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(Re)mapping the Colonized Body: The Creative Interventions of Rebecca Belmore in the Cityscape

Julie Nagam

> *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.*
> —Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

> *Rebecca's art is about us. It is about our history, language, land, pain, hope, and the right to be ourselves. She creates interiority but pushing the boundaries, by using her body as a paint brush to create the corporeal from an inner drive, form from memory.*
> —Robert Houle, *Rising to the Occasion*

Mapping the Colonized Body through Colonized Space

The cityscape holds the memories of indigenous bones and bodies that resurrect a deep sense of place that exists in the landscape of the city of Toronto.[1] This deep sense of place is part of a connection to the land and stories of place. This article will bridge the creative work of Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore with the living histories of the indigenous bodies and bones that are buried beneath the ground of the city of Toronto and the city of Vancouver. I argue that Belmore's artwork is part of the living archive that performs cultural memory and employs telling as part of an embodied experience and a political act. Her

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performance work creates, records, and stores indigenous stories of place. This article uses the ideas of cultural theorists Katherine McKittrick, Mishuana Goeman, and Matthew Sparke. Each of these people brings a different element to theories of the body and space. McKittrick deals with the concealed geographies of the black body. Goeman focuses on the location of the indigenous body within ideas of nationhood and space. Sparke focuses on the indigenous body and how it was mapped or left out of maps, which is a reflection of the colonial cartographies of struggle. This article uses feminist geographers Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose's work in women's colonial geographies to unpack the affects of the map in colonial spaces and the colonial gaze.

The performances selected for this article are *Vigil* and *the named and the unnamed* (Vancouver, 2003), *Gone Indian* (Toronto, 2009), and *Wild* (Toronto, 2001). All of these performances confront the colonial gaze. The colonial gaze is similar to the work done by Blunt and Rose in regard to the imperial gaze. They argue, "To emphasize the 'imperial gaze' highlights the visual and/or the textual politics of representation and location."[2] The colonial gaze takes into consideration the psycho-affective condition (Frantz Fanon) of the colonized person and understands that Aboriginal women's bodies and land are objects of colonization.[3] Belmore's performances interpret history through an Anishinaabeg perspective rooted in the ideology of Native space. This ideology challenges the dominant Canadian narrative, which is intrinsically linked to the white-settler mythologies in the occupation of space. The focus of the article will be the artist's ability to use her body as a tool to shift the colonial gaze to a space that can communicate the link to land and indigenous histories through stories of place. In the selected performances, Belmore's body creates a visual and embodied text that confronts the viewer with Canada's violent colonial history. Her actions and embodied practice narrate indigenous stories of place that confront the historical implications of space in Canada, which is colonized, racialized, and gendered. Indigenous bodies have material consequences in the politics of recognition and sovereignty because these bodies hold the concealed geographies. These histories and knowledges are erased and objectified, which limits the ability of indigenous people to give place-based critiques and apply theories of respatialization. I argue that Belmore's performance and installation work builds a geographic imagination that (re)maps the city space through the presence of her gendered colonized body. This presence can shift the colonial gaze in order to challenge the white-settler ideologies in the occupation of space through stories of place.

Canada's collective memory is built on the colonial myths and disembodied maps of the area we call home. The lack of recognition within these maps demonstrates the unbalanced exchange of information during the mapping of the space. Reluctance to position indigenous people in the present exists because

this challenges the white-settler ideologies and ruptures ideas of ownership over indigenous lands and bodies. Similarly, feminist geographers Blunt and Rose argue that the imperial gaze "highlights the visual and/or textual politics of representation and location. Describing colonized space as constructed clearly undermines claims for mimetic representation by colonial mapping and imperialist history."[4] If spaces in Canada are constructed as nonviolent undertakings of colonial and imperialist projects, we are left with the logic of the white-settler ideologies in the occupation of space, which continues to rely on distorted views of the creation of Canada. It is this distorted view that is built into the foundational myths in the formation of the city of Toronto.

Colonial maps describe the space as void or *terra nullius* by the lack of bodies and their focus on the vast "empty" landscape. In these land surveys, the purported lack of bodies denies the embodied or living knowledge situated in the land and the indigenous bodies. Throughout the colonial project, the map impacted and aided colonization. Blunt and Rose argue precisely this: "A more complex and shifting notion of both space and subject positionality undermines claims to mimetic representation. Colonial maps often codified mimetic representation and today should be deconstructed to destabilize the power and authority of claims for such representation. Maps were graphic tools of colonization, themselves colonizing spaces perceived as empty and uninscribed."[5] I want to be careful in my own project not to lock the Native body into the flora and fauna, but at the same time emphasize that there are strong connections to the land.

The impact of the colonial map can be demonstrated through the settlement plan of Upper Canada and the specific maps of the area of Toronto that state "abandoned Indian village."[6] The specific maps created during the early settlement period and the surveys made to inscribe the colony were built on the idea of an absent Native body. The absent Native body is tied to gendered understandings of land. Land is connected to the female body because, during the mapping and surveying, Canada was constructed through ideas of transparent space, which is the existing spatial relationships among gendered, masculine, and colonial relations. Blunt and Rose argue that feminist thinking of space is situated in the public and private debate. They argue that the relationship between gendered identity and space should not be framed as patriarchal structures but should be looked at as a "social process of symbolic encoding and decoding."[7] These authors understand space to be a series of patterns among spatial, symbolic, and social orders. If we stick to space as male or female then it reaffirms gendered power differences and locks these identities into the public and private debates.

