



## Lands that Witness: Where Memory “Lives” in Rebecca Belmore’s Site-Specific Work

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### Abstract

Colonization and ongoing occupation of the territories currently known as Canada rely on a fundamental mischaracterization of land: land as given, as mappable, as exploitable, as settled, as private property. Rebecca Belmore is one of many artists who have continuously insisted on, in contradiction to these *terra nullius* notions, the liveliness, the power, and the spirit of land. Her work has consistently entered, through a notable variety of media and contexts, into confrontational dialogue with the often-invisibilized, traumatic realities of colonization, ongoing occupation, and the ideology that reproduces them, demonstrating the ongoing existence that these realities have as traces or memory in bodies, in language, in objects, and in places. This paper examines how Belmore, across multiple works, posits each of these as loci for memory before concluding with a more in-depth analysis of her 2017 piece *Wave Sound*, which invites viewers to listen to the land through a large aluminum cone. *Wave Sound*, I argue, insists that memory inhabits not only the body, objects, or even space, but *land* specifically, through its complex engagement with site specificity. Many of Belmore’s works have engaged in a project of remaking a land by making visible its past, which has been made invisible by settler-colonial social relations. But *Wave Sound*, perhaps uniquely, uses participation to implicate viewers in that remaking.

**Keywords:** Canadian art, Indigenous art, land rights, decolonization, performance art.



Rebecca Belmore, *Wave Sound*, 2017. Commissioned by Partners in Art for LandMarks2017/Repères2017. Photo: Kyra Kordoski.

The centrality of issues of land to projects of decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty in Canada cannot be overstated, despite the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and progressive liberal society's consistent exclusion of the question of land rights from their engagements with these projects. This exclusion, for all its proponents' decolonial pledges, leaves intact a fundamental mischaracterization of land that was a requirement for colonization and is a condition for ongoing occupation in Canada today: land as given, as mappable, as exploitable, as settled, as private property. These conceptions are of course denied by any responsible understanding of land, and countless artists, writers, and activists working in Canada have continuously insisted on, in contradiction to these *terra nullius* notions, the liveliness, the power, and the spirit of land.

In their co-written introduction to their collection of art and writing titled *The Land We Are*, Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall make a direct connection between land,

political struggle, and political art in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission logic and federal policy that have attempted to constrain political discourse in order to exclude land rights. This strategy was evidently “intended to undermine the growing movement of Indigenous land-based activism in Canada” in the wake of the 1991 standoff at Kanehsatà:ke known as the Oka Crisis (2015, 1). The book begins with an image of Rebecca Belmore’s *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, created in 1991, which Hill and McCall describe as an “alternative response” to that same crisis. The piece consisted of Belmore touring a large birchbark megaphone across Canada, stopping at sites of significance to various rural and urban Indigenous communities and inviting participants to speak through the megaphone to the land. Indeed, much of Belmore’s work asks to be read in relation to not only the political events that take place alongside it but the land on which it takes place, the rights to which were called into contention by both Belmore’s work and the Kanehsatà:ke conflict.

Following *Speaking to Their Mother*, Belmore’s work has consistently entered, through a notable variety of media and contexts, into confrontational dialogue with the traumatic realities of colonization, ongoing occupation, and the ideology that reproduces them, demonstrating the ongoing existence that these realities have as traces or memory in bodies, in language, in objects, and in places. This paper will examine how Belmore, across multiple works, posits each of these as loci for memory before concluding with a more in-depth analysis of Belmore’s 2017 work *Wave Sound*, often thought of as the inverse of *Speaking to Their Mother*. *Wave Sound*, I argue, insists that memory inhabits not only the body, objects, or even space, but *land* specifically, through its complex engagement with site specificity. Memory-in-land has been implied across many of Belmore’s works, but after *Speaking to Their Mother*, her next work to commit to the question of land with the same degree of directness was *Wave Sound*. While the former asked participants to speak to the land using an oversized birch-bark megaphone, *Wave Sound* invites them to listen to the land through a large aluminum cone. Many of Belmore’s works have engaged in a project of remaking a land made strange by loss, but *Wave Sound*, perhaps uniquely, uses participation to implicate viewers in that remaking.

This strategy, I will argue, is a unique contribution to a field of representational strategies that aim to responsibly witness traumatic historical events. When Belmore centres land as inhabited by memory, *witnessing* is drawn out into *remaking*, with a very different political valence than works that might gesture towards resolution or reconciliation. By putting aside

questions of accuracy and resolution in *Wave Sound* and the other works examined in this paper, Belmore manages to create aesthetic experiences that are meaningful beyond the faithfulness of their representations of the traumatic historical events alongside which they come into existence.

