

# SYMBOLIC OBJECTS IN CONTENTIOUS POLITICS



**Benjamin Abrams  
and Peter Gardner**  
EDITORS

*Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics*



# Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

**Edited by Benjamin Abrams and Peter Gardner**

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## The Feathered Headdress

### *Settler Semiotics, US National Myth, and the Legacy of Colonized Artifacts*

Sonja Dobroski

On February 2, 2020, the Kansas City Chiefs played the San Francisco 49ers in the 54th Super Bowl, the annual apex event of American football. Thousands of fans entered the Hard Rock Stadium in Miami, Florida, in support of their respective teams. America's devoted football aficionados wear a wide variety of adornments to identify themselves as fans of their chosen team. For instance, the Green Bay Packers wear giant foam cheese heads, while Minnesota Vikings fans don horned helmets. In the 54th Super Bowl, as fans screamed, cried, and clutched one another, waves of feathers could be seen in the stadium. Fans of the Kansas City Chiefs wore these feathers on their heads. The logo of the Kansas City Chiefs is an arrowhead, and their mascot since 1989 has been a gray wolf with bulging eyes, draped in "KC" garb. Prior to the wolf the mascot was a horse named "War Paint," ridden by a person in a feathered headdress. This tradition of wearing a feathered headdress has continued into the twenty-first century; fans signify their allegiance to the team by wearing this symbolic object. By 1990 the team had adopted the infamous "tomahawk chop," a movement considered to represent the swinging of the tomahawk. Stereotypical imagery of Native North American people (arrowhead, war paint, headdress, tomahawk) has saturated the team's aesthetic.

On December 16, 1773, well over 200 years earlier, a group of American colonists frustrated with British taxation and seeking liberation from

Fig. 5.1. The destruction of tea at Boston Harbor, 1773 (Lithograph, 1846. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)



the crown's control boarded a ship in Boston Harbor that was carrying imported British tea. Dressed as Mohawk Indians, they dumped the tea overboard in protest. These colonists too were wearing stereotypical Indigenous clothing, what Yankton Dakota scholar and historian Deloria has famously characterized as "Playing Indian."

Indeed, American Indian semiotics—and people—have figured widely in the construction of settlers' national identity (see also Berkhofer 1978; Deloria 1998). There is a consistent element of adornment in these constructs that merits further exploration through the lens of object semiosis. In early artistic depictions of the famous "Boston Tea Party," the colonists, like the Kansas City Chiefs fans, can be seen wearing feathers on their heads to indicate Indigeneity. In this chapter, I argue that what connects these two events is their invocation and (re)affirmation of a set of particular narratives around US settler nationalism through the use of the feathered headdress. I contend that a semiotic cluster has been discursively built around the feathered headdress, a cluster that connects US settler nationalisms and "their" claim-making over Indigenous territories. Returning to the Boston Tea Party and the Kansas City Chiefs, in both we observe the long lineage of settler-nationalist usurpation, invention, and erasure in the US. Through a close reading of settler-semiotic perceptions and uses of Indigenous material culture, I argue that the feathered headdress has become a symbolic object onto which multiple complex narratives of settler identity have been superimposed, which speaks of colonial erasure and cultural appropriation.

Whereas the Boston Tea Party may be unambiguously considered a contentious political act, we may be initially tempted to view the Super

Bowl as something rather different—a benign sporting event, lacking the traditional forms of claim-making associated with contention. However, scholars of American football have recognized the sport's connections to US nationalism (Langman 2003; Sorek and White 2016), identifying football as a “key trope of American identity,” a space in which Americans gather “to celebrate a general conception of allegiance to an American conception of self” (Langman 2003, 69, 72). Indeed, American sporting traditions more broadly are deeply entangled in American collective identity. Butterworth (2005) has contended that baseball in the post-9/11 era has become a site of ritual performance, with the game becoming politically and ideologically mobilized as an arena for the reaffirmation of national unity and commitment to the nation, highlighting the game's tremendous affective scope and capacity to erode dissenting opinions and even democratic discourse. Hence, both participants in the Boston Tea Party *and* the Kansas City Chiefs fans engage in acts of national performance, contending for the nation, and adopting feathered headdresses as signifiers of identity in the process.

As headdresses have been utilized and manipulated by US settlers since the beginning of colonial contact in the Americas, we must consider the adoption of the headdress into the Kansas City Chiefs costume and the disgruntled taxation-protesting settler-colonists as part of the same lineage. In this chapter, I draw on Tarrow's insights on contentious performances and their capacity to “[spread] across an entire society” (1998, 16). However, in this study, I follow the symbolic object itself—the headdress—as the connecting performative feature binding together the Boston Tea Party, KC Chiefs fans, and a host of other phenomena. These phenomena, I argue, exist in relation to a type of political contention that lays claim to Indigenous territories through semiotic nationalism. A central aspect of contentious politics is “claim-making”—a concept that brings together “contention, collective action, and politics” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 7). There may be no grander example of claim-making than settlers' inhabiting and owning indigenous territories. Indeed, the settler-colonial condition rests on the active, working structural arrangement that consistently maintains settlers' right to settle the land. Wolfe (2006, 388) wrote, “territoriality is settler-colonialism's specific, irreducible element,” and that “invasion is a structure not an event.” This structural aspect of land-based claim-making is the quintessential character of settler societies. The subject—the settler—makes claim to the land (and its semiotic associations) as the object. Claim-making of this nature informs the larger “headdress telos”

that permeates national discourses, allowing its wearers to subvert and obscure the very historicity of the symbolic object itself.