Goeman's work builds on the ideas of encoding and decoding by explaining the social conditions of indigenous and gendered space. She argues that

colonial spatializing "refer[s] to nationalist discourses that ensconce a social and cultural sphere, stake a claim to people, and territorialize the physical landscape by manufacturing categories and separating land from people."[8] She brings forward the idea that colonial spatializing of indigenous lands, bodies, and minds has occurred since contact through maps, travel logs, newspapers, and writing. Goeman argues that these materials have formed a confining and defining systematic practice of Native spaces, from land to bodies. She states that these spatial relations "relied on sets of gendered spatial metaphors, such as dichotomies between home/nation, public/private, frontier/cosmopolitan, women's/men's space, and many more that inform those discursive constraints that affect entire communities."[9] These gendered relationships are part of the traditional archives, bones, objects, maps, and explorer's notes/journals and are not separate but are constrained within these dominant discourses. In the maps and surveys of the vast landscape of the Americas, in particular Canada, the indigenous body is locked into a binary of visible/invisible presence. Indigenous people have been placed on the periphery in the history of Canada because their presence challenges the white-settler mythologies in the occupation of space. In many cases, indigenous bodies are not visible in maps, travel logs, or documents, and when they are present they are bound to the colonial gaze that describes them as a noble savage or places them passively into the flora and fauna. I want to complicate the notions that have been constructed by the colonial gaze in Canada in order to build a geographic imagination that (re)maps the city space through Belmore's performance and installation work.

Before this can take place, we must recognize that a large part of the settler distortion is mobilized through the self-affirming white-settler mythology that continues to tell itself that it is the rightful proprietor of the newfound land. These mythologies in the occupation of space are bound to ideas of transparent space and the traditional archive, which attempt to own indigenous bodies and land. Rose states that "Transparent space, as an expression of social-scientific masculinity's desire for a total vision and knowledge, denies the possibility of different spaces being known by other subjects."[10] A critique of transparent space, which is gendered, masculine, and colonial space, can address the power dynamics between the settler and colonized relations. As geographer McKittrick points out, "transparent space assumes that geography—specifically, physical and material geographies—is readily knowable, bound up with ideologies and activities that work to maintain a safe socioeconomic clarity."[11] The concepts of (re)mapping and (re)imagining attempt to build on McKittrick's idea behind "the image of transparent space as a territory and [it] also allows for dreams of something beyond its boundaries; it permits efforts to imagine its dismembering from without as well as from within."[12] Drawing on the indigenous connection to land and body can provide the tools necessary to remove indigenous people from the outside

where "Others" are placed, a space that is something beyond transparent space. Indigenous bodies are situated as the "Other" and are ignored in the colonial gaze that places them in undesirable spaces such as the ghetto, colony, inner city, and reserve.[13] Instead, I want to locate these bodies in a rich embodied history and knowledge that transcends the white-settler mythologies in transparent space.

Performing the Female Colonized Body

Belmore's performances are part of indigenous embodied and (re)remembered knowledges that are situated in the material realities of the gendered and colonized body. In order to comprehend these realities, the reader must understand that the indigenous body is proscribed through the lack of a visible presence in the mapping or surveying of the vast landscape of the Americas, in particular Canada. In the context of Newfoundland, Canada, cultural geographer Sparke argues in his article "Mapped Bodies and Disembodied Maps" that indigenous bodies are absent in maps, and this represents the political effects of colonial cartographies. He explains that "disembodied maps" are the abstract of colonial mapping, and the map is treated as an artifact without an understanding of how the map has suppressed the possibility of a lively embodied knowledge. Belmore's performances narrate stories of place to visually demonstrate an alternative cartography that can challenge and contradict myths of settlement situated in the colonial narratives of archaeology and geography, which are situated in maps and other archival material. Her body is the site for critical interventions into a colonial space and, at the same time, she is (re)mapping the indigenous presence through her body, as it represents the five-hundred-year history of the colonial gaze.

The first artwork to be discussed is the performance *Vigil* and the video installation of this performance, *the named and the unnamed* (see fig. 1). The performance took place in the city of Vancouver in order to shed light on all the missing women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside who were later found murdered. This area of the city has a high rate of crime and drug use; it is also the location of Chinatown, which has been accused of being a racialized space that harbors drugs and prostitution.[14] A large number of Aboriginal people live in this particular area of the city, and the space draws in many people with nowhere to go and hosts the highest sex trafficking in the city. Aboriginal women make up a large percentage of the people living in this area and are a part of the five hundred missing Aboriginal women across Canada.[15] The number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women continues to increase and is a growing concern for many indigenous communities. Calling this issue to attention is the main focus of the performance, a powerful piece