A review of a selection of literature that positions memory as inhabiting the body, objects, and space, alongside a review of the ways Belmore puts forward a poetic and political understanding of all of these as loci for memory, will help to build up a vocabulary to articulate what she suggests about land in *Wave Sound*, in the context of the current political relevance of issues of land in the territories currently known as Canada.

## MEMORY IN BODY, LANGUAGE, AND OBJECTS

Theorists of performance studies have much to offer an investigation into where memory “lives,” having often engaged in the work of conceptualizing intangible forms of knowledge as more than simple negations of traditional, material archival practices. Rebecca Schneider’s article “Performance Remains,” as the title suggests, challenges a dominant archival logic and common conceptions of the ephemerality of performance, proposing that performance does remain—in the body. By “[resituating] the site of *any knowing* as body-to-body transmission” (2001, 105), Schneider divorces the site of knowing from any official record, locating it in the body and opening up a new set of possibilities for “where” we could conceive of memory “living” or having an existence.

Claudette Lauzon’s scholarship on Belmore reveals some of the ways in which the Anishinaabe artist commits to such a body-to-body transmission of memory. For example, in her installation *The Great Water*, which features a capsized canoe and its surrounding area draped in black cloth, Belmore “[conveys] the threatening permeability [...] of the boundary that separates traumatic experience in the past from the viewer’s capacity to perceive or ‘feel’ it in the present” (2008, 173). Viewers of Belmore’s performative works often watch Belmore’s body “feel” such an experience and are sometimes made to “feel” that experience in their own bodies; traces and memory find form in and are transmitted between bodies. Lauzon describes Belmore’s use of performance and installation to make absence—in the case of her 2002 performance *Vigil*, the absence of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side—present, reinscribing it on her own body by “creating a space in which the ghosts of missing women haunt our bodies and our consciences” (2008, 173). *Vigil*’s audience witnessed Belmore

attempt to scrub clean a Downtown East Side alley, shout the names of so many missing women, and pull a rose through her teeth for each name she shouted, before putting on a red dress which she repeatedly nailed to and ripped away from a telephone pole. The names of these missing women had been written on her arms ahead of the performance. Belmore's body, through these names, the repeated ripping of the dress, and the other physically exhausting elements of this work, is made a *site* for absence, traumatic repetition, and political struggle—a role into which colonized bodies, in literal and metaphorical ways, are already often forced.

In the photo-based installation *State of Grace*, Belmore uses various material techniques, such as gashes cut through the photograph of an apparently slumbering woman, to “allow the air currents that waft gently through the room to animate the portrait ... literally animating the ghosts that haunt [the paper]” (Lauzon 2008, 171). This idea of traces or ghosts that “haunt” a body, of the body as locus for memory or knowledge, has become common sense for many theorists of trauma studies, performance studies, and art history more broadly. It is a general premise of Belmore's work, often activated through body-to-body transmission—past trauma is made present, and viewers' bodies are implicated.

Veena Das, across her work on the anthropology of violence and social suffering, similarly evokes the concept of memory having an existence in the body, foregrounding the role of language in this relationship. Making use of Ludwig Wittgenstein's “rigorous philosophical grammar” for the “possibilities of imagination of pain” (1997, 69), she suggests that “in the register of the imaginary, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also seeks a home in the body” (1997, 88). In her example of gendered practices of public lamentation in India, grief finds its “home in language” through a process of it being first given a home in the bodies of women who “actively engender its transformation into language” (Bennett 2002, 349). This model of the relations between language, utterance, bodies, and memory points towards a particular role for art in witnessing and processing collective historical trauma. Such a role is reflected especially directly in Belmore's *Vigil*, suggestive as its title is of ceremonial or even religious observance, and of the power of performative utterance in giving memory a “home.”

These relations are also reflected in Belmore's non-performative, object-based installation works where missing bodies are made present, sometimes stood in for by an object. For example, in her 2006 sculptural work with Osvaldo Yero, *Freeze*, a roughly body-sized

block of melting ice commemorated the suspicious death of Neil Stonechild, a teenaged Indigenous man. Belmore performs such a transformation of absence into presence across all of these contexts and media, always directly connecting it to a body, an object, or, as I argue below, a space.

## MEMORY IN SPACE

While almost all of Belmore's works are site-specific in some way, conscious of place and space as meaning-contributing elements, certain works of hers foreground space as locus for memory, just as *Vigil* situates memory in the body and *Freeze* situates memory in an object. One touchstone for investigating such works is Gaston Bachelard, who wrote extensively on how memories can be thought to "live" in spaces—architectural spaces, in his case—and the ways they can be "excavated" through reverie, literature, and poetry, and then analyzed through phenomenological and psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks. He describes a "localization of our memories in the house" and proposes a "topoanalysis" of the sites of our intimate lives, the "theatre of the past that is constituted by memory;" for him, space "contains compressed time" (1969, 8).

