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## Embodied Liminality and Gendered State Violence: Artist Expressions in the MMIW Movement

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## **Embodied Liminality and Gendered State Violence: Artist Expressions in the MMIW Movement**

By Rachel Presley<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article examines four multimedia artist artefacts at the nexus of the missing and murdered Indigenous women's (MMIW) crisis. I position activism as a decolonial methodology that radically alters our attunement to embodied aesthetics, contending that feminist activists employ a radical imagination to liberate the body/body politic. Decoloniality must be an enacted praxis, and for many Indigenous feminists, creative and artistic practices provide a transformative pathway towards "making" and "living out" one's indigeneity as knowledge and tradition-bearers. Each of the four exhibits illustrate the ways in which settler politics are narrated and resisted through and by the Indigenous body. My analysis illuminates what I theorize as an "embodied liminality" allied to Anzaldúa's (1987) "Borderlands" and Bhabha's (2004) "Third Space." By articulating both feminist and decolonial forms of liminality, I explore the radical dimensions of activism and the strategic subjugation of the liminal's in-between threshold in which Indigenous women are traditionally relegated as "monstrous" Others. Using feminist activism as a pathway to decolonization renders indigeneity clearly visible, such that the once-shadowy forms of its liminality are now simultaneously the protagonist and antagonist of the settler state. Building a decolonial movement against the MMIW crisis must begin with the recognition of the Indigenous body across fluid boundaries of radical resistance and critical vocabularies of aesthetic deviance.

*Keywords:* MMIW; gendered violence; activism; decolonial feminism; liminality

### **Introduction**

Native women experience violence at higher per capita rates than any other racial group (Deer, 2015). The infamous "1 in 3 Native women will be raped in her lifetime" statistic is actually closer to 35 percent, and in 2010, the *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* found that 56 percent of all Native women have experienced some form of sexual violence (Rosay, 2016)—an overwhelming majority of which is committed by non-Native men (Amnesty International, 2007). Outside of the United States, Canadian agencies also report alarmingly high rates of violence against Indigenous populations: Between 1980 and 2012, First Nations women and girls represented approximately 20 percent of all female homicides in Canada despite comprising less than 4 percent of the population (Government of Canada, 2016). Even more, a 2007 study in Saskatchewan—the only province to review missing persons files for demographic anomalies—found that Indigenous women made up 6 percent of the population yet accounted for more than 60 percent of all missing persons reports (Provincial Partnership Committee on Missing Persons, 2007).

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It wasn't until September 2016, under tremendous pressure from Indigenous groups and human rights organizations, that Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, established the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) whose final 2019 report garnered more than 1,000 hours of testimony from 2,300 witnesses across three years of private interviews and public hearings. The report affirms that which Indigenous populations have long known: that the violence they experience is a condition of an insidious settler state and a distinctly colonial genocidal project. Chief Commissioner Marion Buller reflects, "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, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA<sup>2</sup> people" (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, p. 5). This systemic violation, exploitation, and terrorization of Indigenous women across both racialized and gendered lines is far from an isolated incident but rather beckons to what Quijano and Ennis (2000) define as a "coloniality of power"—the ever-expanding legacy of colonization and social discrimination that not only built but continues to uphold and perpetuate the settler state, its policies, and its practices.

However, it is important to recognize that statistics of gendered and sexual violence, especially those involving Indigenous peoples, do not reflect the full extent of assault. For one, many Indigenous women are reluctant to speak with state representatives who gather data since these reports can be used to justify the use of coercive enforcement and criminalization tactics (Coomaraswamy, 2001, p. 3; Mack and Na'puti, 2019, p. 351); second, as Deer (2015) explains, "Native people make up such a small percentage of the American population that a valid random sample is difficult to come by . . . [and may not] constitute 'statistically significant'" (p. 2)—an obstacle further exacerbated by the lack of statistical records for queer Indigenous populations (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2016). In Canada, these issues are amplified by the fact that a national missing persons database was not established until 2010, rendering it near impossible to determine historical rates of violence or compare current datasets against other population trends. Taken together, actual rates of violence against Indigenous women are in fact far higher than what is reported and cannot ever fully convey the amount of pain and trauma experienced by its victims and survivors.

In an effort to (re)center Indigenous resistance to gendered violence and to promote a decolonial epistemology, this article explores four activist<sup>3</sup> collections part of the global MMIW movement. In the following section, I discuss the commitments of decolonial feminism and emphasize the practices that not only resist colonial logics but also engage in alternative, non-Western lifeways. I position activism as a decolonial methodology that radically alters our attunement to embodied aesthetics, contending that feminist activists employ a radical creative imagination to liberate the body/body politic. Following this discussion, I reveal the curvatures of decolonial expression across four MMIW activist artefacts: Jamie Black's art installation, "REDress Project;" Kristen Villebrun's inunshuk landscape architecture; Connie Walker's *Missing and Murdered* radio podcast; and Kim O'Bomsawin's documentary film, *Quiet Killing*. All four examples illustrate the ways in which settler politics are narrated and resisted through and by the Indigenous female body. My analysis illuminates what I theorize as an "embodied liminality" allied to Anzaldúa's (1987) "Borderlands" and Bhabha's (2004) "Third Space." By articulating both feminist and decolonial forms of liminality, I explore the radical dimensions of

<sup>2</sup> Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and/or asexual.