that confronts the viewer with the painful and terrible feelings that each of these murdered women might have experienced. The performance does not take these violent acts lightly; Belmore creates a serious and attentive atmosphere to confront these issues directly. The performance takes place in a back alley in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where we first see Belmore crouching on the ground with her arms covered in ink. These inkblots appear later to be the names of all the missing and murdered women. She begins by placing red rubber gloves on her hands and vigorously attempts to wash and scrub the back alley of all its grime and dirt. Then she moves over to a bag and begins to pull out and light each tea light rapidly; she continues to lean over while individually lighting each candle in her white tank top and rugged washed-out jeans. Each flame represents one of the murdered women. A person then joins the performance and assists in her efforts to finish lighting the candles. While these candles are being lit, Belmore begins the visceral engagement with the viewer by screaming each murdered woman's name out, and then ripping a rose or flower stem through her teeth. This act continues until the viewer becomes uncomfortable with the pain Belmore is experiencing and communicating. Once the repetition of this act is finished, she undresses and puts on a flowing, red, ankle-length dress. Belmore washes her hands and face before she walks over to a telephone pole and begins to nail sections of her dress to the pole; she then violently rips her dress away, struggling each time as she nails more sections to the pole. She continues this act over and over again. During this act, the viewer can hear and feel her struggle and exhaustion. Eventually, her dress is shredded into a bunch of pieces, and she almost drops with exhaustion. Belmore limps over to an old pickup truck in her white tank top and underwear and leans on the truck while the song "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" by James Brown blasts out. This performance is a powerful and gut-wrenching experience that positions the colonial gendered body in the forefront in order to confront the colonial injustices experienced by indigenous women.

Figure 1: the named and the unnamed, *2003. Printed courtesy of the artist, Vancouver, BC.*

The colonial gaze is confronted in Belmore's performance because this artwork embodies the physical pain and suffering of the Aboriginal women who had been murdered and unaccounted for in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. It forces the viewer to become aware of Belmore's body and the murdered bodies that she represents. Belmore's performance becomes a tool to expose the injustices of the colonial relationship that indigenous women face in Canada. Charlotte Townsend-Gault describes Belmore's performance as "crimes against the body, the native body, the woman's body . . . embodied in, enacted by, or inscribed on her own body."[16] In *Vigil*, Belmore's body becomes a site where the women's bodies become visible in all their pain and suffering. This reenactment of the pain is communicated when she repeatedly rips the thorny stem through her mouth and continues to nail her dress to the pole only to tear it off again and again. These acts represent both the history of indigenous women's bodies as being objects of the British Empire and the current colonial relationship to the Canadian state. Thus, Belmore's work becomes a site where the colonized body is present in the city of Vancouver and tells the story of the colonial relationship through the visual image of the performance. Cultural and art historian Dot Tuer describes Belmore's body in her performance works as "a cipher for the ways in which the scars of history are remembered."[17] Belmore's performance is in direct confrontation with Canada's social imagination, which has been grounded in the white-settler ideologies in the occupation of space; it is the collective amnesia that continues to colonize and objectify the indigenous female body.

The act of Belmore screaming out each murdered woman's name represents the connection of the colonial body to indigenous stories of place because she draws on the relationship to the networks and on the relations of land, stories, and place. Belmore's actions confront the site to make certain that the colonized body is visible in the city. Belmore states, "I am conscious [of] where I am located—where I find myself standing. I think about the history of each place."[18] Memory and the ways in which we remember become important pieces to the history of indigenous bodies and bones. McKittrick reminds us of the visual component to memories, "the site of memory is also the *sight* of memory—imagination requires a return to and engagement with painful places."[19] Indigenous bodies share this denied access (as McKittrick's work reflects the black body) to the sight of memory within the Canadian state, as it is our bodies that are intrinsically linked to the land of the Americas. The black body and the Native body are tied to colonialism. The differing factor is that the black body is brought to the land through slavery and colonized through this act. The Native body is conquered through the desire of dispossession of land and then through the acts of assimilation.

Belmore's performance work employs telling as part of an embodied experience and of a political act by taking the viewer to these painful places where indigenous bodies are visible. Transporting us to the site and sight of Canada's violent colonial history, Belmore's body challenges the colonial gaze by establishing indigenous people as a presence instead of an absence. Belmore does this by using her ability to (re)enact, (re)remember, and (re)imagine the indigenous history and its relationship to land through her body. Sparke argues, "A native cartographic narrative, though, it is not a story of a migrant power. Nevertheless, it is a reminder of the possibility of mapping migrancy otherwise, of mapping new found land through the body. Memory in this sense does touch us in the present, refusing to go away, an embodied absent presence, a painful record of a lost space of between-ness, intrusive inappropriate bitter flashing."[20] Belmore's work centers on her worldview, which is grounded in the material understandings of Native space because her body is intrinsically linked to the land. Her actions are connected to her Anishinaabeg practices and knowledge, which are based on Belmore's consciousness of the indigenous colonial histories and the relationship to the land. She formulates these stories of place through her body, and it is in her performance that the embodied presence is narrated. At this juncture, there is a particular visual recognition of the painful colonial histories that the Native body has endured.

