

Rebecca Belmore: Performing Power

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The aurora borealis or northern lights, ignited by the intersection of elements at precisely the right second, burst into a fire of light on black Anishinabe nights. For some, the northern lights are simply reflections caused by hemispheric dust, but for others they are power. Rebecca Belmore knows about this power; her mother, Rose, told her so.¹

Though the imbrication of Anishinabe thinking was crucial in her formative years in northern Ontario, Belmore now has a much wider base of observation from Vancouver, British Columbia. Her role as transgressor and initiator—moving fluidly in the hegemony of the west reformulated as "empire"²—reveals how conditions of dispossession are normalized in the age of globalization.

Every country has a national narrative, and Canada is better than most at attempting to integrate multiple stories into the larger framework, but the process is still a colonial project. The Americas need to be read as a colonial space with aboriginal or First Nations people as seeking decolonization. The art world has embraced the notion of transnational citizens, moving from one country to the next by continuously locating their own subjectivities in homelands like China, Africa and elsewhere. As a First Nations or aboriginal person, Belmore's homeland is now the modern nation of Canada; yet, there is reluctance by the art world to recognize this condition as a continuous form of cultural and political exile. The inclusion of the First Nations political base is not meant to marginalize Belmore's work, but add depth to it. People think of Belmore as both Canadian and Anishinabe—I think of her as an Anishinabe living in the continuously colonial space of the Americas. Belmore prefers to let her work articulate her positions or "interstices."³

Belmore's commitment to envisioning an aboriginal presence in the Americas does not suggest that her work is beyond transcending these specific histories. On the contrary, her role as the artistic voice of Canada at the 2005 Biennale calls for a reworking of a "post" to "neo" colonial, theoretical and aesthetic frame. To embrace this art we need to understand the simultaneous intersecting spaces that Belmore negotiates within the "empire": aesthetic (sculpture, installation, performance) and cultural (post-colonial theory and historical trajectory of aboriginal culture). The Americas as "empire" is the global condition and Belmore is critiquing it from within.

The world that Belmore responds to is consistent with a "turbulent time of unceasing cultural, social, and political frictions, [as well as] transitions, transformations, fissures, and global consolidations" articulated by Okwui Enwezor for Documenta XI.⁴ Enwezor's summation of a "post-colonial order" maps a space that locates Belmore's work beyond a hermetic Canadian aboriginal binary. In his description of post-coloniality he goes on to say:

... full inclusion with the global system and by contesting existing epistemological structures, shatters the narrow focus of Western global optics and fixes its gaze on the wider sphere of the new political, social and cultural relations that emerged after World War II.⁵

The wider sphere that Enwezor describes is an act of decolonization, which is understood as "liberation from within." Belmore demonstrates "liberation" with an aboriginal and artistic agency by confronting these "structures" through strategic performances. In her performance titled *Artifact #671B* (1988), she took advantage of the spectacle of the Winter Olympics held in Calgary to draw attention to the multinational company, Shell Oil. She tagged her body like an artifact in a museum, but with one important twist, one of

the signatures was the Shell corporate logo, marking corporate incursion on First Nation space. In doing so, she revealed the duplicity of a company that provided corporate sponsorship of the Olympic exhibition, *The Spirit Sings*, which featured Canada's First Nations people, while securing drilling rights in the territories of outstanding Lubicon Cree land claims.

Belmore's sound performance, *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991), gave voice to aboriginal people across Canada. Constructed as a giant megaphone, reminiscent of birch-bark cones used for moose calling in northern Ontario, this piece opened up a space for aboriginal people to speak and be heard. It created a site for the recognition of the historical erasure of aboriginal voices, and empowered aboriginal people to speak to "all of [their] relations" as well as the living cosmos.⁶

The bifurcated title is one of several created by Belmore that includes both Anishinabe and English references, with the intention of addressing the suppression of aboriginal language. The significance of language in aboriginal culture is described by Cree artist and curator, Gerald McMaster:

For aboriginal people, language originates from the land . . . where indigenous languages articulate the land and in turn the aboriginal is articulated by the land.⁷

As illustrated by the title of this work, the use of the megaphone "contested an existing 'western' epistemological structure," while recovering an aboriginal tradition.⁸ To bring a thought to life through the spoken word is one of the most powerful acts of reinserting aboriginal knowledge or epistemes into aboriginal and Canadian cultures.

