

Temporal Brutalities: Memories of the Past, Present, and Future within the Works of Rebecca

Belmore

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Rebecca Belmore's *Fringe* (Figure 1) stands out for its subversion of typical figuration. Belmore's compositional framing and use of handiwork preserves an image of mutilated gore that is normally absent from portrait framings of a singular figure. Created in 2007, *Fringe* operates as a photograph depicting a partly-covered, reclining nude body as they turn their face away from the viewer, revealing a sutured scar running across the entire back. Red beadwork, mimicking the dripping blood flow of freshly mutilated skin, is sewn directly into the stapled and scabbed flesh (Figure 2). Linear streaks of beaded crimson blood evenly stream down, beginning to pool on the pristine white sheet towards the lower back, visually preserving this moment of horrific pain as a permanence of wounded gore. With *Fringe*, Belmore exemplifies her artistic interest in memorializing the violence done unto Indigenous bodies as well as disrupting the conventions — and temporalities — of artistic display. *Fringe* acts as one of many interventions made by Belmore to expose, define, and redirect the politics of display in crafting official (and national) memories, and the piece furthers her artistic project of questioning what it means to *remember*. Are memories something confined only to be in dialogue with the past, or can they be created in simultaneity with — or even anticipation of — the future? By examining *Fringe* within the context of her larger *oeuvre*, Belmore's works can be understood to capitalize upon their specific sites, mediums, and forms in order to simultaneously engage with paradigms of the past, present, and future.

Belmore places many of her works in direct dialogue with the past and its preservation, and other works created before *Fringe* reveal Belmore's interest in the site of the museum space as a vessel for official memories. Staged over five nonconsecutive days in late 2001/early 2002, *Wild* saw Belmore lay (apparently) naked, draped in a pelt of beaver and human hair, in a four-poster bed within The Grange (Figure 3), a Torontonian colonial home preserved as a

historic house museum by the Art Gallery of Ontario. It is clear that even before *Fringe*, Belmore imagined her art as a *disruption* of the established sanitized expectations of the museum space, jolting her viewers out of their museum-viewing daze when they encounter a living, breathing woman amidst centuries-old antiques. Belmore attributes this interest and lineage in disruptions to the museum space — and to the official memory it preserves — to the artistic interventions of many Indigenous artists over that past decade, especially to Payómokawichum performance artist James Luna.¹ In *The Artifact Piece* (Figure 4) staged in 1987, fifteen years before Belmore's intervention, Luna installed himself into an exhibition case, wearing only a loincloth, in the San Diego Museum of Man. In her exploration into artistic disruptions of continued histories/legacies of Canadian colonialism, Heather Jessup notes how Luna's performance deliberately presents his own body as an "artifact" in order to "mimic, disrupt, and question" the methods of the very exhibit he now inhabited - an exhibit on the "ways of life" of the Kumeyaay people, complete with mannequins and props to recreate scenes of Indigenous life.² Luna similarly presents his own Indigenous body in the (almost complete) nude, recalling both the objectifying gaze of ethnographic exhibits and their assignations of Indigeneity as symbols of a historical, non-concurrent past.

Belmore, following in the footsteps of Luna, problematizes the official narratives of the past preserved within each museum exhibit. Luna inserts himself as a living, current, and tangible Indigenous body against the plaques, dioramas, and wall text that relegates Indigeneity to a removed, extinct past. While Luna's interventions call attention to the fallacies and constraints of Indigenous (mis)representations within the museum space, Belmore emphasizes

¹ Heather Jessup. "Part Two: Unsettling Images Decolonizing Ethnographies in the Artworks of Brian Jungen, Jeff Wall, and Rebecca Belmore." Essay. In *This Is Not a Hoax: Unsettling Truth in Canadian Culture*, 69–118. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019, 111.