Belmore's work challenges the Cartesian model of subjectivity, encompassing the lived body, and as feminist performance scholar Amelia Jones argues, in the context of body art, "it *enacts* or *performs* or *instantiates* the embodiment and intertwining of the self and other."[21] At the same time, Belmore's work achieves what Goeman articulates as the integral basis of Native space. Goeman explains that Native space is a "dismantling of boxed geographies and bodies def[ying the] Cartesian subject status."[22] Belmore's body is part of a new subjectivity, which Jones explains is part of "this new experience of subjectivity as embodied rather then transcendental, as in progress, as engaged with and contingent on others in the world."[23] The politics of representation become present in her colonial body, which is visibly being performed. Her actions are tied to concepts of Native space, which are explained by Goeman as "engaging both historic attachments to particular geographies and imperial histories that undermine such attachments"; she argues that "Native conceptions of space defy a dominant, Cartesian model of imperial subjectivity in which consciousness emerges out of itself ('I think; therefore I am'), and in abstraction from the particularities of history and geography."[24] I argue that Belmore creates artwork that employs telling as part of an embodied experience and of a political act that is rooted in Native conceptions of space that defy the Cartesian model. She does not think to create her consciousness; she is embodied and embroiled in this violent colonial relationship. Her artwork

reenacts, reremembers, and reimagines the landscape not by thinking but by being a part of the embodied history within her gendered colonized body.

The Bloody Acts of Colonizing Indigenous Bodies

Belmore's colonized body is linked to the historical narratives that are part of Canada's violent colonial relationship. Each space in Canada has localized histories of this relationship, and, similar to the missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Vancouver, there is a story that maps indigenous bodies to the first murder in the newly formed city of York (Toronto).[25] Chief Wabakanine and his wife were camping at the Toronto Islands, which are a sacred healing place for many Anishinaabeg. This area is part of the story of the great storm that was caused by the Thunder Bird, who was responsible for shifting the islands away from the mainland. This story is told in Robert Houle's artwork *The York Teamway* (1997). These islands are a place with great power because of their relationship to the Thunder Bird and have been occupied for thousands of years. Chief Wabakanine and his family canoed over from the Toronto Islands to the St. Lawrence Market to trade their goods. Once they arrived at the market, they were confronted by a small group of British soldiers who made advances at Chief Wabakanine's sister. The chief confronted the soldiers and requested them to stop making inappropriate advances toward his sister. The soldiers did not like having their authority questioned and began beating the chief. The soldiers continued to beat him so badly that the chief's wife could not stand by. She jumped into the fight and pleaded with them to stop. Instead the soldiers beat the chief and his wife, who were hurt so badly that they died a sad and tragic death.

Their dead bodies mark the first murders and later the first murder trial in York. Sadly, the soldiers were acquitted based on a lack of evidence because the translator for the Mississauga people was unable to appear at the trial. The trial proceeded without any testimony from the Mississauga people. This sparked an uprising from the Mississauga, who consulted the Three Fires and decided not to destroy the city of York in order to revenge the deaths of their chief and his wife.

In this story, the indigenous woman's body is for the taking, and she is nothing but a thing to be dominated or tamed. The female body becomes the object of the soldiers' desire, and it is the position of the soldiers as the colonizer/master that allows this transaction to become a reality. The feminization of the colonized landscape is a reference to indigenous scholar Andrea Smith's book *Conquest* and to Goeman's concepts of colonial spatializing and gendered metaphors. Smith states, "the connection between the colonization

of Native people's bodies—particularly Native women's bodies—and Native lands is not simply metaphorical."[26] The land was free to be taken, and this theft was justified because Native people did not control or subdue nature. The position of the female body is tied to the land, and this informs how people read or view the landscape because the land and the female colonized body are for the taking. Similarly, Blunt and Rose argue that "the association of indigenous women with colonized land legitimated perceptions of both women and land as objects of colonization."[27] The chief's sister is an object to be colonized and controlled by the soldiers, and once there is interference with this power dynamic, the soldiers resort to brute force. This violence propels more violence in an effort to respond to the original act. The brutal violence of the story is forgotten in the white settler's history because if it is remembered it will disrupt the glorified mythology behind the settlement of Toronto and Canada. Belmore's artwork is about remembering the suffering of others and the connection of this suffering to the colonial relationship. The story of the Anishinaabeg people who were unjustly murdered is similar to the work Belmore has done about the murdered women in Vancouver (*Vigil*) and in other performances, including *Freeze* (2006), which is about the Aboriginal people who were left outside to freeze in the forty degrees below zero weather in the prairies, and *Bury My Heart* (2000), which is about all the murdered Ogala Sioux killed at Wounded Knee. When the story of the unjust murders of the Anishinaabeg people in Toronto are told alongside the stories of colonial suffering through Belmore's performance, it demonstrates the survival of these stories, the strong resilience and strength of the Anishinaabeg people, by recognizing the power of indigenous stories of place.