The artistic performance, *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking To Their Mother* was an act of self-determination, and is emblematic of what Mohawk scholar, Taiaiake Alfred, addresses in *Peace, Power and Righteousness*:

The path to self-determination is uphill and strewn with obstacles, but we must take it; the threat to our existence as indigenous people is so immediate that we cannot afford not to. The only way we can survive is to recover our strength, our wisdom, and our solidarity by honouring and revitalizing the core of our traditional teachings. Only by heeding the voices of our ancestors can we restore our nations and put peace, power, and righteousness back into the hearts and minds of our people.⁹

Alfred's quote on self-determination frames a reproduction of *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking To Their Mother*, which is currently on permanent display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington.

As guest curator for the NMAI exhibition, *Our Lives*, I found *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan* to be one of the most significant expressions of sovereignty beyond political boundaries. With this work, Belmore addresses the colonial erasure of aboriginal languages that are the foundation for indigenous knowledge and often referred to as "traditional teachings"—First Nations people in Canada were going to be heard, while reclaiming or "giving voice" to the future.¹⁰ Belmore is piercing the silence and drawing our attention to the fact that when we speak the entire universe or "mother" hears our words.

Belmore's work addresses not only issues about the relationship between the "empire" and indigenism, but she is interested in the notion of hegemony as "globalization." There is a tendency to dismiss the ongoing subjugation of multiple or indigenous knowledge systems. For Enwezor, the process of organizing Documenta XI provided him with an international forum to insert post-colonialism into an art world discourse. He writes about the "structure" of historical interpretation and the impact of post-coloniality on the "totalization of Empire."

(W)hile postmodernism was preoccupied with relativizing historical transformations and contesting the lapses and prejudices of epistemological grand narratives, post-coloniality does the obverse, seeking instead to sublimate and replace all grand narratives through new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation.¹¹

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain in their book titled, *Empire*, that "... featuring a new type of global sovereignty ... in its deterritorialized form, [it] is no longer defined by the conservative borders of the old nation state scheme." Likewise, Enwezor sees the margins as producing experimental cultures as counter resistance statements to the impact of what Hardt and Negri identify as the "totalization of Empire."¹² Enwezor identifies these "experimental cultures" as emerging out of "the conditions of imperialism and colonialism, slavery and indenture, compos[ing] a collage of reality from the fragments of collapsing space."¹³ Each performance or installation by Belmore is negotiating this "space."

Canadian curators, Dot Tuer and Barbara Fischer, suggest that in "... Belmore's understated work the nodal points of history intertwine with the subjects of her own performances, and her interest in historical (dis)appearances."¹⁴ Perhaps the performances located on "nodal points" do not release pressure, but draw our attention to the individuals that are made invisible by these "structures."

Canadian flags, space, and the colour "white" are a few of the "fragments in Enwezor's collapsing space," used by Belmore in several works that address Canada's attitude towards First Nations governments. Tribal governments that represent Oka, Ipperwash and Burnt Church stand out in history as markers of land claims and dispossession, as well as racial attitudes and economic oppression. According to Mohawk curator, Lee-Ann Martin, Belmore's work provides a symbolic perspective on many of these political issues.

... the prevailing symbolism associated with the colour white as signifying purity, cleanliness and goodness. She substitutes alternative associations from an Aboriginal perspective: white guilt, whitewash, white lie, and white-out ... it is the red of ancestors' blood upon whiteness: blood memories of pain because of white lies.¹⁵

Martin's description might refer specifically to one work, *blood on the snow (2002)* that articulates these ideas with a massive white quilt covering a centrally located chair, which is interrupted by a dramatic gash of blood. This installation refers to the 1890 United States cavalry's massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, where the frozen dead bodies of three hundred unarmed Sioux, mostly women and children, lay for four days under a blanket of snow. This poignant work marks a condition of indigenosity within a specific hemisphere.

blood on the snow is similar to *The Mama Poems*, by the Mohawk writer, Maurice Kenny, who wrote, "America is like a clean apron covering a bloody dress."¹⁶ Belmore and Kenny are not only voices for First Nations culture in Canada and the United States, but for all the other oppressed people around the world, like the genocide of millions of Mayas in Guatemala in the 1980s. Their work is also meant to symbolize individuals like Dudley George, and the ignored and unanswered disappearance of aboriginal and non-aboriginal women from the downtown eastside of Vancouver in the 1990s.¹⁷

