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## Resisting Transhistorical Violence: *Fringe* and Art Activism

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*Between 1587 and 1589, Netherlandish artist Jan van der Straet engraved a series of plates entitled New Inventions of Modern Times. One, Allegory of America, portrays an Indigenous woman in a feathered headdress and skirt eagerly welcoming Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci as he steps onto land. Van der Straet's work occupies space in a long history of male European artistic depictions of Indigenous women, but the white colonial gaze evident in Allegory has not gone unchallenged. In 2007, Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe) responded to transhistorical violence against Indigenous women and girls with a billboard instalment entitled Fringe. Although originally displayed as a direct response to the Pickton murders in Vancouver, Fringe transcends a single event or story. Belmore's billboard reimagines controlling images that construct Indigenous women as sexually available conquests. She strips the image of the icons that artists have used to represent Indigenous women. By placing the billboard in a crowded metropolitan area, Belmore forces the viewer to confront the still-present reality of Indigeneity alongside the concomitant brutality of settler colonialism. Belmore's art functions on multiple levels to convey a sense of survivance in the face of systemic attempted genocide. Fringe is a fully realised, modern, and powerful piece of art activism that transforms visual culture. In this paper, I analyse the transhistorical effects of art as a tool of colonisation, as seen in van der Straet's work. I then theorise Fringe as a vibrant piece of art activism (artivism) that subverts the white male colonial gaze.*

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### Introduction

A photograph of a woman occupies a billboard in Quebec. She reclines on her side, naked save for a thin white sheet draped around her hips, her back to the camera. The palette is neutral, white, and grey. What strikes the viewer, what one's eyes are drawn to over and over, is the slash across her back running diagonally from shoulder to hip. The gash itself is puckered and red, sewn shut but still raw. Upon closer inspection, one sees that the blood dripping from the wound is not, after all, blood, but small red beads creating rivulets from the wound to the white cloth upon which she lays. Rebecca Belmore, the Anishinaabekwe artist who created *Fringe*, identifies the transhistorical nature of violence against Indigenous women. On her website, Belmore says, "The Indigenous female body is the politicized body, the historical body. It's the body that doesn't disappear". While some interpret the image as a cadaver,

Belmore insists that the wound will heal, and the Indigenous woman will “turn her back on the atrocities inflicted upon her” (belmore.com). Although the billboard originally appeared as a commentary on the Canadian press and governmental response to the Robert Pickton serial killings, *Fringe* enters a discourse analysing centuries of colonial construction of Indigeneity, as well as Indigenous resistance to those constructions. Drawing on postcolonial theorists such as Sarah Deer and George Yancy to interpret two competing artistic representations of Indigenous women, I trace the transcultural consequences of the white gaze on Indigenous women and the transformative nature of Indigenous artistic resistance to white colonial violence. Part 1 of this essay analyses *Allegory of America* by Jan van der Straet to illustrate the effects of the white gaze on Indigenous women. Part 2 analyses *Fringe* by Rebecca Belmore as one example of the power of art activism to alter the visual world long dominated by white Europeans.<sup>1</sup>

### Part 1: Inventing Indigeneity

In Jan van der Straet’s *Allegory of America*, Amerigo Vespucci (figure 1) strides onto shore, cape covering his armour. In one hand he holds the mariner’s astrolabe. In his other, he carries a crucifix-topped Southern Cross banner. When Vespucci calls to her, a woman named “America” rises from her bed. Although she is white-skinned and blonde, iconography confirms her Indigeneity; feathered headdress and feathered skirt, which Europeans believed to be common adornments for all Indigenous nations on both American continents, mark “America” as an Indigenous woman. She invites Vespucci’s presence with an outstretched hand and slightly parted legs, signifying her sexual availability. Just as van der Straet codes her as Indigenous (and hence primitive) through iconography, he engraves Vespucci’s image with



Figure 1. Jan van der Straet, called Stradanus. Allegory of America. 1587-89. Public domain.

symbols of European male authority. The military sword, religious crucifix, and Southern Cross in his hands bestow on him military might, religious authority, and political will. These innovations code Vespucci, and symbolically, Europe, as civilised in contrast to the naked, sexually available woman who represents the entirety of America.