For US settler society to exercise its claim on indigenous territories, the population must maintain its rights of ownership. This maintenance manifests in a variety of actions, from US federal Indian policies to misrepresentations in popular culture; there are a myriad of assaults on indigenous sovereignty. Maintaining this claim also entails mobilizing national symbols and objects to produce a particular settler heuristic that both elides and supports the project of settler-colonization. In this chapter, I show how the headdress has been crafted into a symbolic object in service of settler claim-making and claim maintenance, emerging and reemerging across multifarious US national(ist) contentious performances.

### The Headdress as a Symbolic Object

To establish how these disparate events are connected through objects, it is necessary to explore the relationships between “object” and “symbol.” A wide variety of feathered headdresses exist in Native North America, made from diverse materials and with different histories and varying socio-cultural situatedness. Adornment in general among indigenous peoples of the Americas varies in myriad distinctive ways. The homogenization of a wide range of indigenous peoples and tribal identities is a symptom of settler-colonial thinking. This homogenization, I argue, exists in a particular semiosis surrounding sociohistorical settler nationalism and its associated concept of “liberty.” Smithsonian curator Cecile Ganteaume has written about one of the earliest depictions of Indigenous people(s) of the Americas, Johann Froschauer’s *Tupinambas of Coastal Brazil*, published in Amerigo Vespucci’s *Mundus Novus* in 1505 (see Ganteaume 2017, 7). In this woodcut, several figures can be seen wearing flared feathered headdresses, and participating in cannibalistic activity. Ganteaume asserts that “clothing was one of the most important ways of illustrating cultural diversity in sixteenth century Europe” (2017, 27). This, she purports, explains why feathered headdresses became a standard means of representing American Indian people; it was a process of “othering” via material culture. American Indians wearing a “stand-up feather headdress had become a wide-spread visual convention for depicting any ‘New World’ American Indian” (2017, 40). Feathered headdresses were consistently used in non-Native depictions of American Indian people, from the beginning of European colonial contact in the Americas to the settler narratives in the twenty-first century.

The headdress acted as signification not only of the Indigenous, but of the “New World” and the people one might expect to find there.

Froschauer’s *Tupinambas of Coastal Brazil* (1505), alongside other early depictions of feathered headdresses, began with an erasure of materiality in the creation of an icon.<sup>1</sup> The feathered headdress in these images is largely detached from Indigenous life-worlds. Colonial iconicity,<sup>2</sup> in its nature, tends to rely on the erasure of diverse Indigenous material traditions. A comparison of an actual headdress from the Tupinamba people with its depicted image in Froschauer’s painting shows very few similarities between the two. In fact, one could hardly identify what is depicted in Froschauer’s painting as a distinctly Tupi headdress. There are two important starting points for understanding settler semiology here. The first, foundational point is that these headdress depictions or “ethnographic objects” have been extracted from indigenous life worlds, constituting the first disruption in material relations and a distancing from indigenous materiality. As Fabian (2004, 25) has argued, the collection of the ethnographic object was a process of decontextualization, which often served the national and Western scientific imaginary. An image from Ferdinando Gorge’s *America Painted to Life* (1659) resembles Froschauer’s painting; the partially nude female figure wears a feathered headdress and is holding a severed leg. Again, the image portrays cannibalism and savagery. If we took away the female figure’s adornment (headdress, bow and arrow, feathered skirt), would this image communicate “America”? I argue that it would not. We would see a woman with European features participating in cannibalistic activity. It was these adornments, this iconic status of the headdress, that allowed both political and geographic communication to be successful among colonial populations.

In contrast to their homogenization and acontextuality when depicted and used by settlers and colonists, in their usage by Native American people, feathered headdresses are community- and person-specific, each with its own unique identity and relationship within the Indigenous worlds of its crafting and maintenance. In a colonial context wrought with systems of hierarchy and power, this disparity is far from benign. The significance of settler iconicity lies in its need to cut through the roots of Indigenous

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1. An icon is a sign in which the signifier resembles the signified, (i.e., a painting or a picture).

2. Iconicity refers to the similarity between the symbol and what it stands for. The depiction of several identical headdresses (feathers on a band) homogenizes diverse material traditions to produce a particular kind of icon.