Belmore's *Wild* is a moving expression of such a memory-in-space, but also remakes a space by manipulating the memories that inhabit it and disrupting the way the space is produced by and reproductive of particular social relations. *Wild* was performed as part of a 2001 exhibition celebrating the centenary of The Grange, a nineteenth-century colonial house and "National Historic Site of Canada" that makes up part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's programming space. For this exhibition, artists were invited to produce works in particular rooms of the house. For her contribution, Belmore, unclothed, occupied a grand four-post bed in the former master bedroom, having dressed it with a comforter made of beaver pelts and black hair. Like *Vigil*, *Wild* makes an absence – in this case of particular voices from particular histories – visible and felt through Belmore's body and viewers' bodies in the present. But it does so in a way that shows how the body and space work together to house memory. Bachelard conjures the poetic image of the "house we were born in" and its "liaison [with] our bodies, which do not forget" (1969, 15) —a physical "inscription" on our bodies, for example in the form of "organic habits," that nevertheless requires a return to that house in order for us to rediscover it (1969, 15). Here, memories "live" in the house and in our bodies but are only activated or triggered

when the body returns to the house. In *Wild*, the original life of an architectural space is emphasized through its subversion as Belmore “plays the role of the unexpected and historically unwelcome guest in the most intimate room in the house” (Bradley and MacKay 2001). Belmore identifies that this master bedroom houses a particular history that is waiting to be activated by the colonial patriarch and brings into that space not the body it expects, but instead the body that unsettles those memories and that history. This body not only occupies the space, but stretches out and reposes in it, swaddled in the comforter which, as an object (composed of pelts and black hair), equally unsettles the same history.

## MEMORY IN LAND

Belmore creates a similar effect with *Gone Indian*, though with a completely different tone and at the scale of urban space, which, as Henri Lefebvre has shown, houses memory and inscribes bodies just as Bachelard suggests houses do. Like *Wild*, *Gone Indian* foregrounds the fact that spaces depend on particular bodies to activate the memories that inhabit them. The 2009 performance, a collaboration with Michael Greyeyes for the Nuit Blanche art festival, began with Belmore and Greyeyes driving what Julie Nagam describes as a “(rez)zed up van” (2011, 159) through downtown Toronto, blasting powwow music and eventually parking at an intersection in the middle of the finance district. Greyeyes exited the van in Cree regalia and started to dance while Belmore paced around the site, holding a large cylindrical stone. Dressed in a utilitarian green jumpsuit, with bandanas tied to one leg and feathers on her back, she opened up a number of bandana bundles on the ground which were filled with pennies, spreading 500 pennies around the site. As Greyeyes continued to dance to the music from the van, which had now changed to rap, Belmore gathered pennies onto the stone cylinder and began smashing them with a second stone.

Lefebvre, in his 1974 volume that theorizes space as socially produced, describes the role of space as an “ordering of things” (1991, 32), and the site of *Gone Indian* represents an almost cartoonishly recognizable example of such a role. If “[social] space contains – and assigns (more or less) appropriate places to – (1) the *social relations of reproduction* ... and (2) the *relations of production*” (Lefebvre 1991, 32), then the financial district of Toronto is a loaded site for what Nagam describes as a performance about “the unequal distribution of wealth, profit created from land and resources that were extracted without any consent, and erasure of any indigenous

presence” (2011, 160). The intersection at which *Gone Indian* takes place, more obviously than most, is a space produced by and reproductive of the social relations of a society that has delivered unmeasurable injustice to Indigenous people. And, like *Wild*, this performance’s insertion of bodies that “[reveal] a history that is entirely at odds with the accepted history of the site” (Ritter 2008, 57) emphasizes the reliance of this space and its social-reproductive function on particular bodies for its activation.

Through performance, *Gone Indian* not only reveals the memory that inhabits a particular site, activated by particular bodies, but *remakes* a space made strange by loss and by colonization: the urbanized city block. By “confronting” and “pushing back,” as Greyeyes has described the performance (Nagam 2011, 160), Belmore and Greyeyes insist on the *current* and *future* presence of Indigenous people, despite 500 years of erasure and oppression, at the centre of a space that most desperately and transparently has a stake in the opposite, representing undeniably incompatible political and economic interests. This is in addition to unearthing the suppressed *history* of that space. These two different functions are brought about by one set of actions, echoing Das’s insistence on “the complex relation between ... building a world that the living can inhabit with their loss and building a world in which the dead can find a home” (1997, 88). This is the relationship that brings out the connection between this city block as space, and this city block as land.

