
Walking with our Sisters and Indigenous Women's Voices: Decolonization for the 21

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Abstract

In the context of the SSAWW call concerning border-crossings, the idea of borders crossing women who were already present in North America and the consequences of those colonial lines deserves attention. An examination of the Walking With Our Sisters memorial illuminates how Indigenous women continue to reclaim presence and voice within the context of ongoing colonization in Canada and the United States through their own continued rhetorical practices. In 2013, Métis artist Christi Belcourt organized the Walking with Our Sisters (WWOS) project, an art installation and memorial dedicated to 1,000+ missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada and the U.S. (www.walkingwithoursisters.ca). Originally conceived as a collection of several hundred hand-made and purposefully unfinished pairs of moccasin vamps that would represent the unfinished lives of the remembered Native women (Belcourt 2013), the memorial grew to encompass nearly 2,000 pairs of donated vamps, and the installation has already traveled to 17 different Indigenous communities. This presentation acknowledges that the memorial accomplishes its initial purpose to raise awareness of ongoing patterns of violence against Indigenous women, and moreover, in its development it has become a powerful means for Indigenous communities to emphasize the importance of women's voices and do decolonizing work. One could put WWOS in the context of the tradition of Native women of past centuries advocating on behalf of their communities through writing and oratory, and to an extent that is true. However, based on my own experience in researching contemporary Indigenous museums and volunteering with a recent WWOS installation, I demonstrate that WWOS does unique, critical, decolonial advocacy work for the 21st century that places the rhetorical power in each host community's hands, centers Indigenous makings as also-always rhetorical (not just writing), and ultimately endeavors to shift the power of rhetorical narrative-making to the Indigenous communities the project represents.

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