

## **Critiquing the Institutionalization of the Red Dress Exhibit in the Canadian Museum For Human Rights**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the complexities of institutionalizing The Red Dress Project, a symbol addressing the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2s), within museums, particularly the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. Specifically highlighting strained historical relationships between Indigenous peoples and museums, this critique emphasizes the risk of portraying an ongoing issue as a historical event, hindering public awareness and action. I will expand on my critique by utilizing my personal experience at the museum, not only as a museum patron, but as a Coast Salish, Two-Spirit person myself.

### **1. Introduction**

I vividly remember my mother gifting me a pair of beaded earrings for my nineteenth birthday. Deep red cylinders joined with string to form tiny red dresses that would dangle from my ears. Despite their allure and intricacy, these red dresses have come to represent the violence that Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people endure.

The REDress movement began in 2010 by a Métis artist, Jaime Black, from Thunder Bay, Ontario (First Nation Indigenous Studies 2009). The Red Dress Project invokes the use of red dresses hanging in typically empty spaces to generate remembrance and advance action on the national issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2s). Black mentions that her work began mainly in Winnipeg, and through the grassroots work of Indigenous people and combined allyship, the Red Dress has become a widely recognized symbol for MMIWG2s throughout North America (First Nation Indigenous Studies 2009).

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba, located alongside the Red River, demonstrates the Red Dress movement in one of its many exhibitions centered on human rights violations. I traveled to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) this October to observe the Indigenous experience depicted in the museum as a Coast Salish individual. Indigenous issues and experiences were highlighted throughout many spaces in the museum, invoking times of reflection. However, one particular space that situated itself in my memory was the Canadian Stories Gallery, where I was confronted with six dresses hanging from the ceiling against a photographed background of white birch trees. This exhibition is in the Level One Gallery entitled Canadian Journeys, which focuses on surveillance and language rights. The Red Dress exhibit at the CMHR provoked me to consider some potential issues that may be circulated when placing such a sensitive, ongoing issue into an institution of this kind. Therefore, I will be using my personal experience and relying on scholars' inferences to critique the institutionalization of The Red Dress Project. I will consider the strained relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums and highlight some contentions that may arise when memorializing current issues.

### **2. Indigenous Peoples and Museums: A Contentious Space**

Museums are contentious spaces for Indigenous peoples due to past and present colonial relations that exist within these institutions. Amy Lonetree acknowledged this in their work that surrounds decolonizing museum practices, emphasizing that "museums are already extremely painful sites for Indigenous peoples due to their history with colonial practices" (2012, 1). Lonetree understands this through the lens of early anthropological ideals, which stressed that Indigenous peoples and

communities were a fleeting race (2012, 8), leading to exhibitions that misrepresented and demonstrated cultural insensitivity to the communities they were portraying (Phillips 2012, 185). Indigenous communities were depicted as an image of the past rather than the everpresent hubs of vibrant, living culture they have always existed as (Harrison 2009, 10).

According to Phillips, when museums were becoming prominent institutions, it was common for them to acquire sacred material culture and even human remains during colonization and exploitation (Phillips 2012, 190). This created a relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums characterized by theft, forced trade, or removal without proper consent or understanding of the cultural significance. Lonetree (2012) also considers that museums were not spaces that offered open collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for some time, creating an even more tumultuous relationship. Through recent years, contemporary museum practices seem to attempt to lean toward incorporating Indigenous presence into their work (Lonetree 2012). This has been done through a myriad of collaborative practices, which all focus on healing the relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums. For example, The Canadian Museum for Human Rights held an event for Red Dress Day in May 2023 in which community members who have been affected by MMIWG2s brought artistic expressions of their grief to the museum for a two-day period in which guests were welcomed free of charge to view the materials. It was held as a demonstration of honor and remembrance of Indigenous kin who have been afflicted by the historical and ongoing crisis on MMIWG2s. However, this aspect of community engagement is not congruent with their permanent Red Dress Exhibition as it was only a two-day exhibition, and greater efforts must be made to facilitate collaboration and cultural recognition (Canadian Museum for Human Rights 2023).