Nagam speaks of the land, during Belmore’s and Greyeyes’s performance, “happily remember[ing] the sound it once heard on a regular basis,” before colonization and urbanization (2011, 161). By revealing particular memories that inhabit a particular city block – “[resurrecting] the indigenous bodies and memories that haunt the spaces beneath the cityscape” (Nagam 2011, 161), and, I would argue, the land as well – *Gone Indian* invokes this space’s history of land not as empty container but as something with its own spirit and agency. Its use of site specificity “specifically [works] against transparent space” (Nagam 2011, 161), which assumes that “geography [...] is readily knowable” (McKittrick 2006, 5), and it does so by beginning to move from a discourse of space in general to one of land in particular. It foregrounds two relationships to land: the space’s history *as* land, but also its history as an active agent in industrial practices that have been inconceivably destructive towards land.



## WAVE SOUND

*Wave Sound*, despite taking place without narrative or performance, and in land we wouldn't think of as particularly altered by colonialism (compared to the urban setting of *Gone Indian*), speaks just as directly to themes of loss, colonization, and futurity. The work was part of *Landmarks 2017*, a Canada-wide arts initiative on the 150th anniversary of the nation-state, to which many artists, including Belmore, took a more critical and less celebratory approach than the funders were perhaps anticipating. The project consists of four large aluminum cones that invite participants to listen to the land at four sites across Canada: Banff National Park in Alberta, Pukaskwa National Park and Georgian Bay Islands National Park in Ontario, and Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland.

In the context of Belmore's larger body of work that continuously speaks back to an ongoing colonial present, *Wave Sound*, like *Gone Indian*, suggests an "embodied or living knowledge situated in the land" that can be accessed with the appropriate attention and activation (Nagam 2011, 149). The conceptual simplicity of the project and the theoretical interchangeability of the sites are what gets the message across: there is something in (any) land to listen to. And in the context of Belmore's body of work that, as we have seen, regularly situates memory in bodies, objects, and spaces, we may have a clue as to what that "something" is: memory. Of course, participants are not meant to *literally* hear anything other than the perceptible sounds of the environment. *Wave Sound* sketches out a social relation between participants and land that follows a *structure* of listening, parallel to the relationship of *literal* listening in the work.

The most evident point of comparison, mentioned at the outset of this paper, is with Belmore's much earlier work *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, one of her only other fundamentally participatory pieces. *Wave Sound* is easy to read as a reversal of the megaphone from *Speaking to Their Mother*, but it can perhaps be more attentively read as *Speaking to Their Mother*'s complement or counterpart. I mean this conceptually and materially: the two works considered together suggest a thoughtful reciprocity in body-land relations, and both the birch bark and stone come across as careful, skillful manipulations of materials that are particular to the lands they will engage with as sculptural objects. Perhaps birch trees, fast-

growing and flexible material resources for many needs, are to the act of speaking as stone, a passive but incredibly supportive element, is to the act of listening.

A crucial difference is that *Speaking to Their Mother* consisted, materially, of one object that was toured to different locations, while *Wave Sound* places four static sculptures in four particular locations. In *Speaking to Their Mother*, the megaphone came to participants, but in *Wave Sound*, participants must travel to the cones—a very different deployment of site specificity. Specific sites were chosen, but I would argue that in this project they have a sort of metonymic function in relation to Canada as a territory: that the project, especially in the context of *Landmarks 2017* as an invitation to reflect on Canada’s history as a nation, was really about all of Canada, as a land, and not only those four particular sites. The distance between the four cones suggests a strategic placement that might aim to get a read of the whole territory, a poetic invitation to listen to Canada, as a land, not as an empty container that has been filled in with autonomous objects, activities, and the social relations of a settler-colonial society. The sites Belmore chose, all within national parks, have some aura or illusion of being natural, pure, or unchanged by colonization—perfect examples of the empty, transparent space that Lefebvre disproves. He describes an “illusion of transparency” that is “embodied and nourished” (mutually) by the “realistic illusion” of natural simplicity and spatial opacity 1991, 28-9; this illusion supports conceptions of space as pre-everything and intelligible. In suggesting that there is something to listen to even in those, the most putatively “transparent” of lands, Belmore calls into question the transparency of *all* the land that Canada has been built upon, from these apparently “empty” national parks to the most urbanized, unrecognizable districts like the site of *Gone Indian*.