² Ibid., 113.

their very absence within the narrative told by The Grange. By disrupting these rooms' self-proclaimed function as portals into the colonial past with her present and modern body, she not only forces her viewer to wonder what stories of Indigenous interaction have been swept under the rugs of these historically staged rooms but also forces them to question how these narrative absences affect the lives of real, breathing Indigenous women like the one they see displayed before them. Jessup links these tendencies to question the historical memory preserved by museum spaces to the idea of the "reverse ethnography," coined by interdisciplinary artist Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña with their performances of *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*.³ By assuming the official site and form of the museum display, these artists turn the museum space into a reflexive critique, explicating the colonial gaze underwritten into each of the museum's interactions with — and avoidances of — Indigenous subjects.

Fringe is another example of how Belmore enters her works into the museum space only to subvert the histories preserved by the institution. Though it was originally displayed as a transparency in light box on a billboard in Montreal, the piece now hangs within the collections of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Like Luna's *The Artifact Piece*, Belmore's work assumes the forms and conventions of display previously sanctioned by the museum space. The composition of the nude reclining figure recalls countless images preserved within the official canonical space of the museum, such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque* or Velazquez's *La Venus del espejo*. While *mimicking* these compositions, Belmore notably subverts their form by denying the returned gaze of the depicted body. In fact, Belmore's composition refutes the nude's voyeuristic vulnerability by refusing to identify - or classify - her figure at all, constructing an unclassifiable image of androgyny. Belmore's figure offers no direct view of their chest, face, or genital area. This ambiguity is further enforced by the figure's hair, both long

³ Ibid., 78.

as it spills over the pillow and short as it cuts off below the model's ear while being both blonde and brunette. These changes and unclassifiable traits added by Belmore call attention to the instability of the museum space's mediums of historical preservation, scrutinizing any "truth" or accuracy captured by the canon's representations of Indigenous bodies. Belmore calls into question the museum's — and its sanctioned mediums' — very ability to preserve the memory and legacy of Indigenous actors.

By adopting the format of the photograph, Belmore's work assumes a heightened permanence within the museum space to correct its preserved memories with testimonies to the violence of erasure. In her genealogy of representational violence in the art of Indigenous feminist artists, Shari Huhndorf connects *Fringe's* refusal to meet the viewer's gaze - and subsequent *unidentifiability* - to these legacies of ignored violence: "This photograph... does not depict its referent. Rather, the body in Belmore's photograph stands in for women who disappeared, who were rendered invisible in life and in death, whose bodies can never be seen."⁴ Huhndorf also notes the ambiguity in the figure's identification in Belmore's subversion of the photograph's truth claims, writing,

The fact that this is a light-skinned and racially ambiguous body subverts the classificatory purpose of "type" photography. Rather than situating its Native subject in the past, the photograph is emphatically contemporary... By drawing together the genre of ethnographic photography with those of the nude and the forensic, the image in turn implicates ethnographic images in the violence of the gaze, the ways that spectatorship objectifies and dehumanizes racialized people.⁵

Huhndorf emphasizes that *Fringe* performs a similar transgression of temporality as *Wild* and *The Artifact Piece*, inserting a modern body into formats of display used to relegate Indigeneity to a removed past fully separate and asynchronous with the modern-day present. Belmore adopts

⁴ Shari Huhndorf. 2021. "Scenes from the Fringe: Gendered Violence and the Geographies of Indigenous Feminism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 46 (3): 561–87, 570–71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 573.

the ethnographic gaze of the photograph to reveal its representational inadequacy, disrupting this relegation to the past that allows the museum space to historicize and distance contemporary Indigenous claims, both political and territorial.⁶ Belmore utilizes *Fringe*'s medium in order to place it in dialogue with these paradigms of past representations of Indigeneity, invoking their objectifying gaze and fallacies as she attempts to scrutinize both presences and absences of Indigeneity within official memory.