Bruges-born van der Straet engraved *Allegory of America* for the Florentine Medici court as one of 20 plates celebrating the discoveries and inventions of the European Renaissance. At the time of the engraving, binary gender norms prescribed differentiated roles to European men and women. Although there was some variation between countries, classes, and religions, European women were generally valued for their child-bearing and rearing ability, limiting their sphere to the home and family. In “Women in Renaissance Florence,” art historian Dan Kent, insists that Florentine women “were excluded from public life, and sequestered in the home to ensure their purity and that of the blood line through which property descended” (26). Florentine women’s physical space was confined to interior spaces, out of which they peeked through narrow windows. The gendered difference in physical views reflects European expectations of feminine passivity and the nature of European power at the time of van der Straet’s engraving. The act of looking held power over the social order. Theorising the power of men to look, Laura Mulvey succinctly defines what is meant by ‘gaze’ and how it functions. She insists that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female [...] the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly” (60). The male gaze, then, constructs women as passive recipients of male authority while the right to gaze reinforces active male power.

During the Renaissance, and in contrast to women’s restricted purview, the European male gaze expanded as navigation, exploration, and technology enticed them farther from home. Considering the European male gaze specifically on colonised people, Nicholas Mirzoeff remarks, “imperial visuality was an abstracted and intensified means of ordering biopower” (196). Because European men constructed Indigeneity as bereft of Europe’s civilised morality, they insisted that Indigenous people welcomed the racial hierarchies resulting from imperial visuality, or the coloniser gaze. Such Euro-centric racial hierarchies have had transhistorical and transnational consequences. Under international European law, the doctrine of *terra nullius* allows nations to take possession of uninhabited land. Ignoring the presence of, or discounting the humanity of, the Eora people, colonising explorer James Cook claimed Australia for Britain in 1770. A similar concept provided cover for Joseph Trutch to ignore Metis, Inuit, and First Nations’ land claims in favour of colonial British Columbia, resulting in the continued colonial occupation of unceded land (Fisher 3, 5). Indigenous people from Thailand to Ireland, Russia to South Africa, have seen their communities denigrated as the coloniser gaze turns toward them. Jan van der Straet’s engraving makes explicit ongoing

racial and gendered positionality as constructed by colonisers, who, in the case of the American and Australian continents, are white European men.

The coloniser gaze manipulated the analogy of Indigenous woman-as-land to give the coloniser sovereign right to conquer and own both. In *Allegory*, the Indigenous woman, and by extension, the land, willingly receives Vespucci's male/cultural advances. Historian Philip Deloria outlines the many uses colonisers made of Indigenous images, including evoking "female sexuality in picturing the fertile landscape or to show the colonies as available and vulnerable to the desires of English men" (29). Where Gauguin enacted his own version of primitivism to access "the earthly paradise, its plenitude, its pleasure, its alluring and compliant female bodies," (Solomon-Godeau 314) European colonisers in the Americas instead created a new mythos of Indigeneity intrinsically linked to virginal land ripe for conquest by civilised men. The land, and the women, lie open for them to own. Europeans did not step into nativism: they created, exploited, and dominated it.

Writing extensively about Black, Black Indigenous, and Indigenous race issues, Critical Race theorist George Yancy draws attention to the connected oppressions realised by all people who have been colonised, particularly those whose skin colour offers the white colonial gaze a quick way to enforce racial hierarchies. "'Blackness' vis-a-vis the white colonial gaze is historically constructed *tertium quid*; it is that which emerges as a third element, between, as it were, the dark or swarthy skin colour of the colonised, which is a natural phenomenon, and the white colonial gaze, which is a form of hegemony and control" (7). He clarifies that 'Blackness' refers to Indigenous people as well when he writes, "the dark or swarthy color of the colonized [...] is a natural phenomenon" (7). The colonised woman becomes object and subject, the site of male fear and fetishisation, constructed and owned by them. She is studied, quantified, and classified. Devoid of autonomy within this created ethos, the Indigenous woman finds herself frozen in a European mythopoeic construction of Indigeneity that bears no resemblance to her lived experiences or her own worldview. This codification brings with it stereotypification, forcing her into a Manichean binary reflective of the virgin/whore paradigm that society, law, and education perpetuate. This binary becomes the lens through which colonisers and colonial material structures view all Indigenous women: they are seen as either Indian Princess or savage *squaw*, a racially gendered term frequently used to disparage Indigenous women by reducing their identity to their sexuality.<sup>ii</sup>