*Wave Sound*’s participatory structure separates its location of memory in land from some other examples. In *Wild* and *Gone Indian*, viewers look on as Belmore’s (and Greyeyes’s) bodies activate certain memories and social relations in space and disrupt others. Viewers’ own bodies’ agency in activating space is put to the side by the structure of a performance; at most, they might *reflect* on their own role, how their own bodies reproduce those spaces or not. In *Wave Sound*, with no performance, only an object and a site, the participant’s own body’s relation to the “empty” land (and so all of Canada-as-land) cannot be avoided. The existing social relation between body and land is restructured with the invitation to listen.

*Wave Sound* unsettles what Hill and McCall identify as “teleological constructions that insist on ‘moving on’ from conflict created by a colonial event safely located in the past” (2015, 3), by centring the very thing that Belmore was trying to *reveal* in more urban settings like that of *Gone Indian*: land. But it also, because of its participatory rather than performative framework, invites participants to engage in the remaking of land, including these “natural” sites as well as the more obviously altered sites the piece gestures towards. Inherent in the proposition that memory remains with land and is there to be listened to is the understanding that new encounters, including viewers’, will go on to remain with or inhabit the land into the future.

This understanding resonates with Lefebvre’s model of space not as a pre-existing, empty container in which objects exist and actions take place, but as an “active moment” that must be consciously produced (because it already is being produced by every society), bearing the inscription of the past and reproducing the present (1991, 46). This conscious production of space, I argue, is the political project these works engage with when they “remake” a space made strange by loss. All of the artworks this paper has examined recognize space as something produced according to an ideology and a set of social relations that it in turn reproduces, and they all actively intervene in those processes. While Belmore’s performance works act out these interventions for viewers, *Wave Sound*, through participation, creates an intervention that includes the viewer and extends beyond the scope of a performance, in addition to doing the important work of connecting these understandings of space to issues of *land* specifically.

## ART AND LOOKING

Belmore’s practice is one of many that attempts to grapple with a long history and ongoing present of political erasure, physical dispossession, and cultural genocide carried out against the Indigenous people of Canada, whose eventual disappearance, by assimilation or extinction, has historically been posited, explicitly and implicitly by the Canadian government, as the only resolution to the contradictions inherent in the settler-colonial state. From a political standpoint, Belmore’s work takes on this violent myth when she manipulates the social relations that produce and are reproduced by social space. The gesture of revealing the history of a space, especially one that contradicts accepted history, also makes a claim about the future that is contained, latent, in that space, one that *must* be different from the official, planned future laid out above, one of Indigenous futurity and the end of settler-colonial capitalism.

From an aesthetic standpoint, alongside many artists and museums that have grappled with *representing* the unthinkable realities of such political circumstances in Canada, I want to argue that Belmore's artistic practice contributes importantly to a project that seeks responsible "ways of looking" at traumatic historical events or circumstances, after Marianne Hirsch's concept of the "look" which, in contrast to the authoritative "gaze," is "local and contingent, mutual and reversible" (2001, 23). Rather than attempting to communicate the magnitude, the experience, and the immediacy of the suffering, Belmore's works put aside questions of accuracy or resolution of these issues in order to create aesthetic experiences that are meaningful beyond the faithfulness of their representations.

*Wave Sound* grapples with a violent colonial history and ongoing present, bearing witness to generations of loss that have made the land it engages with strange, including in ways that are not perceptible or empirically measurable—indeed, this strangeness is not perceptible at the "pure, natural, untouched" sites of *Wave Sound*, but by metonymically referring to the whole territory of Canada Belmore infects these sites with a conception of space that contradicts their supposed purity. *Gone Indian* invites spectators to bear witness to a space's remaking (into land) through performance; *Wave Sound* starts with land and implicates participants in its further remaking. This centring of land *as itself* is an important strategy, politically and aesthetically. The myth of land as settled – literally and as a political question – continues to be perpetuated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and progressive liberal society in general. But, as Belmore and many others have shown us, land and the history inhabiting it remains, has agency, and is absolutely central to any project of decolonization, which, without land rights, cannot be more than a metaphor.

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### **About the Author**

In 2017, Madison Mayhew graduated from Emily Carr University's Critical and Cultural Practice program with a minor in Social Practice and Community Engagement. Since then, she's spent time creating and delivering arts programming for elementary school students in East Vancouver, always contextualized in relation to contemporary pedagogical social practice artwork. She also self-publishes a zine project called *Horticultural Counterpowers*, a collection of art criticism and critical theory essays about how plant life figures, metaphorically and literally, within Marxist conceptions of urban space. She is currently working as 221A Artist-Run Centre's Admin Assistant and is an MA student at SFU's School for the Contemporary Arts.