Fringe's dual sites of the billboard and museum also allow the piece to directly respond to the present, contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Before being acquired by the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the photograph was staged on a billboard in downtown Montreal (Figure 5), assuming the transparency in lightbox format of countless commercial advertisements. By adopting the visibility implicated in the form of the billboard, Belmore's piece also adopts an "evidential force" in "representing Indigenous women who had been rendered invisible in life as well as in death," forcing viewers to confront the history of violence against Indigenous women in the construction of the current city/country — and its public space — that they inhabit.⁷ In fact, Belmore's composition, among many of her other pieces, was an attempt to specifically memorialize the Indigenous lives taken by the serial killer Robert Pickton, who is estimated to have abducted and killed 49 Indigenous women living in Vancouver's Downtown East Side over the span of a decade. He was finally arrested in 2002 and convicted in 2007, but his brutality and the violent inaction of the Canadian state/public left permanent scars on Indigenous communities across the country. Julia Emberely traces how the trial impacted Belmore's work, emphasizing Belmore's frustration with the media's objectification of these lost lives: "The media dismemberment of the murdered women and Pickton's dismembering of the

⁶ Ibid., 571.

⁷ Ibid., 570.

women's bodies are structurally similar in their treatment of the women as human wastage."⁸

Huhndorf notes how *Fringe*'s use of the billboard format implies a critique of the mass-media apparatuses that sensationalized the trial and killings, "presenting Aboriginal pain and death as a spectacle for public consumption." Because many of Pickton's victims were low-income, sex workers, and/or drug addicts, they were all able to be labeled as disposable by the state because of these associations. The billboard advertising the reclining nude only overpronounces "the hypervisibility of the sexualized Indigenous body," to further problematize the mass media's colonial confluences of Indigenous bodies and prostitution.⁹

This record of stereotypes and confluences assigned to the Indigenous body allows Belmore's piece to assume the ethnographic function of recording the *current, present* relation between the Canadian state and its Indigenous subjects while simultaneously reclaiming its site through its memorialization. Belmore's piece makes permanent the absence of the lives of these women murdered by Pickton, re-inserting a declarative testimony to the Indigenous lives taken in the construction of modern urban space. Belmore's intervention memorializes and makes visible the current conditions of Canada's relationship to Indigeneity, where Indigenous women are three times more likely to experience violence and *six* times more likely to be murdered than non-Indigenous women.¹⁰ Huhndorf notes that the billboard's location placed *Fringe* above the Montreal location of the Grand Council of the Crees, also helping to (re)define "the city as a place where Native people reside and assert political claims, thus undermining antinomies between the city and the reserve as Native space," centering "gendered violence in struggles over land and sovereignty."¹¹ The occupation of public space by (the image of) an Indigenous body

⁸ Emberley, Julia. 2014. "On Not Being an Object of Violence: The Pickton Trial and Rebecca Belmore's *Vigil*." In *The Testimonial Uncanny: Indigenous Storytelling, Knowledge, and Reparative Practices*, 133–55. Albany: SUNY Press, 143.

⁹ Huhndorf, "Scenes from the Fringe," 571.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 563.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 570.

“resists” the very means of “subordination and removals of Indigenous people” that define current urban geographies.¹² Belmore’s utilization of *Fringe* as an advertising billboard allows her piece to both speak to, and counteract, an absence of Canadian recognition of the colonial violence that continually haunts and renegotiates the urban public space of the country.

But *Fringe* and its permanent medium of photography is not the only way in which Belmore has disrupted, redefined, and reclaimed public space. *Vigil*, performed four months after Pickton’s arrest, uses Belmore’s own body as a synecdoche to memorialize the disappeared women on the very same streets where they were abducted. She begins in a tank top and jeans, scrubbing and washing the street corner below her (Figure 6). She then dons a red dress that she hammers into a telephone pole, subsequently screaming in rage and agony as she tears the dress (and herself) free from the constraint of the nails (Figure 7). Her arms are covered in the names of the women killed by Pickton, and she shouts each name into the silence, painfully dragging a thorny rose through her clenched teeth. The performance ends with her re-enacting the very scenes of his victim’s abductions, walking over to a black pick-up truck and driving away with the unidentified rider as *This is a Man’s World* by James Brown plays. In her analysis of *Vigil*, Maggie Tate emphasizes Belmore’s reclamation of these urban sites of abduction as

space where people live... the silences between the names also make empty spaces, which become haunted by the unknown names of the unnamed, disappeared women who no longer walk the streets but whose names are lost to memory, bodies that have turned up that have yet to be identified.¹³