Excavating the Lived Colonial Space

> *I wish to rest my weary body in the master's bed. The bed has an autonomous quality that I find extremely attractive. The bed is a fortress. The four posts clearly marking its territory. Its canopy offering protection from the powers that live in the sky. It has become my shelter.*
>
> —Rebecca Belmore, *House Guests*

A major exposed excavation in Toronto is The Grange, which is the original home of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO).[28] This stately home was built in 1817 and given to the AGO in 1911 to be renovated in the British classical tradition of the eighteenth century. The house was built for D'Arcy Boulton Jr., a member of the prominent Boulton family. He was married to Sarah Anne, and they had eight children. Their house was located on a one-hundred-acre estate that extended from Queen Street to Bloor Street and continued

through the large sections of Beverley Street right on to McCaul Street. In commemoration of this colonial history, the AGO assembled artists to create *House Guests: The Grange 1817 to Today* (2001; see fig. 2). Belmore was an invited artist to this collection, and she selected the master bedroom for her performance/installation *Wild*.

This installation consists of Belmore occupying the space for five days by lying in her constructed version of the master bed in this stately home. Other than the bed, the room remains untouched in a Victorian-style aesthetic. The canopy is a play on this aesthetic because it is covered in dark furry beaver pelts and draped in stunning crimson fabric. Four magnificent posts frame the bed and move the eye down toward the white bedding and crinoline bed skirt. Placed on the top of the bed is a maroon satin duvet covered with massive amounts of black hair that is sewn into the duvet. Belmore situates herself nude under the fantastically constructed blanket. She continues to confront the viewer by occupying the space of the master's bedroom in various positions.

Placing the Native female body in the colonial room confronts the violent and gendered history of indigenous and settler relations. The site and sight of

Figure 2: Wild*, Toronto, 2000. Rebecca Belmore. Printed courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.*

the installation play a significant role because they mark the violence of settlement and defy the myth of the absent Indian. Belmore's body occupies the space of the master, which challenges the white-settler ideology of ownership. The Native body is marked as the Other, but at the same time is considered absent in the building of the Canadian nation, and Belmore inserts her presence, which tells the stories of indigenous people. Belmore explains that "by occupying a place that is [as] personal as this bed I am making a connection between myself and the history of The Grange. It is a way of asking 'Where is my history?'"[29] Art critic Kathleen Ritter states that in this performance/installation, Belmore "reveals a history that is entirely at odds with the accepted history of the site."[30] When the viewer is confronted with the sight of Belmore's body, the power behind the gaze shifts because it challenges the accepted historical mythology of this colonial house. By inserting her body into the house, and specifically into the master's bedroom, Belmore causes the colonial and gendered indigenous histories to come to life through her body, which permits these stories to be present in the larger historical narrative of Canada.

Belmore's body confronts the colonial gaze by her ability to represent a version of herself as a Native woman, as opposed to an object to be dominated. Native women have been dismissed through patriarchal accounts that left them to be written out of the dominant Canadian narrative, and when they were part of the narrative they were considered to be objects to be tamed or possessions. Belmore's gesture to write herself back into the narrative with her own body places indigenous women as a whole into the forefront of that story. Her body acts as a catalyst for the importance of stories of place and the polemic of the representation of the Native body. Her body rejects the "subjectifying gaze and assimilative lure of colonial recognition" by her ability to represent her own history and way of being through her body.[31] As art historian Richard William Hill points out, "Given the history of representation, it becomes evident that our identities have been framed since contact within hierarchical dichotomies developed prior to any experience of our particular cultures."[32] He states that some of the most damaging dichotomies are nature versus culture and primitive versus civilized. In this performance, Belmore plays with these dichotomies by situating the naked female Native body in the Victorian master bedroom (primitive vs. civilized) and by integrating the natural materials of hair and beaver pelts into a highly stylized wood bed frame (nature vs. culture).

The presence of the sleeping colonized female body disrupts the eighteenth-century colonial space. This kind of disruption can be linked to what Jones explains is the "recognition of the body/self as a dispersed, multiple, and particularized had dramatically progressive potentialities, especially for women and other subjects historically excluded from the privileged category of

'individual.'"[33] Jessica Bradley contends that this performance "enacts a layered redressing of history while fulfilling the fantasy of finding a comfortable, even luxurious, place to stay in a hostile world—a world that saw her ancestors as potential aggressors to be feared."[34] The fear that Bradley speaks about is from indigenous people's aptitude for strength and their connection to nature and animals; it is this relationship that creates an unsettling feeling for settlers as their histories are bound to tidy management of the land and the creatures within it. Belmore's sense of place is connected to her ancestral relations that are part of the land and to an embodied knowledge that is part of indigenous stories of place. She is a performing subject; her body is "engaged with the social, embodying and so particularizing and politicizing self/other and self/world relations."[35] Belmore's self/other is marked by her colonial and gendered relationship to the Canadian narrative. Her self/world relations are part of indigenous knowledge that is linked to the rest of the world, including our colonial history.

