



# **Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody**

*Sherene Razack*

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No matter where in Canada they occur, inquiries and inquests into untimely Indigenous deaths in state custody often tell the same story. Repeating details of fatty livers, mental illness, alcoholic belligerence, and a mysterious incapacity to cope with modern life, the legal proceedings declare that there are no villains here, only inevitable casualties of Indigenous life.

But what about a sixty-seven-year-old man who dies in a hospital in police custody with a large, visible, purple boot print on his chest? Or a barely conscious, alcoholic older man, dropped off by police in a dark alley on a cold Vancouver night? Or Saskatoon's infamous and lethal starlight tours, whose victims were left on the outskirts of town in sub-zero temperatures? How do we account for the repeated failure to care evident in so many cases of Indigenous deaths in custody?

In *Dying from Improvement*, Sherene H. Razack argues that, amidst systematic state violence against Indigenous people, inquiries and inquests serve to obscure the violence of ongoing settler colonialism under the guise of benevolent concern. They tell settler society that it is caring, compassionate, and engaged in improving the lives of Indigenous people – even as the incarceration rate of Indigenous men and women increases and the number of those who die in custody rises.

Razack's powerful critique of the Canadian settler state and its legal system speaks to many of today's most pressing issues of social justice: the treatment of Indigenous people, the unparalleled authority of the police and the justice system, and their systematic inhumanity towards those whose lives they perceive as insignificant.

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