The bifurcated representation mirrors the Manichean divide of the colonised world itself. The popular image of the Indigenous woman fluctuates within this paradigm to serve the needs of the whole colonising political body. The Indian Princess, under such names as Sacajawea and Pocahontas, sacrifices herself for white men to further the interests of colonisation and capitalism. She is the perfect woman: noble, non-threateningly erotic, submissive. While Sacajawea and Pocahontas indeed lived, the representation of their lives has strayed from the historical facts. They are not useful to colonisers in their true form: the power of their image lies in how colonisers manipulate the image to justify white lust for Indigenous bodies and land. The princess represents submissive Indigeneity, a willing subject of the white male gaze. The *squaw*, however, with unchecked sexuality, represents the fears of colonial power. This quickly becomes the default image in white narratives. Here, Indigenous women are “constructed as lascivious, shameless, unmaternal, prostitutes, ugly, and incapable of high sentiment or manners [...] the dark mirror-image of the idealised nineteenth-century visions of white women” (Eberts 80). The *squaw* is exotic, wild, libidinous. She has sex indiscriminately but can be tamed by a white man through love, religion, or political machinations. Whether viewed as princess or *squaw*, the Indigenous woman remains stagnant in history, locked in a fictional past created by the white gaze.

To take one concrete example of the transhistorical effects of the coloniser’s gaze, US social programmes created without Indigenous women’s input limit available resources to reservations, although an estimated 78 per cent of Indigenous people live outside tribal statistical areas, with 60 per cent living in metropolitan areas (US Department of Health and Human Services). Constructing Indigenous women as always already a willingly colonised subject, confined to the racial organisation produced by settler colonialism, replicates original settler colonial politics, allowing those in power to remain willingly ignorant of the Indigenous woman’s lived reality, including what physical spaces she occupies.

The coloniser’s gaze impacts more than Indigenous women’s political power. Analysing colonisation’s effects on Black bodies, and applicable to Indigenous bodies, Yancy asserts, “Hence, the Black body is coded as a form of pathology; it is coded as evil, dirty, and promiscuous. Indeed, the Black body is coded as a site of axiological nullification” (Yancy 9). Manipulating the new mythos has proven a powerful and lasting tool in the coloniser’s arsenal with implications across disciplines. Colonial power creates a myth of Indigeneity, which gives birth to academic studies which, in turn, reify the myth and embolden the settler colonial power that birthed it. With the myth comfortably ensconced in the power structure, settler-colonial

governments maintain legislative and religious control over Indigenous women through a superimposed coloniser-style patriarchy. White devaluation of Indigenous women's bodies and the narrative colonisers weave about Indigenous sexuality, directly impact gendered violence and judicial responses to violence. The legal ramifications become clear when looking at the US. Not only has the patriarchal structure reduced the power Indigenous women traditionally held through matrilineal lines, but it eradicated historical tribal protections against abuse.

For instance, through the Mvskoke tribe's written laws dating to the mid-1800s, we see evidence of a woman-centred response to violence: women had the power to name assault and dictate the terms of reconciliation. "And be it farther enacted if any person or persons should undertake to force a woman and did it by force, it shall be left to woman what punishment she should satisfied with to whip or pay what she say it be law (sic)" (Deer 17). Compare this to US law of the same era. Based on English common law, coverture doctrine held that the husband subsumed the wife, making rape charges against a husband impossible. Indigenous women lost tribal power as colonisation dictated strict terms of tribal hierarchy. They also lost historical rights to have their story believed absent overwhelming proof. Violence against Indigenous women became part of a colonial power grid, with all lines fuelling the European colonisers who benefit from the subjugation and rape of both Indigenous women and the land/resources. Andrea Smith theorises, "It is through sexual violence that a colonizing group attempts to render a colonized peoples as inherently rapable, their lands inherently invadable, and their resources inherently extractable" (312). From the beginning, when van der Straet first imagined America as an Indigenous woman, the coloniser's gaze has sought to manipulate and control the image to coalesce power and property in the Americas.