Fig. 5.2. An allegorical image of America (Ferdinando Gorges, 1659). (Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, RI.)

material traditions. It is not an individual headdress understood through Indigenous life worlds, but a headdress that stands, in part, for all headdresses. Keane (2003, 415) writes,

To determine what features count towards resemblance require some criteria. These involve the articulation of the iconic with other semiotic dimensions—and thus, I would argue, become thoroughly enmeshed with the dynamics of social value and authority.

The headdress is transformed from an individual and tribally specific cultural belonging to a generic icon through specific representational and material interventions, wherein we can observe hegemonic social values and forms of authority. To settler society, it is not the type or number of feathers that matters, and there is no indication of the Indigenous worldviews in which the headdress was created, the making and knowing about the object. Instead, the headdress in these images (or other semiotic dimen-

# THE FEMALE COMBATANTS



OR WHO SHALL

*Published According to Act Jan<sup>y</sup> 26. 1776. Price 6.<sup>d</sup>*

Fig. 5.3. "The Female Combatants" (1776).  
(Lithograph, unknown artist. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.)



sions) is surrounded by a variety of indexical<sup>3</sup> signs. Protesters at the Boston Tea Party and football fans at the 54th Superbowl were engaging in a type of distinctly US American activity. The choice to utilize the headdress in these acts is connected to the headdress's ability to convey and represent each of these disparate subjects as engaging in an act of Americanness. To understand how this symbolic object became connected with America, it is important to also examine other objects and symbols that have been displayed alongside the headdress.

Three consistent indexes are created in these images, and indeed many other images throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries share these semiotic features. The first is the headdress to Indigeneity as a broad category, the second is the headdress to "America," and the third is to a type of savage barbarism depicted via cannibalistic activity. In Joan Blaeu's atlas, an engraving titled *Allegory of America* (1662) depicts three headdresses (see Ganteaume 2017, 30). One is worn by an Indian maiden, the other two are depicted in the top lefthand corner on two figures participating in cannibalism. Here, we begin to see the sense of the "noble savage" emerge. The headdress is associated with barbarism through cannibalistic activity, which may only be circumvented through the Christian figure depicted looming over the figures, speaking of the "hope of salvation" but also of the dangers that the New World might represent for Europeans. The headdress on the Indian maiden, the central figure in the engraving, is indistinguishable from the headdress on the cannibal figures, cementing the iconic register through the erasure of potential individual materiality. Deloria (1998, 6) has commented on the cognitive dissonance that emerges in US settler populations through the desire to "savor both civilized order and savage freedom," what he has described as America's "fatal dilemma." The homogenization of headdresses resolves this dissonance by making a comfortable connection between nobility and savagery in these two figures. Above the maiden's head, the angels hold the banner "America." A variety of other semiotic communicative references are imbued in this image, namely, the inclusion of the naked Native woman connoting the "virgin continent." An image of the maiden was commonly used, and scholars have supported the notion that this communicated rape-able and takeable land (Deloria 1998; Smith 2015). Indexicality and icon inform and rely on each another here; I focus primarily on the indexes of "America" and "indigenous." As I show, these two indexes are foundational and have

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3. Indexicality occurs where the signifier is attached to the signified (i.e., smoke = fire).

survived to the present day, allowing other semiotic dimensions to derive from them like tendrils. The indexing of the headdress as “indigenous” and as “America” was only possible through an easily recognizable icon, such that any type of feathered-looking item adorning the heads of any subject was placed alongside notions of America and indigenosity (both diverse, complex, and nuanced categories).<sup>4</sup> The reverse also holds true—the homogenization of headdresses (icon) is only possible when they are attached to notions of “America” (index) or “indigenous” as broad categories, effectively shifting the objects out of individual tribal realities and into the socio-semiotic associations of colonial exploration. The interpreter is able to receive communication about the headdress through “America” and “Indian,” and “America” and “Indian” through the headdress. To articulate its potency in social life, we need to extend the headdress beyond its iconic character and, as Keane (2003) noted, into other semiotic dimensions.

Prior to the American Revolution, North America was subject to competition among European colonial powers. Yet the headdress as semiotic representor of “Indian” and “America” suited all of these powers, not least because, at times, the colonizers found working relationships with American Indian people to be politically advantageous. Competing powers made alliances and negotiated with Native people in order to “win” the land and wrest control of it from competing interests. The interconnected notions of the headdress as “America” and as “Indigenous” follows this particular relational logic. As a communicative device, this semiotic cluster (headdress, Indian, America) allowed colonial powers to root political and land-based notions in visual imagery. Crafting diverse Indigenous cultures’ headdresses into a homogenous icon became a necessary condition for colonial discourses about territory, land, and nation. In the 1740 drawing *European Race for a Distance*, a satirical commentary on the War of Jenkins’ Ear between Spain and Britain over the control of commerce in the West Indies, America is represented by a maiden wearing a feathered headdress and seated on a crocodile. Beneath her pedestal, “America” is inscribed. This eighteenth-century depiction draws on the same semiotic cluster as Froschauer’s *Tupinambas of Coastal Brazil* (1505) and Blaeu’s *Allegory of America* (1662). It is important to note the longevity and durability of these semiotic clusters: it is not a brief legacy, but one that stretches across five centuries, from the earliest European depictions of Americas through the exploration and conquest of the “New World” to the present day.