<sup>3</sup> A hybrid neologism that signifies work created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism. Activism will be explored in depth throughout the entirety of this essay.

activism and the strategic subjugation of the liminal's in-between threshold in which Indigenous women are traditionally relegated as "monstrous" Others.

### **Decolonial Feminisms: Theory and/as Praxis**

A commitment to decoloniality, like Lugones (2003, 2010) suggests, is a praxical task. It seeks to collapse the colonial logics of knowledge production and to communally resist White Western oppression in radical formations of alternative organizing. Pivotal works from Spivak (1988), Marmon Silko (1997), Enloe (2004, 2017), Fernandes (2013), and Radcliffe (2015) affirm that colonization is a ubiquitous, yet nuanced, network of disenfranchisement and erasure across race, gender, sexuality, and class lines. Decolonization, then, requires an attunement to paradigms of difference and dissident epistemologies, especially from those most oppressed by colonial structures. In order to work against entrenched traditions of "positional superiority" (Said, 1978), there is an urgent need to explore alternate modernities and to globalize, internationalize, cosmopolitanize, and indigenize our commitments to intersectional resistance (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014).

Incorporating Indigenous feminisms are crucial if we are committed to a decolonial turn across our scholarships and politics. Such critiques are intricate, multi-layered, and dependent upon recognizing intersections of power and domination that shape gendered relations, especially for Indigenous peoples. As Goeman and Denetdale (2009) note, there is no monolithic approach to Native feminism (and in fact claiming so would only continue to perpetuate cycles of epistemic colonization); yet, across varying strains of decolonial Indigenous feminisms is a commitment to critical, creative imaginaries that intervene into White feminism's erasure of settler occupation and its failure to engage gendered violence as colonial violence (Barker, 2008; Driskell, 2010; Simpson, 2014). Goeman and Denetdale (2009) add that Indigenous feminism is wholly concerned with "*doing things*:" "Imagination, a concept too often overlooked as fanciful and devoid of the capacity to change power relationships, becomes a key concept" (p. 12). Decoloniality must be an enacted praxis, and for many Indigenous feminists, creative and artistic practices provide a transformative pathway towards "making" and "living out" one's indigeneity as knowledge and tradition-bearers (Pedri-Spade, 2016).

We must examine the interconnectedness between art and activism as decolonial theory-building intersects with feminist artefact-making. Doing so continues to promote decolonial thinking across cultural agencies and invites new perspectives about the ways in which art may "reclaim, express and define personal and political histories, challenge conventional Western notions of dichotomous sexed subjectivity, and open out the relationships of please/knowledge, word/flesh, and space/time to new ways of thinking against the grain" (Meskimmon, 2003, p. 1). The personal is, indeed, intimately political.

### *Artivism and Indigenous Aesthetics*

As a critical form of epistemological inquiry, exploring feminist artistic practices is invaluable to our exploration of decolonial, experimental creativities. Artivism, as the use of artistic expression towards political activism, provides a particularly robust lens to evaluate alternative utilities affecting social change. Serra, Enríquez, and Johnson (2018) contend that artists "recognize the value of art as a powerful tool for social justice, change and liberation, and use it to help people imagine a different world" (p. 109). Likewise, Nossel (2016), Poch and Poch (2018), Reestorhoff (2017), and Sandoval and Latorre (2008) elaborate that artivism depends upon

an active—oftentimes vulnerable and precarious—participation and a critical engagement with the creative process. In articulating the affective cultural politics of activism, Reestorhoff (2017) writes, “[A]rtivism actively involves itself in events in order to sculpt the social . . . Artists do not want to merely criticize the art system or the general political and social conditions under which the system functions. Rather, they want to change these conditions by means of art” (p. 166). It is a graphic record of a “crossable threshold” from reality to radical imaginary (Poch and Poch, 2018, p. 7).

Yet, Léon (2017) admits that the term perhaps raises more questions than answers: “Are we talking about a fuller understanding of activism? About socially responsible art? About direct action done in a fun, happy, and peaceful way that speaks to the heart as well as the head?” Drawing upon art theorist Rosalind Krauss, Léon categorizes activism as the creation of “liminal scenarios,” or artefacts that cross the ethical condition with their aesthetic creation “in order to put forward other forms of political activity.” But just as the term discursively represents a hybrid neologism, so too do its artistic and aesthetic qualities. Mateos and Sedeño (2018) write that activism ultimately functions to disrupt, subvert, and intervene against systems of oppression, but its uptake depends upon a “hybrid code” that mixes forms of discourse with the combination of different artistic techniques. They explain activist artefacts must return the “political capacity to aesthetics . . . [and] convert artistic practices into social transformation” (p. 53). Similarly, critical scholars like Lemoine and Ouardi (2010) and Jordan (2016) describe activism as intentionally mercurial, or an “indiscipline with refusal rooted in its heart” (Jordan); or as Raunig (2007) quips, the collision of art machines with revolutionary machines. For example, Jordan writes:

In the same way that an artist might work with wood or paint, activism might look at plans for direct action to shut down an open-cast coal mine and imagine how it could be made more powerful and theatrical . . . It might involve inventing new ways of holding horizontal assemblies or designing a shared ritual.

Such participatory pedagogy is central to the activist’s mission as one that extends beyond artistic forms or movements. Rather, activism is “charged with the wild creations of art” such that its boundless creativity and imagination purposefully incite radical engagement and entanglement with a political subject (Ensler, 2011). In other words, activism represents the public struggle between the lived and imagined, between the aesthetic representations of what *is* and the aesthetic imaginations of what *could be*.

Given activism’s varying range of expression, it should come as no surprise that its theoretical landscape is also deeply textured, with tangential framing in activist art (Sholette and Charnley, 2014), socially-engaged art (Léger, 2019), and community art (Hersey and Bobick, 2016), among others. Yet while the artists, scholars, and practitioners cited above do well to conceptualize activism across its abstract and material fields, its uptake as a critical frame of analysis for Indigenous sovereignty demands deeper consideration. For Indigenous peoples (and women especially), activism provides revolutionizing utility. Belarde-Lewis (2020) explains that Indigenous knowledge systems are often intricately tied to embodied practices that reimagine diverse artistic forms. In fact, this emphasis on embodiment signals its relevance to Indigenous feminisms. For example, Mithlo (2009) interrogates sovereign gendered artistic practices, noting that feminist Indigenous knowledge systems are both lived and enacted as embodied knowledge—an “experienced reference that has utility and applicability. This engaged site of knowledge is not an abstracted ahistorical framework but is an enacted knowledge” (p. 26). 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. As both product and process, the activist canvas provides space to amplify women's voices as vehicles of transformative expression against gendered state violence and performative healing from colonial trauma. As such, our continued engagement with activism will only continue to advance new methodologies of liberating consciousness and de-marginalizing aesthetics.

Thus, by adapting to these bodily forms of dis/engagement, this analysis seeks to examine how MMIW activist practices are deeply attuned to (re)writing the Indigenous body through hybrid codes of aesthetic subversion. In the section that follows, I examine the ways in which MMIW activists take up a decolonial positionality and strategically confront the politics of the settler state by enacting what I term an "embodied liminality." I attempt to do so by weaving together a comprehensive examination of artist statements, victim narratives, and survivor testimonies alongside a detailed description of each artefact's own decolonial practices. In so doing, I seek to understand the subjectivities and survivances embodied across the MMIW movement and detail the communicative practices that embrace liminality in creatively resistive occupations.

### **Theorizing Embodied Liminality in The REDress Project and Inuksuit Architecture**

van Gennep (1909) introduced the concept of liminality in rites of passage, writing that the liminal beckons to the detachment of a subject from their stabilized environment; it is a period of transfer and transition from one site to the next. Turner (1967), in expanding upon van Gennep, reframes liminality as a process of becoming in which the liminal personae is a transitional being—"betwixt and between," neither one thing nor another: "The structural 'invisibility' of the liminal personae has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified . . . Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories" (p. 96-7). For both van Gennep and Turner, the liminal is intended to represent an unstable, transitory space indicating only momentary, impermanent occupation; so much so that the nature of its subject is rendered incorporeal and dissolved of a recognizable figure in the space-time structural classification—a mere vessel of passage into a stable state (p. 97).

In a critical turn, liminality is often referenced within postcolonial theory, not as a transitionary event, but rather a structural condition; a resonant metaphor for perpetual precarity. Anzaldúa's (1987) conception of the borderland references the geographical area between Mexico and United States—*una herida abierta* (an open wound)—"where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (p. 25). Bhabha (2004), too, conceives of the Third Space as a mutant hybridity born of colonial antagonism and inequity. Like a borderland, the Third Space's liminality is a site of ambivalent contradictions and ambiguities in which the Other is re/translated and re/iterated into an in-between space of cultural collision, negotiation, and meaning-making. For both Anzaldúa and Bhabha, liminality is a precarious extension of the settler state; not a transient condition but a permanent residence that is simultaneously not the Other's home. Lloyd (2012) expands upon this notion, contending that those who occupy liminal conditions constitute what he terms a "present absentee:" "This peculiar condition of being absent even when all too present, or of presence manifest in absence, of being outside even when all too much inside" (p. 61). Attuned to these critical vocabularies, rhetoric across the MMIW movement reflects the absent/present paradox by formulating the liminal as a structural space of occupation

marked through and by the body: a felt political condition as well as an aesthetic expression; the evocation of bodily presence through the signification of its absence.

### *The REDress Project*

Suspended from tree branches, building beams, and ceiling lights, Jamie Black's red dresses hang precariously in midair, each one a different shape, size, and shade (see Figure 1). Since 2015, the public art installation has travelled across Turtle Island (North America) hanging more than 600 dresses in public parks, private museums, and ambient spaces in-between. Red—"the only color that spirits can see"—is what Black refers to as a "calling back . . . allowing them [the spirits] to be among us and have their voices heard through their family members and community" (Suen, 2015). The REDress Project is Black's expression of grief and an evocative appeal to her fellow Indigenous sisters, "giving a platform to those women and girls now silent" (Bolen, 2019). As Bolen (2019) explains, "It draws everybody in. It welcomes people in and invites them to ask questions . . . Violence is one of the issues that affects everyone, but Native women even more so, yet you won't see it in the news." For many of its (White) viewers, the REDress Project is their first introduction to the MMIW crisis; for others, it's a space to mourn: "Tour after tour, family members come up to Black to tell their painful stories of loss, and, in many cases, lack of resolution. During one of her first shows, a family drove nine hours to Winnipeg to donate their murdered daughter's dress to the installation" (Bolen, 2019). For both, it's a participatory engagement with the creative capacities of activism and the Indigenous body/body politic.

**Figure 1**

*The REDress Project installation at the University of Winnipeg.*



*Note.* Photo courtesy of Sarah Crawley.

The REDress Project demands attention to political recognition through the exhibit's bodily transcendence. The garments evoke an incongruent imagery between the floating specters and their material environment—a visual and visceral reminder of the body's haunting absence where the viewer can easily imagine the woman who once inhabited the dress. In this way, embodied liminality is a felt process of colonization whose residual trauma lingers like an apparition. The REDress Project recalls the perpetual splintering and fracturing of the Indigenous body; absences that propel the settler state forward but whose histories endure with the present observer. Occupying this liminal threshold is yet another encounter with the colonizer. It is a corporeal straddling between here and there, life and death, sovereignty and submission. In the same sense, Black's exhibit also performs an embodied liminality that both distances and engages the spectator in a theater of illusion. Recognizing the prominence of the body as both a condition and a casualty of the liminal space, The REDress Project signals a corporeal turn in our theorization of “betwixt and between” thresholds wherein bodies and the body politic can be foregrounded and aesthetically represented.

### *Inuksuit Architecture*

Just as the red dresses mark presence by absence, MMIW landscape architecture demonstrates another iteration of embodied liminality. Lining the path of the Chedoke Radial Trail in Hamilton, Ontario sit thousands of Kristen Villebrun's handheld inuksuit markers, or stone landmarks traditionally used by Inuit travelers to communicate navigational aid, coordination points, food caches, and spiritual landscapes (see Figure 2). In the present, the inuksuit serve as memorializing tokens; grave markers for Indigenous women whose bodies and identities—extensions of the land—beckon to the peculiarity of their political subjugation. The missing and murdered are absent to the colonizer though omnipresent to the surrounding world, yet the logic of coloniality remains an unacknowledged absence built into the ever-present foundation of the settler state. Because of (and in spite of) these conditions, inuksuit sculptures demonstrate the creative contours of liminality. The artistic dimensions of community organizing are materialized through a repurposing of the natural landscape into bodily architecture. Murphy (2016) writes, "Coming out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the inquiry, we have a need for artistic expression to process this." Carter (2015) adds, "[T]his project is different. It's fostering conversation and serving to educate in a way that I have never seen. It's part art project, part message." The inuksuit enact an embodied liminality that exhibits the Indigenous female body as a fulcrum around which colonial national projects are assembled and executed. It is a creative reimagining that speaks to the deviant possibilities of Indigenous bodies as they linger on the trail's literal path to recognition.

**Figure 2**

*Inuksuit sculptures on the Chedoke Radial Trail*



*Note.* Photo courtesy of Adam Carter.

An important consideration of these inuksuit artefacts is the transference of their Indigenous origins to the contemporary MMIW crisis. In addition to inuksuit's earthly functions, certain

sculptures may entail spiritual connotations to act as objects of veneration, “marking the spiritual landscape of the *Inummariit*—Inuit who know how to survive on the land living in their traditional way” (Hallendy, 2015). Invoking these mythical origins through contemporary activism enacts what Keating (1996) describes as “embodied mythic thinking,” or the psychospiritual ordering of non-ordinary knowledge. Irving and Young (2004) add that “Mythic narratives furnish us with alternative ways of perceiving and nudge us to move into realms of liminality outside our everyday entrapments” (p. 214). The inuksuit represent a perpetual Indigenous epistemology that embodies both spiritual and materialistic interchangeable forms, and, not surprisingly, many Indigenous artists immediately recognize its metaphysical dimensions. In an interview with Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, sculptor Kristen Villebrun recalls, “When we were walking the trail, we noticed three or four behind us [inuksuit], and we turned around and looked back, and the shadow that was cascading back onto the trail looked like people” (Windigo, 2015). As embodied liminalities occupy the interstitial in-between, their presence transcends metaphysical boundaries and may (re)reflect themselves into new forms. Such is the case with the inuksuit artefacts whose shadows, like the red dresses, suspend themselves ahead and behind the spectator in otherworldly silhouettes. In Said (1979) and later Lloyd (2012)’s theorizations of Palestinian statehood, they write that the postcolonial Other inhabits a liminal shadowland—“the one whose identity is shadowed by non-identity, in the peculiar after-life or afterglow of the disappeared” (p. 61). Inhabiting the shadowland is a continuous condition, yet this embodiment may, quite literally, find ways to reflect and refract itself into the surrounding world.

Through their respective exhibits, both The REDress Project and inuksuit sculptures enact an embodied liminality that delicately entwines the politics of gender and settler violence and (re)reflects them into meta-liminal material artefacts. The MMIW activist movement, as an aftereffect of perpetual liminality, both realizes and releases new processes of invention that continually challenge its viewers to reconsider “what lives and moves and knows” as Indigenous women are suspended into the public consciousness (Allen, 1986, p. 61).

### **Decolonizing Settler Monstrosity in *Missing & Murdered* and *Quiet Killing***

Embodied liminalities make visible the precarity of the settler state and, in their activist forms, reclaim the sovereign body by resisting its biopolitical constraints. An embodied approach to liminality/borderlands/Third Space and other interstitial locations not only demands recognition and reclamation but also enacts a bodily subversion in which (in)visibility can be creativity obscured and chaotically disordered. Yet, van Gennepe (1909) and Turner (1967) view this capacity as dangerous; that liminal personas may be monstrous beings whose “betweenness” signals a treacherous straddling of antagonistic forms. In fact, liminality is often theorized in relation to monstrosity (Cohen, 1996; Hume, 2006; Knutson, 2018; Nuzum, 2004; Ortiz-Robles, 2015). Liminality signals the inhabitation of our marginal cultural spaces, and it is this shadowy lurking that renders the liminal being as fearful. Nuzum (2004) contends:

Monsters are typically liminal in their physical make-up, often displaying characteristics of more than one species, and this is part of what makes them horrific. They are neither one thing nor the other. Their bodies are chaotic, incapable of complete definition, and, thus, resistant to our complete understanding or control. Monsters are also spatially liminal. They are boundary creatures, lurking in closets, cemeteries, deep woods, and castles on barren mountaintops. They

inhabit spaces and places at the far limits of civilization, locations distant from our daily lives. (p. 208)

In line with Nuzum's definition, mythical literary figures like Frankenstein, Dracula, Grendel, and Jekyll/Hyde are written as liminal beings to occupy our suspenseful narrative imaginaries, or what Ortiz-Robles (2015) defines as "liminanimals"—gothic, figural aberrations. Of course, the liminal outsider's occupation of these indeterminate figures and forms is actually a reflection of the biopolitical realities of the settler state, begging the question of how embodied liminalities may reflect and reject the monstrous conditions of their colonizer.

If we are to take seriously the commitments of decoloniality, then it is necessary to underscore the ways in which monstrous Others inhabit the sanitized White settler state, and, more critically, both embrace and subvert their designation. As Calafell (2012) astutely remarks, "The connection between racist ideologies and monster imagery is not new" (p. 113). For the colonizer, dehumanizing the abject Other presents an opportunity to civilize such liminal beings through projects of Whiteness. Monstrosity is thus a cultural reflection related to fears of Otherness and the potential disruption of the larger White supremacist capitalist patriarchy (Calafell, 2012; Calafell & Phillips, 2019; Rai, 2013). Yet for Indigenous activists, the MMIW crisis represents a particularly *kairotic*<sup>4</sup> moment to reframe monstrosity as an appendage of the colonizer and to utilize embodied liminalities towards radically resistive ends.

### *Missing & Murdered*

Since 2016, investigative journalist Connie Walker has dedicated her CBC News podcast, *Missing & Murdered*, to the ongoing MMIW crisis, writing that the project represents a creative, moral imperative—"an understanding to the situation that maybe a journalist who is not Indigenous wouldn't have" (Ciobanu, 2016). Season one of the series (titled "Who Killed Alberta Williams?") was sparked by a tip from a retired Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer and documents the cold case of a young Gitanyow Band woman brutally assaulted and murdered in British Columbia in 1989 (see Figure 3). Season two, "Finding Cleo," follows the present-day journey of a Plains Cree family affected by the "Sixties Scoop"<sup>5</sup> in search of their missing sister, later revealed to have committed suicide under the care of her adoptive parents (see Figure 4). Under Walker's direction, *Missing & Murdered* became the first investigative podcast for CBC News, marking a critical turn in reporting on the MMIW crisis. Unlike TV and radio expositions that demand a particular impartiality, podcasts allow for narrative flexibility and the affordance to contour stories in intimate ways (McCracken, 2017); or, what Walker describes as "peeling back the curtain." She argues, "In so much of our reporting and investigations, we are only focused on the end result of what we find out, but [with] podcasts . . . you really have the opportunity to provide the proper context people need to understand what the root causes of the issue are (Ciobanu, 2016). *Missing & Murdered* thus documents the liminal lives of Alberta Williams and Cleo Semaganis, engaging with a narrative subversion that outlines the structural violence that ultimately killed both women.

<sup>4</sup> A Greek rhetorical term referring to an opportune moment in time for critical action.

<sup>5</sup> The "Sixties Scoop" refers to the large-scale forced removal of Indigenous children from their homes/communities and subsequent adoption into non-Indigenous, middle-class families across Canada and the United States. It is estimated that as many as 22,000 First Nations and Inuit children were displaced between 1951 and 1991.

**Figure 3**

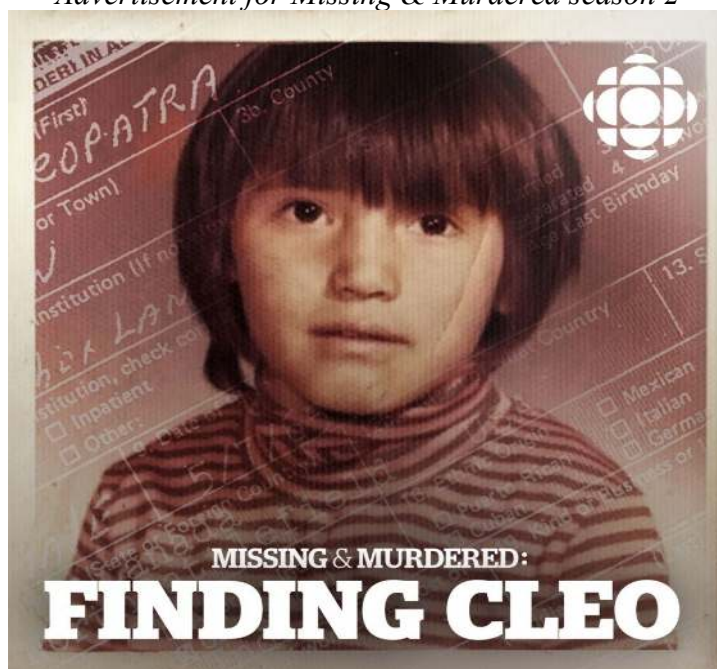
*Advertisement for Missing & Murdered season 1*



*Note.* Photo courtesy of CBC Media Centre.

**Figure 4**

*Advertisement for Missing & Murdered season 2*



*Note.* Photo courtesy of CBC Media Centre.

*Missing & Murdered* takes an episodic approach to recount the monstrosities of colonial violence that propel the MMIW crisis beyond Alberta and Cleo's stories. In both seasons, Walker narrates the two women outside of their victimhood, instead unpacking a history of Indigenous politics that

strategically vilify the Canadian settler state. She explains, “We’re not tricking people necessarily . . . but you’ll have a way bigger audience if you hear an intriguing story about a girl whose family has been looking for her for 40 years” (Boutsalis, 2019). Though MMIW is an international issue, many White citizens remain unaware of its political scope and reach, due in large part to colonial apathy and a lack of representational coverage. In recognizing these constraints, *Missing & Murdered* subverts the true crime genre to engage in affective storytelling that (re)humanizes Indigenous women as survivors of a grotesque and inhumane violence. It is this unpacking of settler structures that allows Alberta and Cleo’s embodied liminalities to supersede their monstrous connotations, instead positioning the Canadian state as a shapeshifting beast: an amorphous politic that leaves bodies strangled on the Highway of Tears<sup>6</sup> and steals Indigenous children from their families in the night. The “liminanimal” is not the Native woman confined to the margins of the settler’s consciousness but the White monster who entraps and enslaves its resisters. Yet, at once, in subverting this colonial trope, *Missing & Murdered* simultaneously relies upon the embodied liminalities of Alberta and Cleo to destroy the structures which insist upon their residual status. Indeed, “their bodies are their weapons” and their precarity is a performance. (du Coudray, 2002, p. 12).

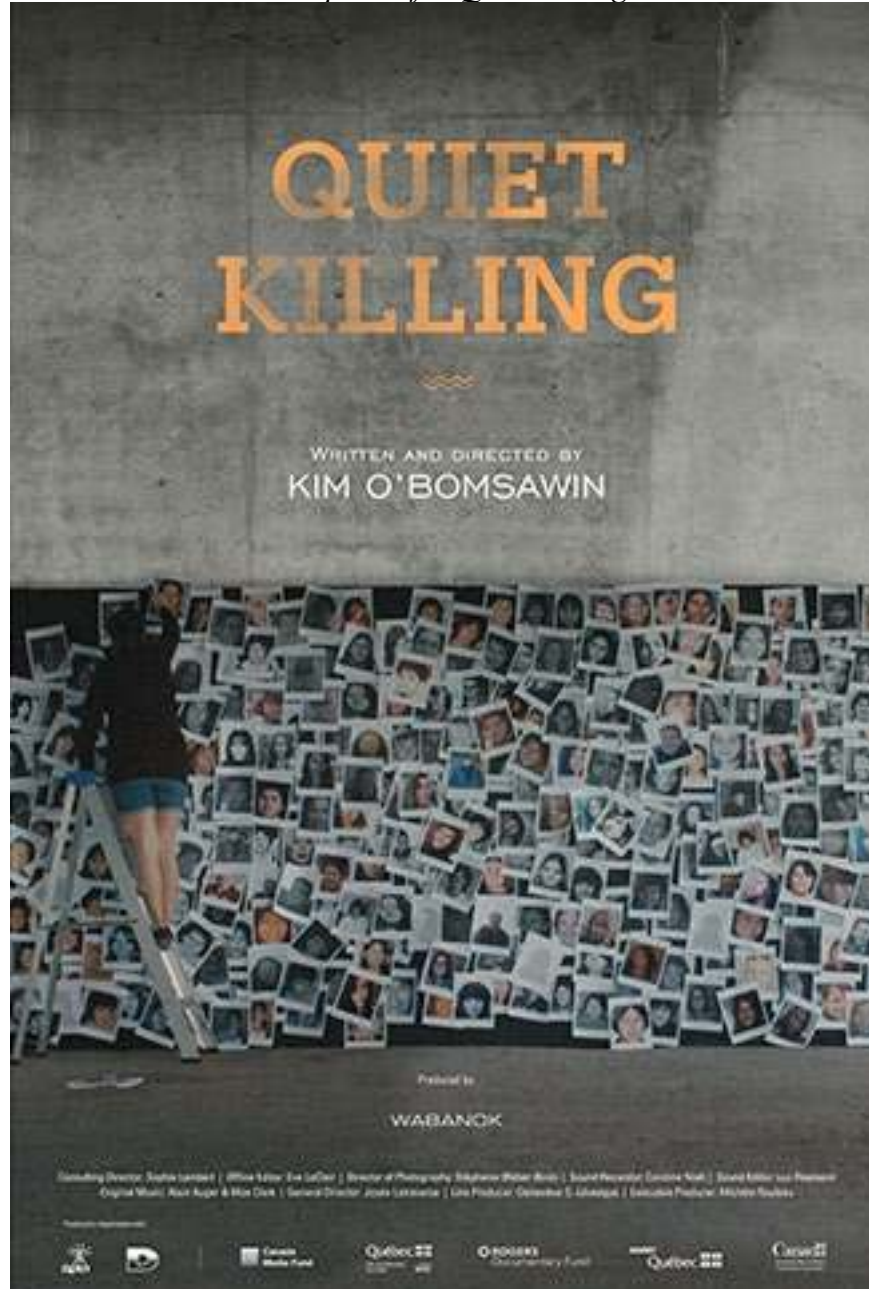
### *Quiet Killing*

Kim O’Bamsawin leans into a billboard-sized corkboard, perched on a stepstool with a stapler in hand. Affixed to the board are polaroid-style headshots of Canada’s missing and murdered Indigenous women—hundreds of smiling faces, young and old, who gaze back at the viewer as if to say, *you may be next* (see Figure 5). The scene is visually daunting—almost desensitizing—and delivers a searing portrait of an apathetic settler state who refuses to recognize the systemic vulnerability of its Indigenous population; one of “utter indifference and incomprehension” (Rouleau, 2018). *Quiet Killing* is O’Bamsawin’s 2018 documentary film that provides a poignantly damning account of Canada’s failure to protect Native women from the very violence that it produces and perpetuates. At the same time, the film features intimate interviews with community advocates, sex workers, survivors of gendered violence, and victims’ loved ones who have forged their own grassroots movements to reclaim a collective bodily sovereignty against insidious state-sponsored precarity. Similar to *Missing & Murdered*, *Quiet Killing* is an arts-funded artefact that sharply deviates from mainstream media and its politic of benign neglect. Instead, the documentary interrogates the violent effects of dispossession across people and place; violence that is deeply rooted in Canada’s settler founding and thus cannot be compartmentalized. It is an exhausting story of violence and institutional neglect that demands an unconditional right to justice and safety.

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<sup>6</sup> The Highway of Tears refers to a corridor of Highway 16 in British Columbia, Canada where a large number of Indigenous women have been reported missing or found murdered.

**Figure 5**  
*Film poster for Quiet Killing*



*Note.* Photo courtesy of Wabanok.

*Quiet Killing* represents the unapologetic blurring of art and politics, or what Reestorff (2015) describes as “unruly documentary activism.” The film provides a multilayered assemblage of Indigenous voices to definitively answer the question, “Why are so many of our girls dying?” (Bilefsky, 2019). O’Bamsawin does not entertain a politic of speculative fiction but rather paints a biographical portrait of Canada as an unrelenting genocidal monster. One survivor of abuse recounts, “I’ve had all my fingers broken. I’ve had guns shot at me. I don’t want to die out there, and the odds are against me. Somebody is going to kill me” (Rouleau, 2018). A community

advocate adds, “A lot of these women were not ‘high risk,’ and even if they were, it shouldn’t matter. There’s no justice for these women yet” (Rouleau, 2018). Trauma stimulates the appetite for colonialism’s rapacious hunger that consumes the bodies of Indigenous women. Remy-Kovach (2018) writes, “Colonization, industrialization, and assimilative policies devour Indigenous lands, cultures, languages, and populations. This hunger becomes more ravenous every time and therefore indulges even more” (p. 6). The activist power in the documentary resides in performing “theories of flesh” in which inner reflection, political imagination, and lived experience entwine to generate subversive knowledges and confront the quietly lurking murderous monster that is colonization (Anzaldúa, 2002; Pitts et al., 2020). Performing these embodied liminalities is a generative decolonial practice that evocatively reclaims individual identities and opens up space for affirmative communal living. Subverting the assigned Other-as-monster trope is a reclamation of bodily sovereignty that offers new ways to understand embodied liminality as a resistive shapeshifter—still attuned to settler politics of subjugation but defiant of the condition; a deeply knowing, unabashedly opinionated “inconvenient Indian” (King, 2013).

Both *Missing & Murdered* and *Quiet Killing* utilize activism as subversive modes of creative expression. Indeed, “Stories are wondrous things. And they’re dangerous, . . . providing alternative voices, vehicles, and venues for expressing historical truths and present hopes” (Lewis, 2018). Walker and O’Bamsawin invoke MMIW’s embodied liminality as a tool to resist monstrosities of colonialism. The metaphysical dimensions of liminality remain an integral component of Indigenous organizing, and reframing this classification now allows for the fluid disruption of its monstrous connotations from the White settler state towards a decolonial reckoning. As one *Quiet Killing* interviewee laments, “200 years of this bullshit here. That’s enough” (Rouleau, 2018).

### Conclusions: “We Are Not Invisible”

In Poch and Poch’s (2018) *Artivism*, they write that activists are the new centaurs of political protest: “Half activist, half artist, they can turn any social or political demand into an inventive, streetwise battle of wits—a battle that makes an impact either through the scale or finesse of its statements. Their allies are trickery, canniness, provocation” (p. 1). It is no coincidence that Indigenous feminism across the MMIW movement engages with activism as its own form of liminal protest. Exhibits like The REDress Project and inuksuit architecture embrace the in-betweenness of political precarity, reflecting their conditions in artefacts of bodily protest that demand the settler state to see them, to recognize their liminality. Gendered violence, as an iteration of colonial violence, validates the liminal designation of Indigenous women whose bodies are all too often casualties of settler projects—raped, beaten, assaulted, strangled, mangled, murdered, missing, ignored as a provision of colonial apathy.

But activism can also ignite new opportunities for Indigenous sovereignty. As its own liminal practice, artivism explores other ways of *being* in the world. Walker’s *Missing & Murdered* podcast and O’Bamsawin’s *Quiet Killing* documentary subvert the trope of monstrous Otherness to narrate the violent horrors of settler politics; disrupting settler ways of seeing to document the deep-seeded roots of colonial violence. As Walker explains, “The issue of missing and murdered women is connected to residential schools; the issue of child welfare is connected to residential schools. All of these things are interconnected” (Kiwanuka, 2016).

However, just as Kiwanuka narrates, the stickiness of settler politics is precisely what sustains its existence; its residue adhering to the surface of the Indigenous body and body politic.

Despite the prolific media success of each of the four artefacts, Indigenous women are still desperately in need of enforceable legislation grounded in structural change rather than reactionary “justice.” In this sense, the material “success” of the MMIW movement is yet to be actualized, despite activists’ untiring pursuit toward sovereign liberation. Still, each artefact reclaims an Indigenous aesthetic that maneuvers the female body against settler logic. Narrating the betweenness of the female body allows for the subversion of embodied liminalities that creatively imagine and aesthetically demonstrate the possibility of an Indigenous uprising. Rupturing settler patterns via the reclamation of bodily sovereignty is already revolutionary in that it aesthetically reworks the liminal space of indigeneity toward an actively imagined decolonial future.

In this analysis I have attempted to return our attention to the body, to lived liminalities and their theories of the flesh, to identify the epistemological pulse of the MMIW movement and demonstrate the creative capacities of Indigenous artists as they narrate embodied trauma towards radically defiant decolonial futurisms. Using feminist activism as a pathway to decolonization renders the MMIW crisis clearly visible, such that the once-shadowy form of liminality is now simultaneously the protagonist and antagonist of the settler state. Activism proves to be a particularly effective practice in the ongoing fight against Empire. Its own attunement to liminal boundaries means that it is already well positioned to critical vocabularies of aesthetic deviance and the fluid contours of radical resistance. The centering of embodied liminalities in The REDress Project, inuksuit architecture, *Missing & Murdered*, and *Quiet Killing* is its own act of decolonial critique that deepens our understanding of the grotesque settler state and calls indigeneity forward in liberating forms. Building a decolonial movement against the MMIW crisis must begin with the recognition of the Indigenous body in all its liminal forms. “We exist; we resist; we rise; we are not invisible” (Iron Shell-Dominguez, 2019).

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