Capitalizing on *Gone Indian*

Belmore and Michael Greyeyes critique capitalism in Toronto's financial district through the performance of *Gone Indian* at the Nuit Blanche art festival (see fig. 3) in downtown Toronto at Wellington and Bay Streets. The performance begins with Greyeyes and Belmore driving around the city with powwow music blasting out of a minivan. Both artists were situated in the front seat of the van confronting the people of downtown Toronto with their loud music and visible Aboriginal attire. The next segment of the performance starts at a downtown intersection (Bay and Wellington) where they park the van with the powwow music blasting. The performance focuses on a (rez)zed up van (the preferred ride of the powwow circuit), and the surrounding area of the van is decorated with traditional Native props. Some of these items included a large drum, feathers, and dream catchers. Initially, Belmore arrives in a dark jumpsuit decked out with three red feathers pinned to her back, and Greyeyes wears fancy dancer regalia with white sneakers. The performance ensues with the methodical movements of Greyeyes, and then Belmore enters the space while thrusting a huge cylinder stone

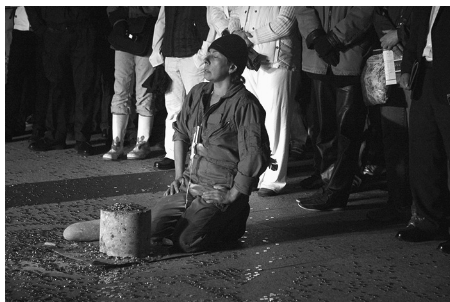

Figure 3: *Rebecca Belmore performing* Gone Indian, *Nuit Blanche, Toronto, 2009. Photo courtesy of Sarah Fay.*

raised above her head. She begins to pace through the site stopping in the four directions. Once she puts aside the rock, she brings a large animal skull onto the site and raises it above her head while the high-pitched vocals shake in the background. Throughout these movements, Greyeyes continues to dance to the music and the audience. He maintains direct eye contact with the audience while moving to the beat of the music. Suddenly there is a shift to stillness, and the rap music takes over from the traditional powwow chants. Belmore begins to bust open four different piles of red bandanas full of pennies. She continues this action over and over again until five hundred pennies are spread all over the street. She then takes the cylinder stone and proceeds to grind and slam the pennies between the stones. At the same time, Greyeyes continues to move to the beat of the music. It finishes with Greyeyes standing still and Belmore crouched on the ground sitting on her knees surrounded by hundreds of pennies.

At the performance site are massive bank buildings in each direction. Belmore explains, "I am very much aware of the site. So I think as far as a place to make a performance it's definitely loaded with meaning."[36] The meaning she might be describing is the unequal distribution of wealth, profit created from land and resources that were extracted without any consent, and erasure of any indigenous presence. Greyeyes says, "It is confronting the money-men as the center of economic power and control; the performance is pushing back by abandoning the money and control of the space." During Belmore's ritualistic acts of carrying stones, skulls, and money you can hear the nomadic movements of the van's stereo vibrating with the drumming and crisp vocals. While this is happening, Greyeyes erupts into the space at unsuspecting moments. "The reality of the piece is a confrontation between sites, people, cultural knowledges; it is really about the intersection of things."[37] The five hundred pennies represent the five hundred years of the colonial relationship between indigenous people and the state. In a further critique of this colonial relationship, Belmore scatters the five hundred pennies in order to communicate Canada's gratuitous and disposable wealth and its lack of ability to recognize whose bodies have suffered in order to achieve the country's wealth.

The performance disrupts the space with its loud music and display of colonized bodies. Belmore states, "The power is coming from the music of our people—our aboriginal music, powwow music, our rap music."[38] This power is evident when the dancer comes to life through the beats of the music, as he is voiceless and only interacts through movement. These movements, rhythms, and beats reverberate from the glass and brick of the office buildings back to the van and bodies in the space. The sound is that of a stereo system that has been played too loud, as the crackle and shaking of the chants are slightly distorted (see fig. 4). The land is reclaimed by the music as it happily

remembers the sounds it once heard on a regular basis. The bodies that are marked in the performance are spectators and active participants within the repertoire who are (re) marking the streets, towers, and sidewalks of the financial district as a Native space. The relationship built between the viewer and participant links them to the history and the presence of indigenous people in the cityscape. The cityscapes within Canada attempt to erase this knowledge by asserting the white-settler mythologies in the occupation of space, which continues to push indigenous people into the background. Instead, Belmore and Greyeyes's bodies are pushed to the foreground in order to confront the viewer with the absent historical knowledge. Their bodies embody the colonial histories and indigenous knowledge through indigenous stories of place. Belmore argues that "performance is calling things to attention [by] making people aware. We live our lives every day—we are busy, busy existing. At the same time, we are aware. We just do not think about it all the time. We can't. I take a moment through performance to create a space to acknowledge [that] what is going on is important."[39]

Figure 4: *Michael Greyeyes perfoming* Gone Indian, *Nuit Blanche, Toronto, 2009. Photo courtesy of Sarah Fay.*

The van is a cheeky reference to "rez" culture in the heart of Canada's financial quarter. The unequal distribution of wealth prevails in the city, and the contrast of the van covered with Aboriginal adornments demonstrates the lens through which Aboriginal people are seen. This is what political theorist Fanon describes as the difference between colonized (poverty) and the colonizer (wealth). The performance confronts the participants with the occupation of indigenous people in the city and, at the same time, provides a serious contex that reveals the importance of dance and music to Aboriginal people. The presence of the vehicle and the artists' bodies debunk the myth of the absent Indian. The project invokes the potential of the space, specifically working against transparent space because the performance creates the possibility to begin "dream[ing] of something beyond its boundaries."[40] To imagine that space as a powwow instead of as the capitalist heartbeat of Canada is to reclaim it as sovereign Native space. The actions of the performance reaffirm its historical roots through the music and the movements of the performers because these gestures resurrect the indigenous bodies and memories that haunt the spaces beneath the cityscape.