Despite reconciliation efforts that have been made to decolonize museums, there are still issues at bay within Indigenous exhibitions, especially when they pertain to current atrocities that affect the communities surrounding the institution. There will likely always be a degree of separation between Indigenous ways of knowing and being from the curatorial approaches of museums due to colonial influences, both past and present.

### **3. MMIWG2s as a Crisis**

The fundamental question being addressed is why the Red Dress exhibition at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is concerning, and why institutionalizing the Red Dress project within museum walls is potentially dangerous. It is important to understand the imminent crisis of MMIWG2s and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights' relation to it to further my critique against the institutionalization of this exhibition.

Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people disappear and are killed at an alarming rate. Homicides of Indigenous Women are six times higher than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Additionally, Indigenous Women constitute between 5% and 7% of homicide victims in Canada while making up only 2% to 3% of the total population (Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2014). These are merely the cases included in the RCMP data; most go unreported or illicitly under-investigated (Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2014). Many scholars understand this victimization from a pipeline of gendered colonization, where legislation such as the Indian Act or instances like the Sixties Scoop decentralized the matriarchs that Indigenous societies once sustained from. In turn, these acts devalued women, wives, and mothers in an effort to reflect patriarchal norms (Parsole & Campbell 2021, 198). The Native Women's Association of Canada estimated that in 2010 alone, there were approximately 1,181 cases of "[Indigenous] female homicides and cases of unresolved missing [Indigenous] females" (Dean 2015, 198). These numbers are not generous, and there are likely to be more, especially in

communities that struggle with mental health issues and substance abuse.

Approximately one month before the Canadian Museum for Human Rights opened, on August 17, 2014, the body of a young Indigenous girl, Tina Fontaine, was found in the Red River—only a few kilometers from the museum grounds. Though her murder did not strike uproar in the media, 2,000 Indigenous kin and others in allyship gathered along the shore of the river for a vigil for Tina's short life. She was only fifteen. The museum, which was in the process of opening, stayed entirely silent in regards to the young girls' murder, regardless of its mission statement that stressed the "public's understanding of human rights" (Dean 2015, 148). The museum did not comment on Tina or the vigil held for her and instead tweeted about the progress on their gift shop, indicating it was 'coming along nicely.' This non-response from the CMHR in 2014 indicates the general attitude towards MMIWG2s, where dismissiveness continually proves dangerous and fosters room for more Indigenous kin to go missing and return home. Simultaneously stressing that cases such as Tina's call for active attention to the crisis of MMIWG2s, rather than simply memorializing them further down the road.

Furthermore, this kind of response affirms the need for movements such as the Red Dress Project that placed pressure on the public to look, and having red dresses hanging in spaces devoid of embodiment (i.e., in forests, in windows) demonstrates the need to have some form of public engagement.

#### **4. Institutionalization of the Red Dress Project**

Institutionalizing The Red Dress Project, specifically in a museum space, is an area of contention. As mentioned previously, museums have historically portrayed Indigenous peoples, cultures, and communities as "frozen in time" (Lonetree 2012). The biggest fear surrounding a current crisis being played in a museum, especially in a section that highlights historic movements across history, is that public interaction will ascertain MMIWG2s to be a resolved issue or one that needs reconciliation. Rather than acknowledging it as a crisis that is being lived every moment for the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. Typically, we engage with museums as sites of memory (Shelton 2006, 500) to reflect on and learn about instances of the past. An example of a museum as a site of memory could be the Canadian War Museum, where military history is the focal point, and their exhibitions are presented with the intention of "honouring and remembrance" where "each gallery highlights defining moments in Canada's military history and the ways in which past events have shaped the nation" (Canadian War Museum 2005). It is less common to approach museums as direct spaces to interact with action. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights museum statement stresses the goal to "explore the subject of human rights, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, to enhance the public's understanding of human rights, to promote respect for others, and to encourage reflection and dialogue" (Canadian Museum of Human Rights 2024). Though it encourages dialogue about human rights, public interpretation of this exhibit may be skewed without clearly explaining how MMIWG2s is an ongoing issue. Additionally, it is evident that this issue needs more attention than reflective dialogue, and it is unclear if the CMHR has taken part in this or encouraged public action. Viewing something as fixed in time rings true with many instances of memorials. Rowlands and Tilly (2006) write about memorials and their implications, highlighting that they are "designed to fix history and are associated with a degree of remembering, usually associated with a given moment in time," posing a risk of separatism from the present moment (Rowlands & Tilly 2006, 510). In comparison, The Red Dress Project embodies both a memorial for the MMIWG2s and a simultaneous call to the public to take action by raising awareness for the issue.