Focusing again on the US as an example, one can see the devastating effect the coloniser's gaze has had on Indigenous women. The National Institute of Justice estimates that 84.3 per cent of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) women will experience violence in their lifetime (Bureau of Indian Affairs Report). More than one in three AI/AN women have experienced sexual violence in the past year, but poor survey design skews the data. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) in the US has only four racial categories plus "other": White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. AI/ANs, Native Hawaiians, Asians, and Pacific Islanders are grouped together, while mixed-race people are relegated to the nebulous zone of "Other," thereby making self-reported rates of violence only nominally valuable when agents analyse risk factors for AI/ANs. The US Department of Justice (DOJ) also collects data, and their reflection of reality is equally dismal. Indeed, in 2016

alone, 5,712 Indigenous women and girls were reported missing. The DOJ database of missing persons logged only 116 of them (Urban Indian Health Institute). Indigenous women continue to be disposable within settler-colonial systems.

Turning now to Canada, one case study illustrates a modern iteration of the coloniser gaze. In 2007, Robert Pickton, a white man, confessed to killing forty-nine women over the course of a decade. He chose his victims from an impoverished area of Vancouver, Canada, a “version of hell populated by prostitutes, drug addicts and pimps” (Huhndorf 561). In an area where Indigenous people represent three per cent of the population, half of Pickton’s victims were Indigenous women. Because Victorian colonial mores, ingrained in law, devalue sex work, and because the white gaze labels all Indigenous women as ‘prostitutes’, Indigenous women are less likely to be considered genuine victims. Those charged with Indigenous women’s safety are no less culpable for the ongoing violence. Writing about police response to missing and murdered Indigenous women, Indigenous feminist and historian Mary Eberts says, “that police often conflate the ‘high-risk lifestyles’ of sex trade workers and the lives of all Indigenous women is not just an error: the terminology reflects decades of government policy” (Eberts 93).

The police and media devalued the lives of the Indigenous women Pickton murdered, which failure allowed Pickton to continue killing. The Vancouver Police Department and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had flagged Pickton as a person of interest, and yet both failed to investigate early reports of missing Indigenous women. In 1997, Wendy Lynn Eistetter escaped Pickton’s farm after being handcuffed and stabbed several times. Although police arrested Pickton, they quickly released him on a C\$2,000 bond. It wasn’t until 2002 that police began searching Pickton’s farm. In February 2002, Pickton was finally arrested and charged with first-degree murder. Police action in the Pickton murders led to a provincial government inquiry into British Columbia police practices. The final report charges the police with failure to act due to societal biases. Volume I of the report says, “[The Indigenous women] were forsaken twice: once by society at large and then again by the police. The pattern of predatory violence was clear and should have been met with a swift and severe response by accountable and professional institutions, but it was not” (4). Volume III of the report reveals that prior to the Pickton murders, police often failed to take missing person reports if the police determined the person in question to be prone to disappearance. The report recommends changing the practice to accept all missing person reports because “categorizations can be problematic when they are based on stereotypical beliefs” (143).



The media, for its part, fed the public images of Indigenous women that echoed van der Straet's engraving, and which were firmly rooted in stereotypes. Analysing the media coverage, researcher Jori Dusome states that prior to Pickton's arrest in 2002, the media rarely reported on the missing Indigenous women. When they did cover the increasing numbers of missing women, the media portrayed the women as "the harbingers of their own misfortune" (Dusome 1). Dusome finds that even after Pickton's apprehension, the women's believed status as sex workers, and/or their assumed drug use, made them culpable for their own murders in the public's eye. Other scholars agree with Dusome's assessment. Shari Huhndorf writes that "in representations of the Pickton murders, the Indigenous woman's body became a site of contestation, its meanings bound up with the political significance of the killings" (565).