Vigil begins to reclaim this urban space — overlooked and labeled delinquent by the state and its press — for the memories of these lives and stories ended by multiple forms of colonial violence. The thorough scrubbing of the sidewalk is Belmore emphasizing her engagement with the site as

¹² Ibid., 574.

¹³ Maggie Tate. 2015. “Re-Presenting Invisibility: Ghostly Aesthetics in Rebecca Belmore’s *Vigil* and *The Named and the Unnamed*.” *Visual Studies* 30 (1): 20–31, 26–27.

a “temporary, partial and symbolic removal of the residue of wasting that signals the uninhabitable ground that is Downtown East Side Vancouver,” directly challenging the neighborhood’s association with criminal unproductivity through her own manual labor.¹⁴ The space is now reclaimed as a site for remembering — rather than forgetting or obscuring — these legacies of violence. Huhndorf argues that the performance “subverts the dynamics of colonial spectatorship” by connecting Indigenous and non-Indigenous bodies in the performance space, outside the inherent power hierarchies of museum viewing.¹⁵ Within Belmore’s reclaimed space, she is able to reconstruct and reimagine the very terms for memorialization that limited her work within the museum space. Like *Fringe*, *Vigil* capitalizes upon its site outside of the museum space to affirm a testimonial intervention into the present state of violence faced by Indigenous people, only this time through an ephemerality that emphasizes this violence’s immediacy and currency.

This ephemerality of performance as Belmore’s chosen medium for *Vigil* is what allows Belmore to forcibly locate colonial violence as a condition of the present, occurring every day across the nation and the world at large. Tate argues that static visual representations, like photography, fix stereotypes as static conditions of the past:

Pictures of [Indigenous] women froze them in time and removed them from an ongoing colonial geography... What [Belmore] offers her viewers is an experience of a loss kept in the present, a history kept alive. By not representing the women as image, she maintains their absence. She maintains their disappearance as a present condition.¹⁶

Paralleling Luna’s *The Artifact Piece* and her own *Wild*, Belmore uses the immediacy of her own Indigenous body to create an ephemeral tangibility that can’t be captured by any photograph or art object. She brings her viewers into the historically charged space of Vancouver’s Downtown

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵ Huhndorf, “Scenes from the Fringe,” 575.

¹⁶ Tate, “Re-Presenting Invisibility,” 29.

Eastside to connect them to these numerous hidden histories of abduction, all while making the violence and force enacted upon these women present and real to her audience. Tate stresses that performance is enacted “through disappearance,” articulating the artwork’s own impermanence as a reflection of the irreplaceability of the Indigenous lives taken by violence: “Even if it is recorded, the experience of being there can never be captured.”¹⁷ Utilizing the medium of performance allows Belmore to further communicate the dangers and inaccuracies of static representation, emphasizing the forever-lost uniqueness of these lives recorded, but never truly captured. The medium-enforced passivity of *Fringe* as it traps its body to a static inactivity behind the frame is completely lost as Belmore turns from photography to live performance to enact her memorials. Foregrounding ephemerality and tangible pain allows Belmore to use *Vigil* to directly challenge the Canadian public’s present-day avoidance to recognizing, and truthfully memorializing, the Indigenous lives lost to the brutalities of colonial violence.

