

Indigenous People's Day (The REDress Project)

When I first immigrated to the United States in 2010, I was the only Asian child, who was from South Korea, in the classroom of my elementary school. Many of my classmates came up to me and would ask these questions. “Are you from China?” “Have you ever eaten a dog?” “Why are your eyes so small?” As they made fun of me, they pulled on the corner of their eyes. I went up to my homeroom teacher and told her all these unpleasant happenings that denied the appropriateness of how I looked by hurting my self-image. My teacher said, “They were just joking. You’re the first-ever different-looking student for them. So, give them time to adjust.” My voice was ignored and I was not accepted as who I was.

A few weeks later, I was attracted by advertisements for the most beautiful doll, *Barbie*. In order to buy the same doll, I went to the shopping mall with my mother. Many *Barbie* dolls wore different clothes but they looked alike with a skinny body, long blond hair, and white-colored skin. While seeing the same dolls, I kept wondering if there would be an Asian doll that might look like me. At the bottom of the shelf, there was only one Asian girl doll. She wore Chinese traditional clothes and had long black hair with single eyelids. Her eyes were exactly like how my classmates would gesture to make fun of me with the slant-eyed sign. Pulling their eyes to the side in an attempt to imitate me was unpleasantly visualized in the Asian girl doll. My body was distorted and commercialized due to the normalization of racism, which did not take seriously its legitimization of bigotry and violence towards marginalized communities.

A little girl was mocked due to her small eyes and could not find her authentic Asian doll out of racial prejudice. Not only did she experience unwanted violence but also experienced how indigenous women and girls have been the object of violence for centuries. According to CNN

World News, thousands of indigenous women and girls have been killed or have disappeared in Canada during the past decades. As victims of a Canadian genocide, indigenous families, communities, and organizations requested the Canadian government to investigate this violence. As a result, their inquiry was set up in 2016. The four commissioners launched this inquiry after collecting evidence and inspecting the systemic roots of all forms of violence. The final report of the National Inquiry defines various forms of violence such as “physical forms (hitting, choking, murder), sexual forms (unwelcome sexual comments, fondling, rape), emotional forms (name-calling, jealousy, humiliation), psychological forms (threats, social isolation, stalking), spiritual forms (bans of spiritual practices), cultural forms, verbal forms, financial forms, and neglecting forms.”¹

In addition to the World Health Organization’s definition of violence, the National Inquiry includes colonial, cultural, and institutional violence as follows: Colonial violence relies on the dehumanization of indigenous people through depriving their necessities of life, ignoring their knowledge and capacity, and reasserting colonial norms; cultural violence is viciously embedded in Canada’s Western white-dominant culture by justifying or legitimizing direct or structural violence towards indigenous people; and institutional violence makes the status quo of racism normal via institutions such as the military, the church, the educational system, the health system, police, emergency responders, and the justice system.² Such structural violence has devalued, ignored, or murdered thousands of indigenous women and girls. This destruction of violence befalls without seeing the true inherent value of their bodies and without regard to their pleading voices

¹ National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, *Reclaiming Power and Place: Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (2019), 76.

² *Ibid.*, 76-77.

While grieving the innocent deaths and disappearances of indigenous women and girls, Jaime Black, a visual artist, created the “REDress Project” in order to inform people of this genocide in Canada and the United States. Since 2010, grounded by supporters, who donated more than 400 dresses to this project, Black was able to install a public art exhibit at dozens of places throughout Canada and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington. She focused on visualizing hidden Native women through her artwork and creativity. Their bodies and voices were symbolized through the red dresses which hung on the branches of the trees with different sizes, shades, and shapes. When the dresses were moving back and forth in the wind, their spirits seemed to speak about how cruelly they were trampled and destroyed under colonial, cultural, and institutional violence. Can it be possible to stand with Native women to end all forms of violence and evoke a transformative action for them?

According to a briefing given by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Native American women are ten times more likely to be killed and four times more likely to be sexually assaulted than the domestic average. More seriously, the National Indigenous Women Resource Center states that their disappearances or murders are caused by crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault, and sex trafficking. Such gendered and racialized violence is revealed through the REDress project if people can perceive the dresses and know the truth of what is going on in the world. Just as the red dresses are intertwined with their presences, people can be aware of systemic discrimination that forces indigenous women to be silenced and to be mistreated as being invisible persons. People can wrestle with the disappearances and murders of the indigenous women committed by violent exploiters, ignorance of the governors, silence of the media, and indifference of the society. Can it be possible to stand with Native women to end all forms of violence and evoke a transformative action for them?

Experiencing violence is no longer a tragic story of only the indigenous women, but rather stories of those who have experienced systemic racism from economic inequality to political injustice. As long as there is an economic gap between white supremacy and the marginalized, it is hard to lessen the success gap due to the lack of educational resources and support systems. Drawing from the fact that white men hold a majority of elected positions, it is obvious to ascertain who holds power to fixate on the political issues and to run politics via the authority of the incumbent. As opposed to systemic racism, Jesus emptied himself on the cross for the poor and the powerless, and similarly the red dresses are emptied on the branches for the indigenous women. Just as Jesus was present in the cup of wine, red dresses are present in the blood and lives of innocent women. While remembering Jesus Christ, who hung on the cross, we can remember the red dresses, which were hanging on the branches of the trees as the spirits of the indigenous women. Can it be possible to stand with Native women to end all forms of violence and evoke a transformative action for them?

The year 2010 is reminiscent of starting my immigration journey in the U.S. It is also the same year as the REDress Project was started by Jaime Black. Ten years ago, a little girl remained silent before racial slurs and the normalization of racism but now she becomes a young woman along with her beautiful self-image and her own voice to fight against the race and gender disparity. Moreover, she looks at the red dresses to evoke a transformative action for the voices of the indigenous women against silence and invisibility. She looks at the red dresses to evoke a transformative action for the bodies of the indigenous women against disappearances and deaths. She looks at the red dresses to evoke a transformative action for the powers of the indigenous women against racism and violence. With her vision, it truly arises to stand with Native women to end all forms of violence and evoke a transformative action for their voices and

bodies like the REDress Project. We can be like the red dresses to speak out for the voiceless and to act for the powerless while moving and walking together.

Minju Cindy Oh is a Junior at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA), located in Aurora IL. At IMSA, she is the Co-founder of a gender equality club (GEN) that strives to create a safe place for all genders. Minju is a current member of the Northern Illinois Conference's Justice Generation and advocates for racial justice. Additionally, outside of school, Minju is the National Director of Publicity at the Junior State of America which urges political activism through non-partisanship. She is currently attending Wesley United Methodist Church in the city of Urbana in Illinois.