British theorist, Jean Fisher, complicates our reception of artistic responses by pointing out that "it is also clear that globalization has made us all subjects of both the local and the global, which inextricably binds our fates together, so it is now worth considering what unites rather than divides us."¹⁸ Fisher goes on to say:

The question to be asked of artistic practice is, can there be an art of resistance

against those forces that push us ever further into the instrumentalisation and devaluation of life? It is perhaps not a question of transgression as such, but of reinterpreting and reconfiguring tactics of resistance against those forces of hegemonic power that seem increasingly to make no social or political sense. What one might look for, then, is tactics that insinuate into the codes of a given discourse and subtly undermine its claims to truth.¹⁹

Canadian art historian, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, insightfully suggests that Belmore's work goes beyond our difference and navigates our shared conditions.

The chair, which stands for its owner or for the life stories of its owners in *Mawuche-hitoowin*, here becomes a throne of blood. Like the evil that left defenseless women and children dead in the snow at Wounded Knee, Belmore's censure of the abduction and probable murder of so many women shows that this exercise of evil makes no racial discrimination...²⁰

Townsend-Gault draws our attention to the fact that many of the “unnamed” are sex workers, addicts, many are First Nations women and powerless. Through Belmore's body, we see the violence against these women and a nation exercise its power.²¹

The discussion of race is a critical component of “post” or “neo” colonial theory and is central in several of Belmore's artworks. She uses her body to signify the ongoing colonization of the Americas, which is in keeping with the use of a native woman's body as “trope” since early colonization. The Americas were represented as a fecund, native female body in an Edenlike paradise, where the native body stands in for the desired occupation or ownership of the land. That Belmore's body is central to many of her performances calls for an expanded reading of this “trope.” The recuperation of the 1970s term “body art” by American curator, Amelia Jones, in *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, based on the work of theorists, Elizabeth Grosz, Michel Foucault, and Bryan Turner opens the frame.²² Jones underscores the location of body as art within philosophical theories of subjectivity—phenomenological, feminist, poststructuralist. According to Jones:

(T)he term “body art” thus emphasizes the implication of the body (of what I [Jones] call[s] the “body/self,” with all of its apparent racial, sexual, gender, class and other apparent or unconscious identifications) in the work.²³

Belmore's body has always been a decolonizing zone, starting with the first appearance of the *High-tech Tipi Trauma Mama* (1987-1988)²⁴ and “... at different sites, on occasions of trauma and of need,” and again in *Rising to the Occasion* (1987-1991), a response to the British Royal visit to Thunder Bay, Ontario.²⁵ Belmore along with eleven other “angry crinolines” wove beaver dam twigs and English china into an exposed crinoline as “mimicry of Royalty and subversion of the colonized subject.”²⁶

Some of Belmore's more recent work responds to what Fisher calls “undermining truth” by exposing a contemporary tragedy that is deeply embedded in a colonial imaginary that is enacted upon “the” Indian or “other” woman's body. The performance and “body art” work, *Vigil* (2002), is documented and featured in the work, *The Named and the Unnamed*, which was included in the exhibition of the same name at the Belkin Art Gallery in 2002. *The Named and the Unnamed* is a response to the murders of more than seventy women—many of whom were First Nations women—from the streets of Vancouver's downtown east side. Despite this tragedy, Canada has gained moral authority in comparison to the United States mainly because of the hawkish and warrior posture of the United States globally. Though it is difficult to accept Canada as a port of high moral ground based on the observations included in an Amnesty International Report in 2004—the report, *Stolen Sisters*, accuses Canadian authorities of “turning a blind eye to [the] disproportionate level of violence against Indigenous women.”²⁷

Townsend-Gault describes *Vigil* and Belmore's response to the tragic deaths of the “unnamed” in her text for *The Named and the Unnamed*:

The performance included all the elements of a classic ritual: establishing a bounded, liminal space, cleansing—a purification which puts the protagonist in a vulnerable or dangerous position, their body marked out in some way or identified by special clothing—endurance, repetitive action, release; a closing sequence with the returning to the “real” world. In *Vigil* the women's first names are written in black marker all over her arms as cues, prompting Belmore to yell them out at the top of her voice, and after each name to draw a rose, with its thorns, through her closed lips. In the performance, crimes against the body, the native body, the woman's body, are embodied in, enacted by, or inscribed on her own body, as if in an act of atonement.²⁸