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4. I draw on a particular reading of Peircean semiotics in developing this argument.

Semiosis of this nature allows the headdress to become malleable. In the colonial context, the capacity for colonists to render Indigenous material culture semiotically malleable was a crucial step. Whether worn in public and in contentious performances or depicted in art, the decision to utilize the feathered headdress can be seen as a relational “aesthetic act.” Adornment “doesn’t grow out of a vacuum, but it is learned through other people” (Roach and Eicher 1973, 7). The violence and dispossession that characterize conquest on the scale of the colonization of the Americas required a material register that was digestible and palatable. When colonists encountered the land that they wanted to take, they encountered Indigenous people established on the continent from time immemorial. They encountered cultural complexity, contradistinctive traditions, and unfamiliar practices. To make sense of what they perceived, and to communicate this in such a way that would allow the colonial project(s) to work in and on the land, this complexity had to be piecemealed and abstracted into a semiotic cluster. The homogenized “headdress” as a settler semiotic aesthetic played this critical role.

The Indian maiden with a feathered headdress figured predominantly in these representations. The headdress was often depicted on a body with a face that drew on European features. In images from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries she was often portrayed with other species such as the alligator or parrot, to indicate her rootedness in the Caribbean, as seen in *European Race for a Distance* (1740) and *Allegory of America* (1662). However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the meanings and uses of the headdress began to shift with the changing tides of colonial power. Leading up to the American Revolution, settlers in the colonies of the Eastern Seaboard adopted the colonial symbol of the maiden-with-headdress and repurposed her to suit their particular political struggles against foreign rule (Ganteaume 2017, 46).

I argue, however, that it was not the female figure that grounded the semiotic referent, but the headdress that acted as continuous in imagining America. The maiden in these reckonings was second to the signifiatory weight that the headdress had cultivated throughout the long history of its iconic and indexical status. In other words, there is no maiden without the signification of “headdress”; she would cease to exist without the relationality that this representational adornment provided. As long as *the* headdress was present, various actors and groups (politicians, protesters, musicians, football fans, artists, and others) across hundreds of years of settler-colonial history could mobilize the headdress in art and adornment

to maintain and perpetuate the semiotic aesthetic constructed in prior years. As such they could continue to participate in, and communicate to, generations of U.S. settlers' political renderings of *America*: of the land and the settlers' right to it. The headdress's malleability is critical, then, to both a historic and contemporary exploration of how the headdress figures into notions of settler national identity.

Thus far, I have contended that the homogenization of Indigenous headdresses into *the* headdress involves—and indeed necessitates—the erasure of Indigenous materialities. The fact that this erasing semiotic practice could be attached to this symbolic object permitted a conquest mentality to be distilled and attached to a physical artifact, hence communicating a settler narrative to its observers. A headdress could be moved from context to context and image to image, to suit a particular relationality between colonizer and “the Americas” with little regard for Indigenous peoples and their lifeways or actual material traditions. Indexicality afforded another move: the removal of the representative Indigenous body from the object entirely. If the headdress now signified America, it needed no Indigenous person or representative Indigenous body to index itself as “American.” The maiden, the female body, only served as a vessel for a material potency that blanketed depictions throughout the sixteenth century, and indeed to the present day. To illustrate, we can examine the 1766 print *The Wheel of Fortune or England in Tears*, a commentary on the Pitt administration (1766–77). During Pitt's time in office, the colonies were a battleground between the English and the French, both wrestling for control of Canada and the West Indies. Pitt is seen atop the wheel wearing a three-plumed feathered headdress. No other sign is present to signify “America” other than the headdress, invoking the land that Pitt invested much time, many resources, and indeed his political career to gain control of. In the British Museum's records relating to this image, Pitt is described as “wearing an American feathered headdress.” Examining the headdress itself, we see a band with three plumes sticking out from the front. Here again we see the dynamics of settler iconicity, with *the* feathered headdress standing in for all headdresses found on the North American continent, from Canada to the West Indies: a vast continent with nuanced and complex material traditions homogenized to serve iconic registers and colonial communication. Whether on a European-featured woman as in Gorge's *America Painted to Life*, on a male figure in *Argus* (1780), or on the heads of European figures such as William Pitt, it is the *headdress* that is the active and potent semiotic agent. It binds diverse narratives of colonial communication to each other.

The simplicity of this symbolic object—at times little more than a few feathers attached to a band—only adds to its malleability and transferability. Cultural appropriation is, hence, not a phenomenon of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but one with a deep historical lineage and affect over multitudes of generations of US settler engagement with American Indian people.

