
Difficult Conversations



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'Red Dresses'

Kathleen McCracken

My poem 'Red Dresses' responds to an installation art project called *The REDress Project* by the Métis artist Jaime Black. First exhibited at the University of Winnipeg in March 2011, Black's work demands attention to one of Canada's most distressing social crises and challenges viewers to engage with what is without question one of the nation's most difficult conversations. Focussing on the racialised and gendered nature of violent crimes against Indigenous women, *The REDress Project* raises awareness of the epidemic of missing and murdered First Nations, Inuit and Métis women across the country.

As a direct result of colonisation, historical trauma, racism, the residential school system and the sexual objectification of women, there are disproportionately high levels of domestic violence, rape and murder against Indigenous women and girls in Canada. While Indigenous women make up less than 5 per cent of the national population, they constitute 24 per cent of the women murdered in the country (Gwiazda, 2022).

In December 2015, the federal government under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau established the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The aim of the Inquiry was to investigate the crisis and its causes, and ultimately end the high levels of violence. In 2019 a final report found that 'persistent and deliberate human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses are the root cause behind Canada's staggering high rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA¹ people' (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). The

report issued 231 Calls for Justice directed towards governments, institutions, social services, industries and all Canadians. This was followed in 2021 with a National Action Plan, which confirmed the government's commitment to realising the goals of the Inquiry and ending the violence.

Determined to take action, Black initially collected 500 red dresses and displayed them on hangers indoors and outdoors at the University of Winnipeg. While their emptiness represented loss and absence, the colour red evoked both violence and vitality. And as Black learned from an Indigenous friend, red is the colour spirits can see, it calls the women's spirits back to the human world to be heard by their families and communities (Gwiazda, 2022). She subsequently mounted the installation across Canada and the United States. In art galleries and universities, in town squares and legislature buildings, gatherings of red dresses haunted built and natural environments. Black's aesthetic response proved a powerful reminder of the issue of violence against Indigenous women. Whether viewers knew nothing about the violence or had experienced the loss of a loved one, the exhibition created opportunities for dialogue and for hearing the silenced voices and stories of the women.

While on an immediate level my poem makes a literary response to Black's *REDress Project*, it also engages with broader issues regarding the need for respectful intercultural dialogue. In 'Red Dresses' I have tried to address the questions – How can non-Indigenous artists be allies in creating work that is part of a decolonising project? How can we make art that acknowledges our outsider/colonizer

¹Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual.

status, yet raises the visibility of Native peoples and issues without taking space that is rightfully theirs? The speaker in the poem is positioned as a white woman visiting Jaime Black's installation. Viewing the dresses prompts her to think back to her own experience of her mother making a red dress for her when she was a girl, and provokes reflection on coloniser positioning in relation to the ongoing tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Red Dresses

On your mother's clothesline
a red dress

Sleeveless
low cut
fluted
empty

it shimmies in the zero
miles per hour
December freeze

Hung from winter-bare
birch trees, from wrought iron
railings, from lamp posts

in parklands
in museum plazas
in gallery gardens
in campus courtyards
in front yards
in back yards
on riverbanks
on roadsides
on highways of tears

from Prince Rupert to Iqaluit
from Kamloops to Winnipeg

they twist in breezes
they breathe

4000 red dresses

lace-collared, open-backed
flounced, floor-length, scoop-necked, strapless
A-line, pencil, mini, midi, first date
dresses

Each one is a girl
each one is a woman

missing, murdered, disappeared

each one is a mother, sister, cousin, daughter
auntie, wife, friend, beloved

each one is Cree, Salish, Anishinaabe
Blackfoot, Nisgaa, Innu, Métis

some were shot
some were stabbed
some were beaten
some were raped

some were walking home
some were leaving home
some were jingle dancers
some were shift workers
some had high heels
some had new jeans
some had hoop dreams
some had children waiting
some had nothing to their names
but their own names

Gloria, Helen, Belinda, Tanya
Isabella, Barbara, Amber, Tina

some were 14, some were 15
some were 20, some were almost 31

Red is lifeblood
red is female
red is the violence
happening
red is the colour
their spirits see
it calls them back
to be heard

it says *look*
it says *stop*
it says *this is not okay*

Do not intrude, do not walk away

touch the hem
 of each red dress
 let its texture return you
 to your mother's side
 her white hands fluent
 as snow geese threading
 Thanksgiving skies
 where she cuts and stitches
 washes and irons
 the red dress she is making

the one you put on
 for your sister's wedding
 your best friend's birthday
 your parents' ruby
 anniversary

those settled spaces
 their perimeters edged
 in safety

Brushing the limbs
 of wild mountain ash
 a red dress

let it say *listen*

let it say their names
 the girls, the women
 each one a story
 you are learning to understand

let it say *absence*
marks presence

let it say *we are here*

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