As part of the *Vigil* performance, Jones' “body/self” position is articulated through the extension of Belmore's skin and the use of a red dress. The dress is both a scarlet mark and a symbol for the retraumatization of the body. In the area of the city where the alleged violations took place, Belmore nails the dress to a pole; each time she pounds another nail, she struggles to free herself from this “skin.” This act is intended to emphasize the violence committed against the body by pulling the fabric to shreds. Belmore's body becomes Grosz's “hinge” or “threshold between nature and culture” as the unprotected woman's body and a carnivorous society. By calling out and writing the names of the “unnamed” on her skin, Belmore becomes Foucault's “surface of the event-droplets of blood from thorns of roses, drawn through her mouth pierce the illusion of a “unified self.”²⁹

In addition to symbolically shredding her skin in *Vigil*, Belmore scrubbed the street clean, lit candles for the lost women, marked their presence on her body, and when she completed the performance, she strolled over and leaned against an uber male signifier—a pick-up truck with a macho sound system. Townsend-Gault describes the end of the performance:

In closing, Belmore, now in jeans and t-shirt, leans up against a looming black pick-up truck, with all the male signifying options, that has been there all the time, parked at the periphery of her action. James Brown's *It's a Man's Man's World* booms magnificently out from the truck's stereo: “This is a man's man's world/but it wouldn't mean nothing, nothing/without a woman or a girl.”³⁰

Belmore's body conjures up Turner's notion of the social self, while demonstrating alienation. If it is a “man's man's world,” Belmore's use of Brown's song dramatizes the ongoing erasure of or alienation of women in this society and simultaneously suggests that without women our society is nothing.

Her work is beyond simply uncovering the trauma; she recovers or sets right or balances the imbalance. Belmore's video and photographic documentation of *Vigil* and *The Named and the Unnamed* performance create a liminal space that can be understood as an aboriginal episteme. Soft yellow lights are digitally superimposed and float over Belmore's body in a random pattern. Each individual light symbolizes the presence of the murdered women and hence gives symbolic life and energy to the memory of each victim. And it is this use of light and energy that is reminiscent and takes us back to Belmore's understanding of and connection to the power of the northern lights.

In Belmore's most recent work for the Venice Biennale, it is precisely the power of place—female space—that Belmore evokes in *Fountain* (2005). Projected on large screens and a water sculpture, this work was originally performed and filmed at Iona Beach, British Columbia in Canada.³¹ Belmore isn't claiming a cosmological connection to this terrain, like the artists of the North-West First Nations communities. Instead, her use of this landscape—loaded with cultural history—does not refer to a specific tradition.

Belmore is aware that transformation from human to spirit or animal forms are the underpinning of most aboriginal stories and nowhere is this more present than in the traditions of the North-West First Nations and her own culture. She learns from these stories that there is power in water, and from this she acknowledges that the waters' edge is the site of transformation.

Belmore understands the significance of and connection between power and water. Her Anishinabe heritage has taught her about the Micipijiu or the "great horned cat or underwater lion, the night panther who could raise storms with a flick of his tail."³² The Micipijiu lives in the waterways of Anishinabe memory and embodies the unthinkable tragedies of human existence. Belmore may never mention this spirit, but she knows the significance and role it has in her culture.

In *Fountain*, Belmore performs the futile task of hauling endless buckets of water from the ocean to the shore. A small fire burning in the distance brings together the powerful and elemental forces of land, water, fire and air. Once again, her body is the conveyor or portal of the power between these elements. She is the connection to water and as she emerges from the water, she walks towards us and then quite unexpectedly she throws water at the viewer and we are surrounded by this water. This gesture provides a connection between viewer and water—an act that symbolizes how water connects the entire world, and in this moment we are connected to all of humanity.

Venetians might recognize a similar cycle of renewal in their own culture. The *Feast of the Sensa*, held every spring on Ascension Day, which is a symbolic ritual re-enacting the marriage of Venice to the sea. Historically, a Venetian doge emptied a vessel of holy water into the sea, dropped a gold ring into the water and recited a vow: "We espouse thee, O sea, as a sign of true and perpetual dominion."³³ It is suggested that this pageant reaffirmed the "sacred bond between the city and her holy protectors."