Vigil then turns towards the future in an attempt to shape it, imparting a responsibility upon its viewers as they become *witnesses* to the scene of abduction that Belmore recreates at the end of her performance. Huhndorf notes the multiple meanings of the word “vigil” that can be traced to the distinct temporalities addressed by Belmore’s performance: “The performance is at once an act of mourning and commemoration, a protest against social injustice, and a call for watchfulness to guard against future harm.”¹⁸ While the performance both memorializes histories of Indigenous suffering and registers this continual, “ongoing vulnerability of indigenous women who continue to disappear,” it does not “present ongoing violence as inevitable. By positioning audience members as witnesses, *Vigil* also calls upon them to act.”¹⁹ This act of safeguarding against *future* harm can be understood to be facilitated by this call to action that Belmore imparts

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸ Huhndorf, “Scenes from the Fringe,” 575.

¹⁹ Ibid., 578.

with her final actions in *Vigil* as she drives away with the mysterious figure in the pickup truck. Emberley notes how her use of a live audience and their participation further instills this responsibility. By asking one audience member to help her light candles placed on the sidewalk, and crossing the threshold into the performance space, she implicates them all as part of this performance and memory.²⁰ They are forced to reconcile their own complicity in state-facilitated violence, hopefully reaching an empathetic understanding that galvanizes them to protect and care for the Indigenous lives still around them before it is too late. Recreating the sounds and visceral reactions of embodied violence allows Belmore to communicate the severity of the losses of life that haunt these city streets, hopefully both educating and galvanizing her non-Indigenous audience. Creating an aware responsibility in one such mechanism that Belmore implores to influence the future of Indigeneity in Canada with her works.

But her works also seek to address the immediate future of its Indigenous audience as well, emphasizing a vision of healing for both individuals and entire communities. *State of Grace* (Figure 8) recalls the same material forms and composition as *Fringe* to offer a testimony of Indigenous resilience and survival. Similarly to *Fringe*, *State of Grace* presents an image of a reclined nude body draped in white sheets. However, this time, the figure's body is entirely covered from the neckline down, and the entire face is captured by the camera's lens. While the model's pose mimics that of Belmore in *Wild*, the refusal of gaze through closed eyes parallels *Fringe*'s similar rebuttal. The composition has been cut into vertical slits that both fragment and maintain the overall image. While the image has faced the violence of a slashing that threatens to obscure and obliterate this individual likeness, Belmore's figure retains its compositional clarity and focus. In an interview with Wanda Nanibush for *Aperture*, Belmore emphasizes a reading of healing and recuperation in this piece: "Perhaps the woman is recuperating from an illness or

²⁰ Emberley, "On Not Being an Object of Violence," 154.

simply dreaming.”²¹ Belmore is not content with only memorializing conditions of labor and violent oppression enacted unto Indigenous bodies; Instead, she hopes to also use her art to create spaces for healing and *rest*, offering a state of relaxed inactivity that is never granted by the colonial state.

State of Grace offers a model for reparative healing to its audience, and this same mode can be understood to emerge from the scabbed scar that runs across *Fringe*’s figure. Belmore herself notes the “connection” between *Fringe* and *State of Grace* as they visually and symbolically “haunt one another.”²² The fact that the model’s bloodshed is documented through the artificial ornamentation of the red beadwork sewn into the scar emphasizes the aesthetic value Belmore attaches to this sign of bodily regeneration. In the description for *Fringe* on her website, Belmore writes that

Some people interpret the image of this reclining figure as a cadaver. However, to me it is a wound that is on the mend. It wasn’t self-inflicted, but nonetheless, it is bearable. She can sustain it. So it is a very simple scenario: she will get up and go on, but she will carry that mark with her. She will turn her back on the atrocities inflicted upon her body and find resilience in the future.²³

Belmore could have used her prosthetics and beadwork to create an open wound that more vividly and accurately mimics the actual wounds inflicted upon Indigenous bodies, but she instead chooses to present this wound as miraculously healed upon impact. While the model must *carry that mark* into the future, Belmore emphasizes — and celebrates — the fact that her figure even has a future to move toward. The figure’s refusal of gaze makes literal this *turning her back* upon the past atrocities and brutalities that both physically and metaphorically scar Indigenous peoples across the nation. Belmore further reiterates this projection of moving

²¹ Wanda Nanibush. 2020. “In Performances and Photography, Rebecca Belmore Faces the Monumental.” *Aperture*. October 15, 2020.