In this section, I have proposed that the history of colonization and settler appropriation of both land and culture in North America gave rise to the creation of a semiotic cluster around the headdress. This semiotic cluster required an erasure and superimposition of the headdress's materiality and Indigenous symbolic content for settler semiotics, in order to serve a variety of important settler-colonial purposes. Most notably, the semiotic homogenization of the object helps create and maintain a monolithic image of the Indigenous people(s) of the Americas. This monolithic representation of “the Indian” has had significant implications that continue to the present day, functioning as a key trope in anti-Indigenous racism, denying tribal identities and cultural difference. This trope is temporally weighted and, I argue, materially constructed through settler semiological intervention. With its roots at the start of the sixteenth century, this practice of crafting the feathered headdress as an icon and shifting its indexical associations to meet settler desires has been a feature of North American colonization for at least half a millennium (Ganteaume 2017, 43).

### Liberty as Qualisign

Charles Sanders Peirce defined a qualisign as “a quality which is a sign. It cannot actually be a sign until it is embodied, but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign” (1998, 291). Anthropologists who have applied the analysis of qualisigns to social life have stressed the entanglement of meanings with objects, people, and places. For instance, through her anthropological study of island cultures off the coast of Papua New Guinea, Nancy Munn (1986) has identified the qualisigns of lightness and heaviness seen and felt in/on the body. These “qualia” she characterizes as having the potential to engage in a “symbolic nexus” where heaviness and lightness (as qualisigns) become inculcated in a spatiotemporal language surrounding the production and consumption of the garden. Observing the relationship between the body and the garden in the Gawanese community, Munn wrote:

When food flows swiftly into the body (insatiable eating that makes the body heavy), it flows swiftly out of the garden. When stones or food leave the garden producing a state of *moru* and making the garden lightweight (empty), the body becomes heavy with hunger, the body and the garden are coordinately produced with reverse qualities of heaviness and lightness. (1986, 87)

Hence, the body and the garden become entangled in a semiotic cluster of what Munn (1986, 80, 121) terms “logico-causal relations”: a set of connections inferred among objects, events, and outcomes (Makovicky 2020). The body can be understood through the garden and vice versa through the categories of lightness and heaviness.

Julie Chu (2010) applied the concept of the qualisign to consider the concept of mobility. Mobility, she wrote, “can do little on its own” (2010, 15). Like Munn, Chu argues for a type of semiotic bundling that occurs when mobility necessarily becomes attached to people, places, and objects. For instance, she uses the example of air travel; mobility becomes embodied in the person engaging in movement via plane. However, she notes that it also becomes “entangled with the other features of whatever material form it takes . . . with other qualities such as speed, lightness, or cosmopolitan privilege” (Chu 2010, 15).

In this section, I wish to further develop our analysis of the headdress and its sociocultural weight in US settler communities by considering how the notion of “liberty” can act as a qualisign that gets bundled into the headdress’s semiotic cluster. Here, I explore how liberty has been variously bundled and embodied. Like Chu’s mobility (airplane), and Munn’s lightness and heaviness (garden and the body), liberty is a quality that becomes a sign only when embodied (the featured headdress).

Unlike Munn’s logico-causal relations, however, I argue that liberty is produced as an act of national necessity that builds on the headdress as icon and index. The relations of settler society are largely predicated on both indigenous absence *and* indigenous presence, and as such, liberty as qualisign can’t be considered within a logical or causal relationship. Indeed, settler-colonialism presents an illogical and dissonant relationality where indigenous people are simultaneously desired and expelled. Causation and logic, if we are to find them, are only partially illuminated, and are often bifurcated as we trace a grand temporal semiotic nexus that is shifting, often unpredictable, and always incomplete. As Veracini reminds us, “settler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production” (2010, 14).

Whereas Munn's semiotic analysis fits into an orderly schema, US settler semiotics (like the settler-colonial project in general) present an ongoing, obscured chaos. I thus trace liberty's attachment to the headdress in light of—and as indicative of—the settler-colonial project's obscuration of its own production.

During and immediately following the American Revolution, the Thirteen Colonies that formed the United States began to grapple with notions of becoming a nation, a settler nation. This process entailed developing a deep sense of importance around notions of “liberty” and “freedom” from foreign (British) rule. Up to this period, headdresses had been associated with the American continent and with indigeneity as a broad category, an entanglement between signs at a metasemiotic level. It is important to note that connections between an object and semiotic systems are not unchanging but processual: complex and dynamic processes of signification change and adapt. In the case of the feathered headdress, we see a variety of new semiotic potentials emerge that served settler nation-building purposes leading up to the American Revolution and directly after. For as much as American settlers needed indigenous peoples to realize the nation, they also needed, equally, to dispossess and erase them.

