasting effects. Hugill's research reveals that newspapers reported that the crisis was largely neglected for two decades because of the negligence of the local Vancouver police department (p. 24). This emerged as the central theme for explaining the crisis in the media. Drawing from Stuart Hall, Hugill suggests that local police negligence became the "primary interpretation" of the crisis, thereby limiting the physical space and parties responsible for the crisis at the local level. This is problematic for Hugill as this interpretation defines both the sources and solutions at the local level, meaning "the narratives of newspapers mask the larger contradictions about the universality of state protection" (p. 24). This primary interpretation sets an ideological limit for the other narratives that would follow. While Hugill commends journalists for implicating local authorities and their role in perpetuating the crisis, he argues that ultimately these groups were the only ones held accountable and that the structural conditions set by the state were neglected.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the role of the state in fostering the conditions that both produced and imperiled marginalized women in British Columbia. Hugill writes that the state is responsible for producing the structural conditions that put these women in danger in three central ways: (1) sweeping retrenchments of state systems of social solidarity beginning in 1983; (2) amendments to the Criminal Code targeted at curbing street prostitution; and (3) the persistent effects of state colonial policy (p. 32). The retrenchment of the state occurred in three distinct periods, beginning in 1983 with provincial budget cuts that "hollowed out social services" (p. 35). The Liberal federal government attacked social services again during the 1990s. Hugill argues that declining federal support both forced and inspired provincial Liberals to further reduce spending beginning in 2001, resulting in the "single deepest cuts to social spending in Canadian history" (p. 37). With this information in hand, Hugill engages with his media analysis and discovers that newspapers report overwhelmingly that women engage in prostitution to support their drug addictions. Despite the reality that many women

engage in sex work as a way to supplement reduced or precarious incomes, this reporting has helped produce an ideological conflation with "drug addict" and "prostitute" (p. 39).

Changes to the Canadian Criminal Code under Brian Mulroney in 1985 resulted in pushing already vulnerable women into the unseen margins of the Downtown Eastside and forcing them to work in relative isolation from one another. These changes impeded sex workers from forming cohesive community that could share information about bad dates and pressured them into making quicker, less-informed decisions about their clients. Yet, only six out of 157 articles studied covering the crisis were critical of these sanctions.[2] Hugill's layered work has the potential to inform current debates in prostitution laws, in which the federal government and provincial government of Ontario are appealing an Ontario Superior Court ruling that dismissed laws against keeping a common bawdy house, communicating for the purposes of prostitution and living on the avails of the trade (Jones 2011).

In a critical analysis of the racial component of the state's culpability of endangering sex workers, Hugill's study finds that only thirteen of 157 newspaper articles acknowledged that a significant proportion of missing women were Aboriginal (p. 47). Despite coverage that goes beyond just-the-facts reporting, trying to invoke some deeper meaning to the crisis, journalists overlooked an abundance of research and statistics from well-established authorities that "clearly demonstrates the disproportionate burden of social suffering carried by aboriginal people in this neighbourhood" (p. 47). Hugill questions why this central factor was neglected despite a number of credible sources for answers. His answer is in Canadian commonsense ideology. Our image of Canada as a fair, democratic, and tolerant society creates "race blindness" as a by-product of commonsense. This commonsense reasoning posits that racism cannot possibly exist in this type of society, so it is ignored almost outright. With this layer being ignored, newspaper coverage focused mainly on the exotic nature of violence and drugs, the self-imposed risky lifestyle in society's seedy underbelly, and the presence of a serial killer to add to the well-established coverage of police negligence.

Chapter 3 focuses on reported images of the missing women and sex workers from the Downtown Eastside. Hugill pays special attention to who is speaking on behalf of missing women and prostitutes and their perceived credibility. Hugill suggests that credibility is based on per-

2 While this is mainly a qualitative study, Hugill uses several numerical representations as another way to illustrate the themes in newspaper coverage.

sonal relationships to victims rather than an understanding of the systemic issues facing the Downtown Eastside. His study finds that family and friends of missing women were quoted 109 times, advocates and allies of street women were quoted 25 times, and sex workers themselves were quoted 10 times (p. 62). This is indicative of vastly differentiated access to discourse and shows that sex workers were not in the position to describe themselves, but were rather described by others. One critique is that while it is implied, access to discourse is not something that Hugill writes about in detail. A second critique is that this analysis also would have been more nuanced if details of quotes from police officers and their role in describing the women and the crisis had been included.

When prostitutes were allowed to define themselves it was only to describe their one-dimensional drive for narcotics. Hugill notes that each paper reminds its readers that these murdered women were "real people," but describes them more like caricatures. Conflating prostitution with crime makes it appear self-inflicted or self-selected—especially with drug addiction. Drawing on Hall, Hugill suggests that through conflation with drug use, prostitution is criminalized and therefore depoliticized (p. 75).

Chapter 4 is where Hugill's work in human geography shines through. The aim of this chapter is to detail the ways in which coverage mapped the Downtown Eastside, using a multitude of images on street-level chaos that set the neighbourhood as symbolically distinct and disconnected from the rest of the city. Hugill writes, "[t]hough seemingly disconnected, patterns of divestment in the DTES and patterns of geographically specific tolerance of illicit activity offer potent ways to interrogate the hollowness of the claim that Vancouver's inner city has been "taken over" by a degenerate population" (p. 83). Here Hugill is pointing to the ways in which capital and state interest had slowly disappeared from the area. Furthermore, differentiated police presence and enforcement created a zone of tolerance that ultimately neglected missing women, suggesting that their disappearances were part of the transient nature of the job.

The coverage of the Downtown Eastside is described through text and photographs as if it were ground zero of a zombie apocalypse, where the undead exchange sex for drugs with human beings instead of simply eating them. The neighbourhood is framed as "a horrifying Hobbesian enclosure where the war of all against all is waged with unyielding fury" (p. 92). No one can be trusted and political intervention is seen as futile.

However, Hugill's conclusion suggests that all is not lost. The

Downtown Eastside has shown a great deal of leadership, bottom-up resistance, ground-level support, and ingenuity in a number of ground-breaking programs, such as InSite, Canada's first safe-injection venue (p. 98). He suggests that sex workers must make changes even if they are not officially sanctioned by the state, such as collective work environments, networks that share bad-date lists, or sex worker unions. They must also push for a venue for safer sex work. These suggestions have partially come to fruition in the aforementioned Ontario Superior Court case ruling, which has seen current and former sex workers advocate for safer conditions.

Work like Missing Women, Missing News questions commonsense ideology and urges critical thinking. While Hugill focuses on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, his work is relevant in current debates surrounding prostitution laws, spatial identities of other urban areas with concentrated poverty[3], and the residual effects of colonialism in an Aboriginal population. The Aboriginal population faces structural issues such as systemic poverty, high rates of incarceration, mental health concerns, and loss of culture, among many others, because of Canada's racist history. This history cannot be ignored because of the contemporary commonsense of tolerance. In the case of vastly disparate birthrates, without developing strategies that problematize and work to resolve the negative impacts of colonialism, institutionally and culturally disenfranchised Aboriginal communities will continue to grow in a culture of contempt and indifference.

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3 Walks and Bourne (2006) report a growing trend of racialized concentrated poverty that suggests a 'ghettoization' in major Canadian cities, such Toronto, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg.