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Performing Possible Worlds into Being: Indigenous Performance of Resilience and Strength

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***Performing possible worlds into being*: Indigenous performance of resilience and strength**

In this article, I analyse the work of two Native playwrights: Mary Kathryn Nagle's (Cherokee) *Sliver of a Full Moon* and Marie Clements' (Metis/Dene) *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*. I trace how these two women use the stage as a space for portraying embodied, historic, gendered violence, like rape, forced sterilization, and the disruption of family relationships. In addition, Nagle and Clements also perform *possible worlds into being* where Native women lead their communities toward healing and restoration.

Keywords: Native Theatre; Colonialism; Gendered Violence

Kokum scarves. That is what Cree people call the floral-patterned scarves that early Ukrainian settlers traded with the Cree. After the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, some Indigenous[1] women posted pictures of themselves

wearing these kokum scarves on their heads and necks to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Kokum means *your grandmother* in Cree. The scarves were first traded in Canada in the late eighteenth century among the Ukrainian, Dene, Cree, and Metis women. The kokum scarves became so common that Indigenous women often included the floral patterns from the scarves in their traditional beadwork. Mallory Yawnghwe, a Cree entrepreneur who includes Kokum scarves in her business, describes the feelings that the scarves evoke for her, 'To me, "kokum scarves" are a symbol that embodies the intrepid and entrepreneurial spirit of my grandmothers: women who worked relentlessly to find opportunity, and to build relationships and cooperation among families and nations to ensure our survival' (Yawnghwe 2020). This admiration for strong grandmothers can be observed today as we witness many Ukrainian women fiercely challenging the Russian soldiers who have invaded their country. The image of an older woman approaching a fully armed Russian soldier and telling him to put sunflower seeds in his pocket so they can bloom when his body is buried on her land, has illustrated the power of the old Cheyenne saying, 'a nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground' (Knowles 2009: 136).

From a scholarly point of view, the current Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Russian colonization of the Aleutian and Kodak peoples of the Pacific coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have their distinct differences. Yet, for some Indigenous people the images of Russian aggression have caused a deep emotional reaction because of their parallels with past Native trauma. 'My heart was going through turmoil for what's going on [in Ukraine],' said Brandi Morin, a Cree woman, 'It wasn't that long ago when Indigenous people had invaders at their doorstep. And they too, had to flee their land with their children' (King 2022). Despite the many

differences between Ukrainians and the Indigenous people of North America, several similarities have emerged in the past few weeks, including systematic, gendered violence against women and the significant role that women have played in helping overcome colonial oppression.

Theatre became an important space for Indigenous women to grapple with the colonial past and its impact on their lives today. The main fabric of the Indigenous dramaturgy is story. The power of story is connected to the oral tradition found in many Native communities; the belief that 'spoken words circle the earth upon the air's currents, they are viewed as permanent: once spoken, words exist forever, uniting living beings across time and space' (Darby et al. 2020: 7). The power of a spoken story informs not only theatre practitioners, but also Indigenous researchers who aim to transform the institution of academia through the implementation of indigenous methodologies.

Some western post-colonial theories overemphasize the importance of storytelling in regard to the past and omit the potential that stories have to impact the future. In her book *Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective*, theatre scholar Christy Stanlake argues that 'post-colonial theories that focus solely on revisionist history can miss the more profound ways storytelling functions in Native theatre because such theories can overlook the relationship between storytelling and the future' (Stanlake 2009: 108). Although many Native stories, especially those which are the subject of this work, include descriptions of the difficult effects of colonialism, Native stories also often exhibit the strength and resilience of Native peoples, especially Native women. The emphasis on loss is important for highlighting the self-agency and resistance of the protagonists in the two plays featured in this paper.

Theatre can facilitate a multidimensional space for stories, as language, the bodies of the actors, sounds, set, costumes, all participate in expanding the power of the story. Monique Mojica (Kuna and Rappahannock), a playwright, performer, and educator, states, 'By embodying that wholeness on stage, we can transform the stories that we tell ourselves, and project into the world that which is not broken, that which can be sustained, not only for Aboriginal people but for all inhabitants of this small, green planet' (Mojica 2009: 2). The embodiment of wholeness accompanies the difficult parts of the same story, the colonial past and present, and helps explain the devastating impacts these colonizing actions had on Indigenous communities. Theatre, although formally a western invention, has been adapted by Native artists as a powerful medium for telling stories that both address the past, while also creating a vision of the future where Indigenous communities are sovereign and whole.

In what follows, I analyze the work of two Native playwrights: Mary Kathryn Nagle's (Cherokee) *Sliver of a Full Moon* and Marie Clements' (Metis/Dene) *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian*. I trace how these two women use the stage as a space for portraying embodied, historic, gendered violence like rape, sterilization, and the disruption of familial relationships. In addition, Nagle and Clement also perform *possible worlds into being*, where Native women lead their communities toward healing and restoration. The recurring motif in both of the plays is the colonizing act of '*taking,*' the stealing of Indigenous women, children, land, and resources by European powers, most often British, French and Spanish, but also a lesser-known European colonizer, Russia. For hundreds of years, Russia was active in the Pacific Northwest of North America, especially among Alaskan and coastal people groups. Both of the plays make reference to acts of Russian colonialism. Like Yawnghwe's description of the symbolism behind kokum scarves, these two

plays depict women who, against odds, survive the impact of foreign aggression on their communities, while also imagining a future where their Indigenous communities overcome this historic trauma. Clements and Nagle wrote their plays primarily for a U.S. audience, therefore the Russian motives are often peripheral in their dramaturgy. In my reading of the plays, I expand on these historic elements of Russian colonization and provide their historic context.

Sliver of a Full Moon by Mary Katheryn Nagle (Cherokee)

Mary Katheryn Nagle is an attorney, activist, and playwright. In her drama *Sliver of a Full Moon*, Nagle includes several stories told and performed by actual survivors of sexual and domestic violence.[2] One of the stories belongs to Lisa Brunner, an Ojibway woman. Lisa shares the memory of being a four-year-old girl witnessing her mother beaten violently by her stepfather, a white man. She recalls hiding under the table, fearing that her mother would not survive the brutal attack. When the stepfather finally left the room, she put her head on her mom's chest hoping to detect a sign of life. Lisa remembers, 'It's not that I could have saved her. It's just that I didn't want her to die alone.' At this moment in the play, other women gather around her and declare, 'Lisa isn't an actress. She is a survivor' (Nagle 2015). Several other women identify themselves as survivors who also testify about their own experiences in the play.

Later in the performance Lisa appears again, sharing another story about her own daughter who had been attacked and violently raped by group of young men with 'white skin, and blue eyes, and blond hair' (Nagle 2015). This same group of men continuously return to the reservation in order to

violate Native women, because they know their crimes will often go unpunished because of a flaw in the American legal system that makes it hard for Native police and courts to arrest and prosecute non-Natives who commit crimes on a reservation (Nagle). While recalling the story, Lisa cannot stop the tears, her voice breaks, and she struggles to continue with the performance. The audience has no doubt that her testimony is real. It feels emotionally raw coming directly from a mother overwhelmed by pain, grief, and regret. Through the tears Lisa admits, 'all the measures that I had tried to protect her didn't work' (Nagle). The emotional investment of the actress/survivor allows the audience to witness the human ramifications of an unfair legal system many Native people experience in the U.S.

Nagle intended for her play to help document an important moment for many Native women in the U.S.: the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 2013. VAWA was initially enacted in 1994, but in its original form the document did not provide protection for Native women. Up until 2013, most tribal governments had no legal power over non-Native people who committed crimes on tribal lands (reservations). This authority was left to the FBI, which often did not devote the attention or resources needed to solve many crimes, especially violence and sexual assault directed towards Native women. The reauthorization of VAWA provided jurisdiction for tribal courts over non-Native perpetrators but only in the case of domestic violence. Native communities still lack the legal jurisdiction to prosecute non-Natives who rape or murder Native women on a reservation. The amendments added to the VAWA have become an important step toward recognizing the sovereignty of many Native communities, yet as the playwright concludes, 'it's just a first sliver of restoration… The first sliver of a full moon' (Nagle).

The women in Nagle's performances are often not professional actresses and some of them are visibly uncomfortable performing. Yet, the telling of their stories allows the audience to bear witness to the impact of gendered violence and its traumatic impact on Native women. Although Nagle includes many facts about the legal process of the reauthorization of VAWA, she also allows the audience to not just understand, but to also *feel* what the victims of the previously flawed legal situation experienced. *Sliver of a Full Moon* contributes to the process of producing an affective knowledge which scholar and feminist Dian Million (Tanana Athabascan) describes as 'felt theory' (Million 2013: 57). Million argues that first-person narratives shared by First Nations and Metis women had an important effect on Canadian scholarship, which traditionally excluded this kind of knowledge (56). In accordance to Million's assertion, Lisa's monologue allows the audience to understand the impact of 'colonialism as it is felt by those whose experience it is' (61). Million described retelling the personal stories as a part of the process of Truth and Reconciliation which took place in Canada from 2008 to 2015. The U.S. never facilitated a similar process of publicly working through the atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples. Nagle creates a space in which the audience can witness the affective impact of colonialism.

Throughout *Sliver of the Full Moon*, Nagle weaves storytelling with reenactments. The character, Diane, played by Nagle during the Harvard performance of the play in 2015, shares about being abused by her husband. When she called for help the police officers inform her that nothing can be done. As Diane relates the details of her suffering, the character Husband appears next to her, mocking her, proving the futility of her pleas for help. Husband even makes a phone call to the tribal police, admitting that he got a little 'carried away' and 'hit his wife.' The policeman asks whether he is an

enrolled tribal member. When Husband responds that he is not an enrolled tribal member, the tribal policeman informs him, ‘If you’re not enrolled, we don’t have jurisdiction’ (Nagle). Upon ending the phone call, Husband towers over his wife in a more sadistic manner, fully aware of the impunity of his actions towards her. The audience not only hears about the flawed legal system which endangers Native women, but they also witness its embodied consequences: an abused woman denied direct help and protection.

Sliver of a Full Moon is intended to be performed only by those who have a personal connection to the stories; who ‘own‘ the stories as survivors of violence. This is the reason Nagle has not yet had the play published and the performances are still relatively rare. The characters listed as ‘chorus MAN‘ include people meant to be recognized as popular politicians. They talk about the feasibility of VAWA reauthorization, offering or withholding their support. These conversations are interwoven between real stories of women’s suffering. Nagle draws attention to the importance of women’s representation in government, where decisions affecting women’s life and well-being is often decided predominantly by men. One scene includes Senator Olympia Snowe, a former Republican Senator from Maine, expressing that all Republican women in the Senate will support the proposed reauthorization of VAWA. Snowe adds, ‘Let me tell you something, we may be Republicans, but first and foremost, we’re women.’ (Nagle). Nagle’s play produces a solidarity and empathy for the characters that will influence the political sensibilities of the audience. In a panel discussion following the Harvard performance in 2015, Nagle asserted that it was the impact of women sharing their painful experiences in congressional hearings and in the media that ultimately helped VAWA to move forward through Congress. Nagle concludes, ‘it’s a huge testament to the fact that the biggest

victories we had legally for Indian nations in the history of the United States came from a movement that was created and propelled by Native women who came forward and told their stories' (Nagle). *Sliver of the Full Moon* furthers this practice by making storytelling an important part of portraying the embodied suffering of Native people in order to document past historical trauma.

Even though the VAWA passed in 2013, not all Native women in the U.S. can celebrate. Nettie Warbelow (Anthabascan) points out that most Alaska natives were excluded from the protection of VAWA. In *Sliver of the Full Moon*, Nettie is joined by another woman named Tami, who together in frustration declare, 'We are still here! From the time of the glaciers until now. We were here before the United States. We were here before the Russians. We were here when they came. Our men gave them fur and as an exchange they gave us alcohol and they took our women.' A Russian man appears before the women, he points at one of them and says, 'This one! Just one night. I'll bring her back' (Nagle). The women continue, 'We had no choice! You had Columbus; we had the Russians. Tell me how is that different' (Nagle)? Nagle's play also includes the history of violence enacted against Native women from the first arrival of Russian colonizers, beginning with Vitus Bering's exploration of the area in 1741.

The first period of Russian development in North America was led by private fur traders (promyshlenniki) who developed their techniques of obtaining fur of the small sea mammals while colonizing the Siberian Indigenous people groups (Haycox 2002: 37). Promyshlenniki were incredibly effective in their business due to their ability to subjugate the local Native communities to coerce them to obtain the furs they desired and pay it as a tribute (iasak) (Miller 2015: 12). Unlike the French, Spanish, and British colonizers,

Russians did not often establish a trading relationship with the local communities in North America. Instead, they used what historian Gwenn Miller calls an 'economy of confiscation,' which entailed taking Native women and children hostage in order to coerce their fathers, husbands and brothers to capture sea otter pelts and give them to the Russians. (Miller 2015: 12) The Indigenous islanders were highly skilled in hunting, so the Russians became dependent on Native labor to extract their desired volume of pelts. The Aleutians and Kodak islands became the target of much promyshlenniki violence towards Native people. Two Russian officers filed a report in 1771 stating, 'They [promyshlenniki] drag their vessels on to shore and try to take as hostages children from the island or nearby islands. If they cannot do this peacefully, they will use force… they are forced to give everything to the promyshlenniki (Miller 2015: 23). As a result, the Kodiak and Aleutian people became de facto slaves of the Russian fur traders.

Sliver of a Full Moon does not focus solely on loss and oppression, but also highlights the strength and resilience of Native women. The characters show tremendous self-agency in breaking the silence of their difficult past in order to bring about a brighter future. Billie Jo Rich (Cherokee) addresses the audience,

> Maybe you've never heard a Native woman telling her story of survival before. Maybe, because you've seen a movie *The Last of the Mohicans* or *Peter Pan*, you think at some point in time, we ceased to exist. But we're still here. Some of us live on reservations. Some of us live in suburbs. We even live in Washington D.C. (Nagle)

The audience bears witness that the repeated attempts to erase Indigenous

people through various colonizing techniques has failed. This play documents both the struggle and the victory of Native women. The partial restoration of tribal sovereignty, especially after VAWA, is a sliver of the full moon envisioning a time of fully restored tribal sovereignty. Nagle's play portrays this sliver as the result of Native women reveling their strength and power by being willing to share their personal stories. *Sliver of a Full Moon* becomes a testimony to a possible future wholeness beyond the suffering of the past.

Tombs of the Vanishing Indian by Marie Clements (Metis/Dene)

Marie Clements is a playwright, performer, screenwriter, producer, and director. She wrote and developed her play *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* for the Native Voices at the Autry National Center, the only professional theatre company fully dedicated to the work of the Native playwrights. *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* is rooted in historic fact and includes elements of documentary theatre. Clements builds a layered, highly poetic world which portrays the struggle of her protagonists against the historical trauma of colonialism. Clements is a citizen of Canada and the majority of her plays center on subjects related to the First Nations and Indigenous people of Canada. However, the play I analyze here was written for a U.S. audience and the subject of the play pertains to American colonization efforts directed toward Native people in the U.S.

Tombs of the Vanishing Indian connects two key moments in the American colonization effort against Indigenous people: the relocation of Natives from remote reservations to urban centers, beginning in the 1950's, and the sterilization of many Native women through a government program that

reached its peak in the 1970s. In the set description, the playwright suggests that the stage ought to be divided into three 'Indian rooms,' one for each of the three main characters. The rooms should look like the dioramas of a museum and placed behind glass 'as if history is animating before the audience, untouchable, until the glass is broken and [the characters'] stories are no longer separate or containable' (Clements 2012: 3). The description of the set and the title of her play both draw attention to the long tradition of framing Native people as a vanishing race, whose stories can only be told as relics of the past.

Clements sets the opening scene of her play in the 1950s, during the mass relocation of Indians to American urban centers as a result of the Indian Relocation Act of 1956. The main characters in the play are three sisters, Jessie, Janey, and Miranda, who, as young girls, lost their mother when she became the victim of police brutality. Early in the play, a man's voice shouts from afar, 'Dammit. She's got a gun.' A gun shot. Followed by the shadows of three young girls appearing on the back of the stage. Janey says, 'She is gone, our center is gone and like a triangle we descend into the vanishing' (Clements: 8). Clements stages the pain of the three girls losing their mother as a purposeful method of asking the audience to bear witness to the disruption of Native family life by forces that are often out of their control.

In their book *City Indian: Native American Activism in Chicago, 1893–1934*, historians Rosalyn LaPier and David Beck describe the motivation of the U.S. government in relocating Native peoples to large American cities, 'So long as they were far from home, they could be viewed as charming vestiges of the past rather than threats to the national expansion' (LaPier, Beck 2015: 13). LaPier and Beck contend that the practice enacted by colonizing powers of increasing the distance between Native people and their ancestral land

began with first contact and continued through most of the twentieth century as an effective means of breaking Indigenous connections to the land; both practical and spiritual. Historian Donald Fixico states, 'Indians became victims in the relocation program as they in fact became something of a disappearing race by becoming invisible among other ethnic peoples in the city streets' (Fixico 2013: 98). Contrary to these expectations, many Indigenous people who relocated to the cities were able to maintain a Native identity by forming tight-knit communities with Natives from other tribes and joining Native activist organizations created in the cities where Natives congregated (LaPier, Beck: 13). In addition, some relocated Native people trained to become lawyers, educators, doctors, and social workers. From these new places of influence, they began advocating for Native rights in the cities and back on the reservations as well. Although relocation inadvertently birthed a new movement of Native self-agency, it also left a traumatic scar on many Native people (Fixico 2013: 98). They were promised employment and places to live, but once they arrived in the city they discovered that their living arrangements were often in squalid tenement buildings and they were often given low-paying, entry-level jobs. In these poor, overcrowded urban centers Native women were especially vulnerable as they struggled to find meaningful employment and were at high risk for suffering sexual abuse.

Clements's play also portrays the use of sterilization as a tool enacted to help make Native peoples vanish. The U.S. Family Planning Act of 1970 was supposed to provide economically disadvantaged women the free or low-cost opportunity to have elective sterilization as a permanent means of birth control. These sterilization procedures were grossly abused and have often been described as a type of eugenic practice by scholars like Andrea Smith and Karen Stote (Smith et al.,2015; Stote, 2015). Many minority women, Natives, immigrants, and the poor, were led to believe that the procedure

was a temporary means of birth control and could be reversed when ready to have kids in the future (Smith et al. 2015: 82). Clements shows the effects this sterilization program had on many characters in her play. Sarah, an eighteen-year-old Indian woman, comes into the office of Jessie [now older and a doctor] and informs Jessie that she is ready to have a baby so she requests Jessie to 'get her womb back' (Clements 2012: 47). This scene portrays an actual event that took place in the office of Dr. Connie Uri in 1972. Uri thought the woman desired a womb transplant after a random, isolated incident where a full hysterectomy had been given as a means of birth control and the woman had not been told it was irreversible (Smith et al. 2015: 82). Upon further investigation, Uri uncovered that the sterilization of Native women had become a common without the additional proper education about what the exact effects of the procedure would be to the women. Uri, a Cherokee/Choctaw tribal member, joined with other Native activists to pressure Congress to conduct an investigation into the Indian Health Services' sterilization practices (80).

In Clements' introductory note to *Tombs of the Vanishing Indians*, she states that an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 Native women were sterilized as a result of the U.S. Family Planning Act of 1970 (Clements, 2012: 2). Three out of seven characters in Clements' play undergo the sterilization procedure, signifying to the audience that the experience was not an isolated story for Native women during that time. Clements insists on asking the audience to bear witness to the embodied experience of the three sisters. She informs the audience of events that happened to them and then shows how the experience was felt by revealing how it deeply affected each individual character. Clements then connects the experiences of these women whose lives were affected by the governmental sterilization policies to the story of

The Lone Woman, a historical Native woman who was the last surviving member of her Gabrielino-Tongva tribe. This tribe had lived on an island off the coast of Southern California called San Nicolas Island. In 1835, a little lumber boat called *Peor es Nada* pushed off from Saint Nicolas Island. Its benches were filled with both young and old members of the tribe who were being forcibly removed from their island by U.S. government commissioned sailors. On one of the benches, a young Native woman suddenly realized that her child had not been put into the boat with her and she jumped over the side, into the strong ocean current and swam back to the shore in order to find her missing child. Strong winds prevented the boat's crew from returning to the island so they left the woman and the missing child behind. The woman was unable to find her lost child and ended up living alone on the island for eighteen years. In 1853, two sailors went back to Saint Nicolas Island and succeeded in finding the woman and bringing her back to the Santa Barbara Mission. In the eighteen years the Lone Woman had been living alone on the island, all the remaining members of her tribe had died, mostly from disease. The woman was the last of her tribe. When she arrived at the mission, no one could understand her language or the songs she sang, so she became a public curiosity with many groups of people coming to see her, fascinated by her widely publicized story. After only six weeks at the mission, the Lone Woman suddenly passed away. (Carmelo 2012)

C.J.W. Russel, an author of one of the early accounts of The Lone Woman, writes, 'Could we but find an author at the present day, with Defoe's graphic imagination, we believe sufficient facts of the lonely exile of this woman for eighteen years, could obtained to make one of the most thrilling and beautifully descriptive volumes ever published' (Heizer et al. 1973: 37). American writer, Scott O'Dell told the story of The Lone Woman in his 1960 novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. O'Dell's book became a popular children's

story and is the main source of information about The Lone Woman for most contemporary people. Clements tells the story of The Lone Woman, but in a way that refuses to perpetuate her as a mere curiosity.

Clements does not place The Lone Woman in the glass Indian Rooms described in her stage notes earlier, instead The Lone Woman moves around the stage throughout the show, interacting with all the different characters. Clements focuses on The Lone Woman's experience of losing her entire tribe, but also portrays her experience as a mother, losing a child. The Lone Woman narrates:

> I fell back, swimming back, all the while feeling the hot sun and the coarse sand… willing the feeling of his cool skin as he climbs onto me… both of us crying like the first time we met…
>
> I went back. I went back… I went back to our island… no matter how long I looked… He was gone… eaten by wild dogs… or drowned… (60)

Clements highlights the experience of the Lone Woman losing her child and uses it as a point of connection with the experience of another character, Janey, a twenty-one-year-old Native woman who has undergone a sterilization procedure. The Lone Woman accompanies Janey to a police detective's office, speaking only in her Gabrielino language, while the audience sees subtitles in English of what she is saying. A police detective plays a tape recording of a conversation she had had earlier with a police officer of her saying, 'Please, I want my baby. I want my baby back. Please. God, please… I want my baby back' (13). The Lone Woman witnesses the

scene with tears rolling down her face. Clements makes a connection for the audience between interrupted and denied motherhood. The detective thinks she may have murdered her baby. The audience then bears witness to Janey receiving an invasive police-requested medical procedure while laying sedated on a bed. According to Clements stage directions, two male medical interns 'put their hands inside her' and 'jab her deeply' (43). Janey's body, including her womb, have now become the subject of the interrogation. The rough exam concludes that Janey is innocent because it reveals that she could not have even conceived a baby because of a sterilization procedure she had undergone in the past. Through all these scenes The Lone Woman is by Janey's side, guiding Janey in her grief. Clements moves beyond simply telling the audience Native women suffered sterilization, but allows the audience to witness what sterilization feels like; a woman lost in grief over a baby she was never able to conceive. Janey confesses to The Lone Woman, 'When I am alone, there is a tomb in the pit of my belly where the thought of him used to be' (21). The grief consumes Janey and yet there is no consolation for the wound.

Clements creates a world of the play in which The Lone Woman and Janey coexist with each other. Their relationship is not metaphor, it is material, as real as the pain shared by them. Even though more than one hundred years separate their lives, the two women share the painful experience of motherhood being stripped away from them. At one point in the play, The Lone Woman passes a swaddled baby to Janey, to which Janey responds, 'I am a home with a child in it.' The Lone Woman then guides her, 'The Taker is looking at us. Pull the dreams to your breast and our child. Drink while there is a river left inside you' (29). This poetic scene captures the physical experience of losing a child; the lactating body that does not know a baby is no longer present and so continues to produce milk. The Lone Woman's

story and Janey's story are intertwined, and the identity of their characters blend together. The police detective refers to Janey as 'Juana Maria' which was the name given to The Lone Woman during the Christian baptism given to her before her death (8). Janey exclaims, 'She is a part of my own story… She recognized what I needed… I needed to know what it felt like to hold my own child… even for a moment' (53). In many scenes, the two women's voices intertwine:

> Janey: Why can't you just leave me alone?
>
> The Lone Woman: Why can't you leave us alone?
>
> Janey: Why can't you leave us alone to love? (31)

The repeated questions emphasize the long history of the colonial *taking*. The unanswered 'why' invites the audience members to formulate their own answers.

The story of The Lone Woman is one instance in a long tradition of non-Natives assuming control over Indigenous people, especially Native women and their possessions. The Lone Woman in Clements' play calls the men who come for her 'Takers' and describes them, 'Even though they hadn't been able to take him… they were able to take my child from me. So when the Takers came again, I stood still. The only one left on this island. The last of my people to be taken' (60). The Lone Woman's story includes the dire effects of colonization, the loss of an entire people group, culture, and language. Although Clements focuses only on the more known parts of the Lone Woman's story connected with her relocation to the mainland,

historical sources identify another group of ‘Takers’ whose arrival also played a key role in the original contact story of The Lone Woman, Russian colonizers.

Russian colonial presence in North America was a significant element in Nagle’s play. Russian colonialism also played a role in the back story of The Lone Woman and would be helpful to include some of this information when discussing Clements’ play as well. In 1812 Russia established their presence in northern California by building Fort Ross (Ogen, DuFour 1991: 5). In 1841 Russians abandoned the fort and in 1859 they sold their territories on the Pacific coast to the United States because of the increasingly heated territory wars breaking out between the Americans, Britain, and Mexico. In addition, Russia was engaged in the Crimean War and could no longer support their colonies in present day California (Mitchell 1997: 23). In the collection *Original Accounts of The Lone Woman*, William D. Phelps the author of a document from 1841, describes an early invasion of The Lone Woman’s home island by Russians, with the aid of Kodak Indians. He asserts that in 1825 the Russian newcomers had ‘many quarrels’ with the locals ‘respecting the women’ and as a result the ‘Russians at length killed all the men with the exception of this old fellow who was badly wounded’ (Phelps 1973: 16). According to Phelps, the Russians ‘became possessed of women’ and lived on the island for about a year before the Gabrielino-Tongve women staged a night-time revenge and killed the sleeping oppressors (16). If this source is accurate, then the Lone Woman had already witnessed a massacre of many of the men from her tribe by Russians, even before the trauma with her tribe’s removal from the island by Americans. This additional backstory highlights the vastness of loss many Indigenous people feel. Through connecting Native women’s personal stories, the history of relocation, the experience of sterilization, and the fate of the Lone Woman, Clements

exposes the multi-faceted colonial attempts by many European and later American colonizers to erase Indigenous people and make them vanish.

Clements goes beyond merely portraying the trauma of Indigenous women by also asserting their power to resist colonization and project a new future of wholeness. The character Ruth is played by the same actress who portrays The Lone Woman. Ruth is a woman in her forties, who is part Jewish and part Native. Jessie, one of the three sisters who lost their mother earlier in the play, now grown up and a doctor, has Ruth visit her office as a patient. Jessie gives Ruth a full body physical including a gynecological exam. After Jessie explains the details of what will happen during the exam, Ruth states, 'I had six children… nothing about spreading my legs makes me nervous anymore… so you can relax' (Clements 2012: 23). After the whole health physical is over, Jessie informs Ruth that her only recommendation is for Ruth to have her tonsils removed. Ruth asks Jessie, 'Is removal always the answer?' To which Jessie responds, 'If you want something permanently resolved… yes, it is…' (25). In these two interactions, Clements allows the audience to connect the female body to Indigenous political/historical issues. Although this dramaturgical device could be negatively read as a playwright using the literal tradition of treating women's bodies as a metaphor for land, Clements intentionally disrupts the connection between Native women's experiences and the plundering of Native land. She insists on portraying the bodily pain of Native women in a literal way, rather than allowing every Native woman's body to simply become a political metaphor. Clements plays with the form and allows Ruth's tonsils to become a metaphor for Native removal. Ruth tells Jessie that she is part Gabrielino Indian and part Jewish. Ruth asks if Jessie is an Indian, to which Jessie responds that she is technically an Indian, but that she 'wouldn't call herself an Indian.' Ruth

then asks her, ‘They take that away from you too… Sometimes history is too painful to remember, but we remember anyways because we are still working it out, aren’t we’ (25–26)? In this short interaction Clements not only links two experiences of genocide, the Jewish holocaust and Native American removal, while also questioning the common notion that The Lone Woman was indeed the last surviving member of her Gabrielino tribe. Ruth’s statement about remembering the difficult parts of her history invoke the well-known call to honor the death of millions of Jewish Holocaust victims, but Ruth also carries on the identity of her Native heritage, embodying Indigenous strength and resilience. Ruth represents the responsibility of those who survive atrocity to not forget what happened and to ensure that such things will not happen again. Clements portrays a *possible future* for Native people where they not only exist, but carry their past suffering alongside their strength and resilience in order to fully overcome colonial oppression.

Both Nagle and Clements explore the gendered violence experienced by many Native women since first contact with European colonizers. For Nagle and Clements, the stage becomes a medium of healing for Native people. The ancient art of storytelling is repeated every time the performance takes place and as Mojica theorizes, these performances reveal that ‘there are links, bridges, medicine paths intact that can bridge what is known, or unconsciously known, and bring it into consciousness by performing possible worlds into being’ (Mojica 2009: 2). The transformation of the western artform of theatre and playwrighting into a Native space of healing is an act of decolonization. Although vastly differently, the two playwrights weave the worlds of their plays with historic facts, events, and peoples, and place them in the same space and time with modern Indigenous women whose lives remain affected by past trauma, giving expression to the circular Indigenous

understanding of time, while also projecting a possible world into being in which Indigenous women receive justice and regain their precolonial status.

The linked Russian colonial past could open new scholarly comparative approaches between the current Russian aggression in Ukraine and past Russian exploitation of Indigenous peoples in North America. Although the historic and geopolitical context is different, the examination of the Russian colonial past may help contextualize Russian mindset and methods in modern times. In addition, the study of the colonial past may build a bridge between Indigenous women and Ukrainian women who have and are withstanding brutal physical and sexual assault while maintaining strength and resilience. Like kokum scarves, perhaps the stage may become a symbol of solidarity between Native people and Ukrainian people.

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Footnotes

1. I use terms *Indigenous* and *Native American* interchangeably. When appropriate historically I use term *Indian*. I also provide specific tribal affiliations while introducing Native scholars, playwrights, and performers.
2. The script of the play has not yet been published, but several recordings of performative readings are available on video sharing sites like YouTube. In my work, I will reference the performance at Harvard University in November 2015.

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