Building on its already iconic status, from the latter half of the eighteenth century images of the headdress began to emerge alongside various notions of liberation. As Deloria (1998) has demonstrated, settlers have long imbued notions of American liberation with the concept of indigeneity. Two additional important icons emerged in this period leading up to the American Revolution and shortly thereafter: Lady Liberty and the liberty hat. These two additional signs were consistently depicted in semiotic clusters alongside, or in conjunction with, the feathered headdress. In the revolutionary war cartoon, *Female Combatants of 1776*, a bare-chested maiden wearing a plumed headdress fights an aristocratically dressed Mother Britannia. On a shield to her right is the conical liberty hat; below the shield, a banner reads “for liberty.” The satirical drawing *Proclamation of Peace* (1783) depicts five male figures, each representing a different aspect of commentary on the success of the American Revolution. One figure, the only one not fully clothed, and wearing a three-plumed feathered headdress, holds a tomahawk in one hand and in the other a pole with the liberty hat attached. A speech bubble from his mouth states, “I have got my liberty and the devil scalp you all!” The “I” in this figure's speech does not represent the indigenous peoples of the continent, but “America” itself.

This Revolutionary rendering of notions of American liberation



Fig. 5.4. *Statue of Freedom*, Washington, DC (Thomas Crawford, bronze sculpture, 1860).

(Photograph by Jack Boucher for the Historic American Buildings Survey, 1993; courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, HABS DC-38-C-11.)



embodied in the headdress-as-America did not end with independence, but continued into the nineteenth century. Francisco Burmudi's first fresco, painted in the nation's capital circa 1855, depicts the Indian maiden wearing an eagle-feathered headdress. She is located leaning on the left side of a frame that contains the profile of George Washington. Leaning on the right of the same frame is the figure of Lady Liberty. In *The Triumph* (1861), a similar visual semiotic cluster emerges in response to the success of a sovereign settler nation. The central figure wears an eight-plumed feathered headdress holding the liberty hat in one hand and the US flag in another. *The Statue of Freedom* (1860), which was once mounted on the Capitol building in Washington, DC, displays a figure with European features dressed in robes similar to those found on depictions of Lady Liberty. Thomas Crawford, the creator of the statue, originally designed the piece as wearing the conical liberty hat. After some critique from the secretary of war, Crawford settled on a Roman-style helmet, its crest featuring "an eagle's head and a bold arrangement of feathers, suggested by the costume of our Indian tribes" (Gale 1964, 56). Underneath the statue is an inscription, "*E Pluribus Unum*" (Out of Many, One). It is here that we might engage with the full weight of a settler-national material semiosis. Iconicity in terms of the feathered headdress indeed fulfilled this creed: out of many distinct Indigenous material traditions, one and only one emerges consistently in settler semiosis, *the headdress*. Crawford's words indicate this reliance on tribal homogenization as the headdress is suggestive of "our Indian tribes," a totalizing statement that erases both tribal identities and material traditions to serve national unity, and thus liberation. Creating this material semiotic cluster follows the very ethos of the settler state: out of many, one. In each of these temporally vast depictions, liberty consistently presents in semiosis with the feathered headdress. Each of the headdresses depicted relied on the iconic and indexical weight produced in prior centuries to communicate hegemonic social value over Indigenous objects, land, and peoples. I argue that it was objects (the headdress in particular) in semiosis that lends the qualisign of liberty to the concepts of "America" and "Indigenous." Images from this period, from both settlers and various European colonial powers, consistently portrayed the feathered-headdress-wearing figure next to objects and figures that also ground liberty as a qualisign.

I began this chapter by discussing the long lineage of the feathered headdress in the US, considering its use in the Boston Tea Party in 1773 and the 54th Super Bowl in 2020. Symbolic objects make effective con-

tributions to nation-building processes. As Anderson (1991) suggests in *Imagined Communities*, even in the smallest of nations citizens are not all personally acquainted, but rather rely on “imagined” connections. For Billig (1995), to maintain this connection, citizens are inundated with everyday representations of nationhood, and these often come in widely recognized symbolic forms. Similarly, Zubrzycki (2017, 5) contends that “individuals experience historical narratives and national myths through their visual depictions and material embodiments.” When we identify how objects work (or are produced) as symbols, objects in contentious political contexts can be more deeply interrogated in terms of their processual and affective scope within nationalist thinking. As Zubrzycki notes, “tracking the making and unmaking of visual and material cultures affords insight into conflicts about, and changes in[,] political visions of the nation” (2017, 4). In settler societies, it is common for visual and material cultures to maintain the settler-colonial project of Indigenous erasure through acts of political contention.

Settler actors at the Boston Tea Party and at the 54th Super Bowl were engaging in a practice of national maintenance and construction through a symbolic object. The object-cum-symbol is critical to connecting these two acts, both of which, I argue, are wrought with contention. Peirce’s theoretical approach to semiotics lends itself to thinking about how objects become symbols, and this gives researchers a road map to think through complex symbolic systems (Peirce 1998). Taking a Peircean approach to settler interpretations of feathered headdresses, these artifacts can be considered a “legisign.” Peirce (1998, 291) defines a “legisign” as, “not a single object, but a general type which it has been agreed shall be significant. Every legisign signifies through an instance of its application, which may be termed a *replica* of it.” The agreement of significance is manmade, socially constructed through a complex process of semiosis. In the context of the feathered headdress, this process of semiosis follows the erasure of Indigenous material traditions. Any feathered object adorning any head signifies “the headdress” as a general type, which indices into notions of America. Thus, the homogenization of the headdress allows actors at the Boston Tea Party and the 54th Super Bowl to identify one another. Indeed, it is the wearing of a homogenous headdress that distinguishes them as a community of protesters and football fans, but also as part of an imagined *national* community.