Greyeyes's and Belmore's bodies represent the colonized body. The transformation of the space is executed through their ability to build relationships

and connect with the participants. This performance is situated in what performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña understands to be the relationship to space and place. Gómez-Peña explains, "I see myself as an experimental cartographer. In this sense I can approach a definition of performance art by mapping out the 'negative' space (as photography, not ethics) of its conceptual territory."[41] The space of the city is not only a conceptual territory for indigenous people, but also an actual territory being actively pursued. The Toronto Purchase and various other discrepancies in land-settlement issues in Canada demonstrate this. The artist's bodies resurrect these historic moments in indigenous and settler relations because they represent the colonized body in the occupation of the financial district, a space rarely permitted to the colonized body. As Gómez-Peña articulates, "Our bodies are also occupied territories. Perhaps the ultimate goal to performance, especially if you are a woman, gay, or a person 'of color,' is to decolonize our bodies and make these decolonizing mechanisms apparent to our audience in the hope that they will get inspired to do the same with their own."[42] The performers' ability to shift the dynamic of the occupied territory is done by reclaiming the space in the present. They rupture the white-settler ideologies in the occupation of space by the vocals and drums of the music and the spectacle of the performance produced through the actions of their colonized bodies. The participant is forced to "see" the indigenous body as a strong and living presence that challenges settler occupation. In this performance, Belmore and Greyeyes challenge settler occupation and critique capitalism. They are acutely aware of the power and wealth located in this area of the city of Toronto. Their actions demonstrated in this performance directly oppose the Native/settler ownership discrepancy because their bodies affirm this location as a Native space.

Connecting the Fragments of the Landscape, Bodies, and Histories

Belmore's performances open up the potential of the space within continuous storytelling of the connections among land, place, clan systems, creation stories, and worldviews through concepts of Native space.[43] Her body becomes a vessel that marks colonial violence and the strength of indigenous knowledge. The interplay of colonial violence and indigenous knowledge creates a powerful creative experience that forces the viewer to confront the myths and "see" the settler violence. Curator Steve Loft warns us about the catchall category of storytelling for indigenous artists, and he assures us that "the strength lies not in the telling of the story, but in its power to assert its meaning."[44] Belmore's ability to assert meaning is the backbone of her performance work. Belmore states, "I

like to think of myself living in the 21st century as a storyteller connected to past artists who write our history—somebody like me has expressed themselves with our bodies—a continuum of a long practice of expressing ourselves as artists or creative people—continuing as we always have."[45] All of the discussed performances pack a powerful punch that jolts the viewers out of their collective amnesia and into a dizzy consciousness and pushes them into an interactive relationship by confronting the viewers with Canada's violent colonial history. Belmore's body, the female colonial body, is a site/sight of Canada's colonial injustices. Gómez-Peña argues that performance is able to captivate ideas such as "reverse anthropology," which means "pushing the dominant culture to the margins and treating it as exotic and unfamiliar. Whether conscious or not, performance challenges and critiques the ideological products of anthropology and its fraudulent history and yet still utilizes parts of the discipline's methodologies."[46] Belmore's body pushes this fraudulent history of the white-settler mythologies in the occupation of space to the background by the simple fact that her body and actions complicate this history.

To interpret the Native body as part of the present allows for real and imagined geographies to (re)create a spatial terrain that maps indigenous bodies into the cityscape. If we are in time to create the space that permits these bodies to be present, then there is a potential to shift the paradigm not just to include indigenous people into the larger narrative but also to catapult them into the forefront of this national narrative. Goeman argues that this narrative would not just "represent space as a return to an 'original' land or an 'original' past/nation/being that erases the layers of time, geography, and history; rather they mediate multiple relationships and by doing so navigate ways of being in the world that reflect contemporary Native experiences."[47] Locating the presence of a colonized body in the vast urban landscape is difficult when theories of race, colonized space, and white-settler mythologies in the occupation of space are implanted and forced upon the landscape. Indigenous bodies have material consequences in the politics of recognition and sovereignty because their concealed geographies are erased and objectified. Limiting our ability to give place-based critiques and apply theories of respatializations, these critiques are locked into the binary of who belongs and who does not. Maps reinforce this relationship by creating discursive and real formations of space through the visual and the text. The politics of visual representation are confined by the lack of the sight of the Native body, which further perpetuates the white-settler mythologies in the occupation of space. These myths are bound to the objectification of the colonized gendered body, in which the female Native body is to be tamed and controlled. The female body is constrained to the land, bodies, and minds of the colonizer. The suggested way of breaching the conundrum is situated in the possibility

of transparent space as a dream without boundaries in which the Native body can be seen.