The white gaze denies access to justice even when Indigenous women report abuse, as Indigenous legal scholars Sarah Deer and Abigail Barefoot attest. "Assumptions about who is a victim and what counts as rape intersect with sexual, racial, and class-based stereotypes in which being a 'genuine victim' correlates with being a respectable, heterosexual white woman who physically resists the assault" (514). In short, Indigenous women rarely count as rape victims because the coloniser gaze has positioned them as inherently rapable and men as the entitled consumers of their bodies. Predators like Pickton target Indigenous women because they are "life devoid of value [...] nothing but the frightening reverse image [*Gegenbild*] of authentic humanity" (Agamben 81).

The constant threat they face informs how Indigenous women experience their lives. Speaking of residential schools, but applicable to all gendered Indigenous violence, Million asserts, "[Their] lives were fraught with a negotiation of their felt profaned status [...] This set up a constant exchange between the everyday discourse that reinforced their profane status, the emotional habitus..." (49). Their inner lives become entangled with the coloniser mythos, pulled between pre-colonial traditions and modern subjugation. They experience what Habermas calls the "colonization of the lifeworld" (Million 177). This inner colonisation is not a bug of the colonial system – it is a feature. Violence is the mechanism settler colonisation uses to maintain control of Indigenous land, and "the abject heart of colonialism and neocolonialism, and their practice of capitalism, is *gendered violence*" (Million 177). Thus, the white gaze on Indigenous bodies creates for itself and for Indigenous people a distorted image that then becomes an intensely shared cultural language.

## Part 2: From the Fringe

In the wake of the Pickton murders, while Vancouver grappled with the sheer volume of murdered women, Rebecca Belmore's art installation *Fringe* appeared in settler-colonial Quebec. Placing the billboard in the context of transhistorical genocide, the viewer can begin to understand the subversive, transformative nature of Belmore's art. The artist's own naked body brutally defies the white gaze, tearing apart the prevailing European mythos. It forces the viewer "to engage with a denied existence and visibility. The body, in this sense, becomes a powerful tool to shame those who claim positions of power" (Matebeni 138). Recalling the reclining female nude so common in European art, such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Reclining Nude* (c. 1892), Belmore similarly portrays her subject prone and naked. The audience, seeing the figure, situates her within a well-trod artistic discursive – here lies an emblem of authentic womanhood. Whereas the female nude in European art "invites an erotic voyeurism on the part of the male spectator" (Perry 27), *Fringe* transforms her nude into a modern Indigenous woman. By turning her back to the camera, and covering her buttocks with a white cloth, Belmore denies the male gaze its "sexual satisfaction [that] can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (Mulvey 59). Belmore, then, endows her female nude with an agency denied van der Straet's "America".

Belmore likewise challenges the coloniser's preconceived notions of what an Indigenous woman looks like, where she resides, and where her value lies. Belmore strips her body of the iconography van der Straet used to represent Indigenous bodies: she wears no feathers. This woman, with a section of her short dark hair bleached, refuses to play Indian. She forces the coloniser to confront the still-present reality of Indigeneity alongside the brutality of settler colonialism. She stands with other Indigenous women and says, in the words of Gertie Mai Muise (Mi'kmaq), "we are systematically oppressed but, without question, we are altogether strong" (25).

A gash across the image's back travels diagonally from shoulder to hip. At first, one sees blood streaming from the stitched wound. Upon closer examination, the rivulets of blood are revealed to be red beads. Beadwork, an Anishinaabe art form used in times of celebration, is a way to connect the past to the present. It declares tribal membership and exhibits individual skill. The colour red itself "transcends the physical world and calls to the ancestors in the spirit world" (StrongHearts Native Helpline). It beautifies the faces and clothing of young Indigenous women. But red means more. It decorates the faces and horses of some tribal nations as they



**Minnesota**  
**Missing and Murdered**  
**Indigenous Relatives**  
**Office**

Figure 2. Minnesota Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives Office logo.

ride into battle to protect their communities. And red is the colour of the hashtag movements #MMIW, #MMIWG, and #MMIWG2S, social media efforts that engage in consciousness-raising across platforms, as seen in the Minnesota Missing Indigenous Relatives Office logo (figure 2). Red is a connection to the spirit world, a symbol of beauty, and a call to action. By stitching the wounded young woman with red beads, Belmore says that this wound will heal with help from her ancestors and community. The skill and beauty of the beads promise hope in the face of horrific pain. This woman, and her community, will find strength and survivance, one bead at a time.