In all representations of the headdress in colonial and settler-colonial

images, feathers on a band suffice to bring it into the corpus of alike objects. This settler-crafted icon of “the headdress” (feathers on a band, denoting America, Liberty, Indigenous) governs *all* other depictions and representations of individual headdresses. It serves the particular settler-colonial purpose of object erasure. We are dealing, then, with a powerful, temporally weighted hegemonic semiosis that relies on the engagement and manipulation of material culture. “Replica” becomes a key word when we consider any non-Native feathered headdress. Indeed, the market is now saturated with headdress replicas from sources ranging from transnational companies to small businesses. The Kansas City Chiefs fans are wearing a multitude of these replicas in their performative fandom. This legacy of material culture-based semiosis roots contemporary uses of replica feathered headdresses in contentious historical and political contexts. It is the dissonant and obfuscated character of settler semiology that generates an heuristic for US settlers as they come to define a highly sacred and localized piece of Indigenous material culture as “freedom.”

Veracini’s (2010) model of the “settler self” gets at the tension between the settler desire to hold an Indigenous relationship to the land and also one that strives to establish European norms. He writes,

Indigenization is driven by the crucial need to transform an historical tie (“we came here”) into a natural one (“the land made us”). Europeanisation consists in the attempt to sustain and reproduce European standards and way of life. (2010, 21–22)

It is this process where liberty as qualisign becomes important for settler national identity, to transition from “we came here” into “the land made us” while still upholding and sustaining European ways of being. It is this unresolved tension between “sameness and difference” that becomes concealed and obfuscated in semiotic reckonings of the headdress. Any headdress used in this manner by settler society is inculcated in notions of settler nation-building, of the emotive and embodied qualities of US liberation and freedom. The headdress lives in the same semiotic sphere as the eagle, of freedom and liberty. This becomes all the more potent when we consider Patrick Wolfe’s claim that “settlers destroy to replace” (2006, 388). The use of the headdress as iconic legisign solves two problems—it acts as a symbol of liberty, creating and maintaining imagined settler kin, while simultaneously working to erase the material traditions of the Indigenous population.

### The Headdress, Contention, and Settler Claim-Making

Symbolic objects, then, may prove to expand the scope of what we might consider a contentious political act or moment. Objects that have semiotic potency are rarely spatiotemporally static. Symbolic objects are reproduced as icons, and, as I have shown in this chapter, can be indexed into other semiotic spheres. Semiosis, in the context of feathered headdresses moving into colonial consciousness, required a type of homogenization and a practice of erasure surrounding diverse Indigenous material traditions and their respective materialities. A settler society, in its basic structural nature, must maintain its claim to Indigenous territory. Settler-colonialism then may be seen as an act of hegemonic maintenance saturated with moments of contentious political action, cycling moments of national memory. Returning to the Boston Tea Party, a curious act of burgeoning settler claim-making emerged here. American settlers sought independence and resisted taxation from a “foreign” entity, what Tilly characterized as a “contentious gathering” (1993, 270). Contentious gatherings, as Tilly has demonstrated, can be methodologically cataloged into a repertoire that may help us understand contentious political episodes (Tilly 1977, 2008). The headdress in semiosis acts as empirical evidence to suggest that settler collective identity emerges in response to symbolic objects imbued with notions of America and liberation that are mobilized in the service of claims to Indigenous territories. In the case of the Boston Tea Party, this liberation and independence from the colonial metropole is a land-based claim. Settler bodies were—and are—consistently grafting themselves onto Indigenous land. We can return to Veracini’s tension here, where settlers desired an Indigeneity in relation to the land base, such that they too were original inhabitants being born and developing a distinct cultural character in relation to that land, separate from the metropole that sought to control and tax them. “Liberty, Liberty forever, Mother while I exist,” written in the speech bubble coming out of the headdress-wearing figure in *The Female Combatants*, articulates this heuristic quality. Two claims exist here. One is the claim to Indigenous territories inherent in the additional assertion that the metropole (third party) no longer had the right to control settler commerce. One must follow the other—claim-making by American revolutionaries participating in the Boston Tea Party was predicated on Indigenous erasure and was mobilized in a political act of contentious gathering signified through the use of symbolic objects. This dual quality of claim through the erasure

of Indigenous material traditions cements and encourages the settler-colonial obfuscation of its creation and maintenance.