The absent indigenous body demonstrates the power of the colonial cartographies and disembodied maps in the city of Toronto.[48] Belmore pushes the boundaries of place-based critiques through her body by performing an embodied between-ness. Her performance work lies in this embodied between-ness that inscribes an indigenous presence in which Belmore's body is the site and sight of the gendered colonized body. The artwork is an embodied absent presence as the visual image, and the body is a political act that tells the complex histories and relationship to colonialism in the urban context.[49] Belmore's artwork represents an indigenous presence by (re)marking and (re)inscribing the cityscape as a Native space. Her creative work transforms the living histories of indigenous people by performing cultural memory. Belmore's performances allow for the Native body to be present by using the body's visual image to reenact, remember, and reimagine the landscape, history, and indigenous knowledges that continue to create a living archive. I close this article with the wisdom of Beth Brant who says, "Memory is like the drum, one tap and the sound resonates and reverberates in to our very soul. One poem, one story, one painting, and our hearts and bodies respond to the message—we are here. We remember."[50]

Notes

1. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Langhorne, PA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110; Robert Houle, in *Rising to the Occasion*, ed. Robert Houle, Daina Augaitis, and Kathleen Ritter (Vancouver, BC: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008), 19.

2. Alison Blunt and Rose Gillian, eds., introduction to *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1994), 13.

3. Ibid., 10.

4. Ibid., 13.

5. Ibid., 9.

6. There are two settlement plans for Upper Canada prior to 1791, which were perfect grid systems. The first was ten miles square for inland settlement, and the second was a nine-by-twelve-miles grid to be situated around a body of water. Alexander Fraser, *Land Settlement in Upper Canada, 1783–1840*, Sixteenth Report of the Department of Archives for the Province of Ontario, 1920 (Toronto: King's Printer, 1921); Derek Hayes, *Historical Atlas of Toronto* (Toronto and Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2008), 20.

7. Blunt and Gillian, *Writing Women and Space*, 3.

8. Mishuana Goeman, "(Re)Mapping Indigenous Presence on the Land in Native Women's Literature," *American Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (June 2008): 296.

9. Ibid.

10. Rose Gillian, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 40.

11. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2006), 5.

12. Ibid., 18.

13. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

14. For additional information see the article by Kay Anderson, "The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category," in *The Urban Geography Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 580–98.

15. For additional information see the report by Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*, http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/sisters_overview.php (accessed July 22, 2011).

16. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, ed., *the named and the unnamed* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2003), 18.

17. Dot Tuer, "Performing Memory," *Mining the Media Archive* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2005), 167.

18. Rebecca Belmore, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

19. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 33.

20. Sparke, "Mapped Bodies and Disembodied Maps," 331.

21. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 38.

22. Ibid., 295.

23. Ibid., 197.

24. Goeman, "(Re)Mapping indigenous Presence on the Land in Native Women's Literature," 295.

25. The official written documents can be found in the archive of the court transactions. The version of this story is told through Philip Cote and Jon Johnson as part of the Indian Bus Tour and the Native Centre of Toronto. The bus tour is a four-hour interactive drive throughout the city during which people are educated about the indigenous histories that are part of the city of Toronto. Native Center of Toronto, Bus Tour, October 31, 2009.

26. Andrea Smith, "Rape of the Land," *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Boston: South End Press, 2005), 55.

27. Blunt and Gillian, *Writing Women and Space*, 10.

28. Jessica Bradley and MacKay Gillian, eds., *House Guests: The Grange 1817 to Today* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2001).

29. Ibid., 83.

30. Kathleen Ritter, "The Reclining Figure and Other Provocations," in Houle, Augaitis, and Ritter, *Rebecca Belmore: Rising to the Occasion*, 57.

31. Glen Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Canada," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 4 (2007): 453.

32. Richard William Hill, "After Authenticity: A Post-Mortem on the Racialized Indian Body," in *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor* (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2010), 99.

33. Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 204.

34. Bradley and Gillian, *House Guests*, 78.

35. Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 205.

36. Rebecca Belmore, "Belmore on Bay," *NOW Magazine* (Toronto), October 5, 2009, 65.

37. Michael Greyeyes, interview with author, April 30, 2009.

38. Belmore, "Belmore on Bay," 65.

39. Shannon Bell, "Rebecca Belmore: Fiercely Political Politically Fierce," *Canadian Dimension* (Winnipeg, MB), 2009.

40. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 18.

41. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 21.

42. Ibid., 24.

43. Goeman, "(Re)Mapping indigenous Presence on the Land in Native Women's Literature," 300.

44. Steve Loft, ed., *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture* (Banff, AB: Banff Press, 2005), 93.

45. Belmore, interview with author.

46. Gomez-Pena, *Ethno-Techno*, 25.

47. Goeman, "(Re)Mapping indigenous Presence on the Land in Native Women's Literature," 300.

48. Sparke, "Mapped Bodies and Disembodied Maps."

49. Ibid.

50. Beth Brant, *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1994), 36.