The art form Belmore chooses is itself evidence of modernity. A camera and billboard become Indigenous feminist tools in her hand. Belmore's female form tears down the Manichean binary and rips open European mythical stereotypes. Deloria writes, "Americans built the nation on contradictory foundations: a highly positive interior brand of Indian Otherness coexisted with exterior savages lurking outside societal boundaries" (74). Belmore refuses both versions. Belmore's Indigenous woman, in contrast to van der Straet's *Allegory*, exists in modernity, corporeal and larger than life. The coloniser is left to stare at the atrocities he has committed, evidence of generations of violence concomitant with his march through the land. Belmore's female nude does not care about our response; she is, in fact, unaware that we even stand here. By turning her back to the coloniser's gaze, she refuses to accept his authority or his stereotypes. While the figure invites the coloniser to witness, she does not address the questions we may have, nor will she respond to any apologies, if we should even make them. While Indigenous women stitch each other up, the coloniser is left out of the feminine, communal healing. By turning her back to us, Belmore says, "You have done this, but I will thrive anyway. You wound me, but you are irrelevant to my healing".

With no explanatory text, Belmore's art draws attention to the discursive formation van der Straet engraved in *Allegory of America*. Instead of a receptive Indigenous woman, Belmore photographs Indigenous womanhood in a system of ongoing and pernicious colonial violence. *Fringe* is a larger-than-life opportunity to sit with pain and grief but also (and this is vital) to recognise the power and survivance of Indigenous people. *Fringe*, with its slashed and stitched

Indigenous woman resembling a cadaver, provokes in the viewer emotions which, if given room, can grow into liberatory actions. Belmore's "red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives" (Fanon 3) hold more transformative power than the now-obscure engravings van der Straet circulated in part because Belmore confronts the viewer with lived Indigenous reality that colonisers attempt to deny.

Belmore stepped into a public space inhabited by colonisers and Indigenous people alike and demanded attention for ongoing systemic violence. This emotionally powerful stimulus loomed larger than life, impossible to ignore by passers-by. By placing her art in a centre of commerce and colonial power, downtown Quebec, Belmore's image negotiated a liminal space between Indigenous and colonial, between death and healing, between public and private. Liminal spaces inclusive of Indigenous women offer us all a chance to transform current systems of domination. But what is the overall work of *Fringe*? While Belmore literally created a physical gap by rupturing the coloniser gaze with the presence of a modern Indigenous woman, this transitional period demands actions, not simply emotions. Just as van der Straet alone did not create Indigenous stereotypes, one piece of art by itself does not move the political machine, nor do I claim it does. Rather, it is my intention to show how Belmore's art operates within an ongoing dialectic inclusive of Herculean efforts by Indigenous women throughout the world who strive to affect change.

In September 2016, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau established a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. The final report released in 2019 included more than 1,000 hours of testimony from 2,300 different witnesses, including private interviews and public hearings. The report confirms what Indigenous communities have been saying for years: Indigenous women face higher rates of violence as part of an ongoing, systemic devaluation of Indigeneity as a whole, and Indigenous women specifically. In the report, Chief Commissioner Marion Buller said, "The truth is that we live in a country whose laws and institutions perpetuate violations of basic human and Indigenous rights. These violations amount to nothing less than the deliberate, often covert campaign of genocide against Indigenous women". Her use of the word 'genocide' speaks to the transhistorical, lasting, systemic effects of the white gaze on Indigenous women. Seen as supportive princesses or savage *squaws*, white colonial society has allowed no place for Indigenous women outside of European constructs. Indeed, white settlers are more likely to put on feathers and call themselves "Indians" than they are to hear the voices of the Indigenous people around them.

The Canadian inquiry fell far short of what was (and still is) needed, illuminating the enormous task of unravelling the effects of the white colonial gaze even while colonial governments attempt to weave a shroud around Indigeneity. In fact, the inquiry arguably assuaged white feelings without significantly improving Indigenous wellbeing. Chief Commissioner Buller called out the Canadian government in the official report, stating that their refusal to grant a requested two-year extension of the inquiry resulted in the silencing of voices. Still, as a US citizen, I have to wonder what the US government would do with such a report if it were to authorise one. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland has formed a Missing and Murdered Unit within the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services, and this sparks some hope that investigations will at least give families and communities closure when their daughters disappear. But investigating disappearances is not as helpful as ending the root causes, and here I circle back to *Fringe*.