A settler-colonial analysis of US sport could extend these notions of contentious gathering to a geographical performance in that teams operate in a state- and territory-based classificatory system. This settler geographic taxonomy reinforces what Indigenous studies scholar Mishuana Goeman (2008, 28) calls “geographical truisms,” where US states’ boundaries cut through Indigenous territories and attempt to supersede Indigenous geographic realities and relations, “producing abstractions of difference.” It is not just blanket nationalism or patriotism that football presents in the US context: it is a type of *settler* imagination of the self that rests on land-based erasure of an Indigenous past and present. Before Kansas became a bounded state, the region was the home of the Pawnee, Wichita, and numerous other tribes entering and leaving Indigenous-reckoned land. The boundedness of settler statehood in the form of “Kansas” or “Kansas City” is a performance of settler land-based re-grafting through the medium of American football fandom that reaffirms settler *claims* to territory. It is the claim to Indigenous territory that acts as the glue in this vast, imagined settler community.

Settler claims to territory come to be expressed in a variety of contentious political acts, being digested and obscured in manifold settler performances of national maintenance. The obfuscation exists in moments when claims to Indigenous territory are reformatted and glossed over under the language of liberation *and* the symbols of freedom. If the claim to territory becomes the emergent quality of a settler politic, when the headdress emerges at the 54th Super Bowl, for example, it represents a contentious political act *semiotically* connected to the Boston Tea Party, to notions of settler claims to territory, and to associated concepts of “liberty.” The symbolic object (the headdress) signifies and cements the comfortable engagement with settler Americana through collective national identity. To articulate this point further, we might think of Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s (2017) discussion of settler aesthetics and symbolic violence here. She asserts that “colonial and authoritarian regimes alike publicly project state aesthetics to display their power” (2017, 1282). These aesthetics act as a mechanism by which settler systems reify hegemony and “shape national memory” (2017, 1282). Indeed, the headdress as icon plays an important part in both preserving national memory and preserving settler claims to Indigenous land and material traditions.

Both the object as an iconic symbol and US football’s geocartographic

team model make the event one of spectacular settler political contention wrought with aesthetic and symbolic violence: a political moment in which to reassert or maintain claim-making, liberation, and conquest discourse into a national(ist) performance. The headdress in these disparate historical moments acts as the threaded continuum that signifies ideas of domestic liberation, boundedness, and the national imagination critical to the construction of US settler identity. As Tilly reminds us, performances, “including social movement performances, vary and change” (2008, 7). Similarly, objects in semiosis are malleable and temporally dynamic. A contentious political structure can be lengthened and repurposed time and time again via a symbolic object through its use in saturated contentious gatherings. Contentious performances can be seen as a “class of communications that evolve in something like the same way as language evolves: through incremental transformation in use” (Tilly 2008, 13). As nations change they transform “demonstration and social movement repertoire[s]” (Tilly 2008, 87). In the context of the US and the headdress, this symbolic object allows claim-making to evolve and to carry on through their continued use in seemingly disparate social phenomena. The Boston Tea Party, as a contentious performance, can be recomunicated and reproduced in national memory in the 21st century at the 54th Super Bowl.

It is no coincidence, then, that Kansas City Chiefs fans have fought back against Indigenous peoples who view their use of the headdress as insulting and protest their right to use it in this way. There is a sense of ownership that runs through the settler use of the object as symbol, with all of the semiotic baggage previously discussed. To be clear, US settlers who wear feathered headdresses are always engaging in semiosis. Replicas are part of a history of semiosis that is deeply entangled in the formations of the settler state. When wearing the headdress, Chiefs fans are engaging in the long history of laying claim to Indigenous land. Concomitantly, the iconicity involved in replica-wearing also lays claim to Indigenous material traditions. This type of adornment becomes especially potent and evidential of its semiotic weight in moments when fans defend their right to wear the headdress in response to protests by Indigenous peoples. Note that in settler semiosis, America is headdress, America is land, and hence it follows that headdress is *also* land. The headdress mobilizes to exercise these claims. It is this broader material heuristic for the settler that makes the symbolic object critical to a long-lasting hegemonic imaginary. What are fans communicating through semiotic signification when wearing or displaying an object that is seen in many parts of Indian country as sacred?

At its most basic, it is a claim to Indigenous territory. The lack of recognition of this particular intention behind the act only furthers the argument that settler-colonialism tends to hide itself, even to its own actors. There is no territory of recognition here; semiosis allows the settler project to work in the *longue durée*. It is only through a deep semiotic reading of the headdress into settler consciousness that we can begin to untangle the current politics surrounding non-Native people wearing headdresses. The 54th Super Bowl and the Boston Tea Party can be seen as connected contentious political acts through the adornment of a feathered headdress. The headdress as a symbolic object serves to maintain the settler state through its cycled use in imagined settler communities. When symbolic objects come into the fold in settler societies, we may indeed expand our scope to include a detailed semiotic reading of materiality grounded in rich historical and political interrogation. Unsettling contemporary settler-colonial thinking may well entail engaging with symbolic objects within their long contentious political histories.

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