²² Ibid.

²³ Rebecca Belmore. n.d. “Fringe.” Rebecca Belmore.

forward through resilience in an interview with Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh: “It's really about being able to carry the scar and still move forward and have a good life... I'm hoping that it is a positive thing. How you see it depends on who you are because it is brutal but it's also beautiful”²⁴ This is why Belmore chooses to ornament this scar with the finely crafted - even *beautiful* - beadwork that memorializes its act of violence. The brutalities of the past are not strictly relegated or abandoned to historical memory, instead imagined as something carried into the future as a reminder of one's own strength and as a source of pride in resilience.

Belmore's specific combinations of site, medium, and form allow her work to simultaneously address and influence readings of three distinct temporalities: the historicized past, ongoing present, and approaching future. Her utilization of the museum space in pieces like *Wild* and *Fringe* allows Belmore to both problematize and course-correct the official narratives of memory preserved by institutions like The Grange or the Minneapolis Institute of Art, challenging their constructions of Indigeneity as something belonging only to a distant, removed past. Her respective use of live performance and photography allows each piece to enact a separate, but equally important, intervention into the expectations of art viewing established by the gallery space. Belmore capitalizes upon the inherent truth claims of photography to both emphasize an Indigenous presence in the face of erasure as well as question this testimonial quality of the medium as a historical document, explicating its inability to accurately classify. By placing *Fringe* and enacting *Vigil* within urban public space, Belmore shows how artistic interventions outside the museum space can speak to an immediacy of the problems and conditions they memorialize. By connecting the instability/precariousness of Indigenous livelihoods to ephemeral installations, she reminds her audience of the daily violence that

²⁴ Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh. 2019. "Primal Work: An Interview with Rebecca Belmore." *Border Crossings*, Jun, 24-35, 29.

continues to brutalize and entirely erase Indigenous peoples. Finally, her works also anticipate a future that can be actively molded and influenced by artistic effort. She directly addresses and galvanizes both her Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience, as she respectively imparts a responsibility and call to heal and protect. The histories of colonial violence captured by Belmore's work can not be unwritten or forgotten, and each piece further emphasizes that these histories are not just relegated to an exhibitory past, instead being far from over as they punctuate the present. Each artistic action and form that Belmore adopts allows her to collapse Western distinctions between past, present, and future to affect a healing change through the active, continual process of remembering.



Figure 1. Rebecca Belmore, *Fringe*, 2007, Transparency in light box, 96.25 x 32.75 x 6.5 in, Minneapolis Institute of Art.



Figure 2. Detail: Rebecca Belmore, *Fringe*, 2007.



Figure 3. Rebecca Belmore, *Fringe*, 2001, Installation/Performance, The Grange, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON.



Figure 4. James Luna, *The Artifact Piece*, 1987, Installation/Performance. San Diego Museum of Man.



Figure 5. Rebecca Belmore, *Fringe*, 2007, Transparency in light box, 96.25 x 32.75 x 6.5 in,
Billboard, Plan Large, Quartier Éphémère, Montreal.



Figure 6. Rebecca Belmore, *Vigil*, 2002, Performance, Talking Stick Festival, Full Circle: First Nations Performance, Vancouver.



Figure 7. Rebecca Belmore, *Vigil*, 2002, Performance, Talking Stick Festival, Full Circle: First Nations Performance, Vancouver.



Figure 7. Rebecca Belmore, *State of Grace*, 2002, Photograph, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver.

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