*Fringe* steps into the discourse by enacting envisioned, direct violence on the artist's own body. By placing that violent embodiment in a public space occupied by white and Indigenous people, she performs pain and healing. By visibly inhabiting the liminal space between the white imagination and the Indigenous reality, *Fringe* reimagines centuries of coloniser narratives that tell of princesses and *squaws*. Belmore's body, beautiful in its woundedness, becomes the site of private violence made public, revealing generations of sorrow, yes, but also resiliency. Rachel Presley, writing about the intersection of art activism and murdered and missing Indigenous women, says, "For Indigenous peoples (and women especially), activism provides revolutionizing utility [...] Indigenous knowledge systems are often intricately tied to embodied practices that reimagine diverse artistic forms". Belmore subverts the white gaze through the language of art, a language that first portrayed Indigenous women as consumable goods. Through her wounds, she asserts the power and creativity of Indigenous women: "In short, the (artist's) body serves as a form of testimony; the body, and by extension, the body's artefact resist, rebel, and revolt against the settler politics that colonized it as an extension of the land" (Presley). The figure offers no convenient checklist of actionable items just as it offers no absolution. With this testimony, the coloniser is left to decide for himself how to engage with Indigeneity in the future.

## **Conclusion**

While some of the symbols Belmore uses seem clear, she likely employs iconography specific to the Anishinaabe nation, a language separate from my own American English

monolingualism. And yet, by incorporating discursive signs familiar to most art historians and lay people alike, such as the reclining nude, Belmore transcends the artificial boundary between Indigenous women and settler-colonial women.

Settler colonialism situates itself as interior to the exterior it creates of Indigeneity. It can only maintain its control by refusing to address its own imaginations of the Other. By building a new nation founded on the exteriorisation of entire peoples, the US Declaration of Independence used “bones and blood” to augment a fantastical world that never was based in reality. “We hold these truths to be self-evident” (Jefferson 1776) begins the world-building of this new empire, an empire dependent on simultaneously co-opting and destroying Indigeneity. In this way, the nation-state declares itself not only sovereign with the ability to enforce the rights of citizenship, but Sovereign, with the power to determine who is and is not human, citizen, present. The US is not alone in its endeavours. Out of this imagined tapestry, the original colonisers of North and South America wove a false image of Indigenous women. That they did so may be unsurprising. That we continue to allow them to do so witnesses against our insistence that this is the land of the free, home of the brave. Fanon asserts, “decolonization, therefore, implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation” (2). Without acknowledgement of and restitution for centuries of violence, decolonisation remains a myth that allows imperial hunger for Indigenous bodies to feed unchecked. As a world, we prove ourselves neither free nor brave when we turn from the billboard and continue the same practice of exteriorising Indigenous women even as they walk next to us in our cities, shop next to us at the market, send their children to school with ours.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A note on terms: 'Indigenous' refers to those who lived in the Americas at the time of European colonisation and their descendants. Because governmental agencies use American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), those terms likewise appear, especially when discussing data. Tribal affiliations and a porous border make the US and Canada both relevant. Theory, research, and statistics from both countries are used. The unique concerns faced by Native Hawaiian women lie beyond the scope of this essay.

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Sexual violence and other forms of physical violence are inextricably linked both in data and in lived experiences. It is virtually impossible to discuss one without the other in any meaningful way. Where appropriate, I distinguish between the two.

Finally, I frequently refer to ‘coloniser’. Although I recognise this may create conflict for some readers, I use the word purposefully to reflect my positionality as a white descendant of European colonisers living in the occupied land known as the United States. In short, I am a coloniser, who both benefits from and seeks to rectify the ongoing use of Indigenous bodies as biopolitical others.

<sup>2</sup> I use ‘*squaw*’ per the literature to distinguish between both stereotypes of Indigenous women. The word itself is a racialised misogynistic slur.