One particular moment in my visit to the museum where I felt a particular pull towards public action, and away from the institutionalization of this project, was

when I was looking out onto the city streets of central Winnipeg, and the Red River, where Tina Fontaine's body was discovered eight years ago. Looking through the windows, we see more Red Dresses, but not in the same format of photographed trees with plaques as inside the museum. Looking outwards from the museum, Red Dresses can be seen hanging from trees, swaying in the wind. Red Dresses were also hanging around small tents, where houseless people built community. Upon a closer view, there was a large banner that read "Camp Mercedes," hanging upon one of the tents. Red Dresses wrapped this encampment, indicating that this community specifically had direct ties to MMIWG2s. Red ribbons were tied, and handprints were painted on the bridge that crossed over the Red River, leading away from the museum. #NoMoreStolenSisters was painted alongside a medicine wheel mural that was also visible from my viewpoint inside the museum. Seeing the community engage in tangible action serves as a reminder that this is an active issue many Indigenous communities are facing today. Not only is this seen in Winnipeg, but rather, there are community based initiatives spreading awareness for this ongoing issue across Canada. In Vancouver, every year on February 14th, The Women's Memorial March crosses the Downtown Eastside. Victims, families, women's rights organizations, allies, and other community members rally together in a call for action, while also remembering and honoring those who were murdered, or have gone missing (Lewis 2024).

This example of community engagement was powerful and functioned as a protest to the current social climate that victimizes Indigenous women and as a public art piece that allows the public visiting the museum to visualize the lived reality of MMIWG2s. It is not a peaceful display against a photographed background. It is an active experience, filled with trauma, and is not in a space in which it can solely be memorialized.

## 5. Conclusion

The Red Dress Project serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2s). The project has become a symbol of remembrance and a call to action. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and museums has historically been fraught with colonial practices, misrepresentation, and cultural insensitivity. While efforts have been made to decolonize museums and engage in collaborative practices, challenges persist within these institutions. The Red Dress Project, a contemporary issue addressing the abhorrent uptick in disappearances and homicides of Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people, faces the risk of being perceived as a historical event tied to issues of colonial past rather than an ongoing crisis. Museums, often seen as a site of memory, allow the inherent memorialization of current issues such as MMIWG2s to persist, and may inadvertently contribute to a perception of separation from the present moment, hindering the necessary public action and awareness needed to address the ongoing crisis. We can look to cases such as Tina Fontaine to understand how a dismissive attitude also highlights the importance of movements such as the Red Dress Project, which places pressure on the public to confront the harsh realities of MMIWG2s. The concluding challenge lies in finding a balance between memorialization and active engagement, which is where the critique of The Red Dress Exhibit in the CMHR stems from. While fixed memorials risk separating the issue from the present moment, The Red Dress Movement must be understood as an active exhibit, an example of art functioning as a protest, and a stark representation of the traumatic reality. In essence, the institutionalization of the Red Dress Project within museums prompts a necessary conversation about the portrayal of contemporary Indigenous issues, urging institutions to actively engage with communities, prioritize public awareness, and address the ongoing crisis of MMIWG2s with the sensitivity and urgency it demands.

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