Fountain is both an Anishinabe articulation of the dangers in life, and a celebration of renewal and the *Feast of the Sensa*. It also embodies current ideas about *The Force of Art*—resistance and production—as expressed by Polish theorist, Krzysztof Ziarek.³⁴ He argues that art's revolutionary force lies in its ability to "maintain a revolutionary momentum" in a climate where globalization diffuses targets of critique not easily identified as "bourgeois culture and morality, aesthetic conventions, national politics, class domination, and so on."³⁵ Ziarek no longer sees ideologies as the site of revolt, but identifies "technological rationality and its contemporary, info-technical forms of power," as the site for a revolt—a site that illustrates oppositional models of resistance: "beyond resistance and conformity, beyond critique and complicity."³⁶ All of this to avoid overthrowing one power for another.

Ziarek redefines an artwork as "forcework—beyond the optics of modern techno-aesthetic categorizations of art, and with it, a corollary rethinking of art's 'aesthetic' role in society."³⁷

Belmore conjures the sublime by transforming a material world performance into a media projection. A spiritual or metaphysical site is created by projecting the virtual water back onto the physical "fountain" of water. The "techno-aesthetic" production of the installation subverts the contemporary, dominant paradigm of technology by appropriating it as an element in the aesthetic.

What is the profound resistance and production expressed in Belmore's ritualistic act? The moment the bucket of water is thrown, the water is transformed into "blood." Water becomes the blood of life. The violent splash against the surface of the camera covers our view. This performance of renewal at the waters edge simultaneously affirms a cycle of power in the age of globalization. The water is not simply a site of transformation, but conceptually transforms to blood, disturbingly disrupting our view. Yet, central to *Fountain*, and Belmore's other work, is the articulation of power—both modern and ancient.

As a strategist, Belmore has been revolting against the "machine" by finding sites of power. The "space" that Belmore rejects is the binaries that contemporary thinkers like Hardt, Negri, Fisher, Enwezor and Ziarek articulate as familiar. Belmore's work seeks to redefine the obsession of modern "power." It would appear that her motivation to reveal a new and different understanding of "power" is an attempt to empower not only First Nations people but all those who experience her work. Rebecca Belmore knows about power; her mother, Rose, told her so.

NOTES

1. Conversation with Rebecca Belmore, Vancouver, British Columbia, December 2004-
2. The use of the term "empire" is based on the construct defined by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii. Hardt and Negri's definition of "empire" is in "contrast to imperialism." They suggest that "empire" establishes no territorial centre of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. "Empire" manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command.
3. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2. According to Bhabha "interstices is the overlap and displacement of domains of difference-that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated."
4. "Okwui Enwezor, *Documenta 11_Plattform5: The Catalogue* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), 44-45.
5. *Ibid.*, 44.
6. Gerald R. McMaster, *Tribe: Critical Perspectives and the New Practices in Aboriginal Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Academisch Proefschrift, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1999), 184. McMaster quotes David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Pantheon, 1996) to reinforce the idea that, "...in this way, she and others participate in a dialogue not with human beings but with what Abrams calls"...a more than human cosmos."
7. McMaster, 184-185.
8. According to Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (Perspectives on Gender)* (New York: Routledge, 1990). 15, "...reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition involves much more than developing Black feminist analysis using standard epistemological criteria. It also involves challenging the very definitions of intellectual discourse." Belmore's work illustrates this idea, emphasizing the centrality of speaking to all other living things as an act of empowerment for aboriginal peoples.
9. See Taiaiake Alfred's introduction in *Peace, Power, Righteousness: an indigenous manifesto* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999). Alfred asserts that sovereignty must be understood beyond western notions of politics and be expressed as an indigenous philosophy.
10. A reproduction of this piece can be seen at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, in the permanent exhibition, *Our Lives*.

11. Ibid., 45.

12. Ibid., 45.

13. Ibid., 45.

14. Barbara Fischer and Dot Tuer, *Rebecca Belmore: 33 pieces* (Mississauga, ON: Blackwood Gallery, 2001), 13.

15. Lee-Ann Martin, *Au fil de mes jours* (Quebec, QC: Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, 2005). 57.

16. Maurice Kenny, *The Mama Poems* (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 1984).

17. Victor Montejo, *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1987).
Montejo constructs the resistance against his people as a form of genocide.

Rebecca Belmore: Performing Power, Jolene Rickard, Catalogue 'Rebecca Belmore Fountain', Kamloops Art Gallery, The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, The University of British Columbia, Canada Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2006, pp.68-76