

# **Indigenous Blood Memory and Abstraction in the work of Anishinaabe Artist Rebecca Belmore<sup>1</sup>**

## **Memória de sangue indígena e abstração na obra da artista anishinaabe Rebecca Belmore**

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**Abstract:** Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore responds to globalization through artistic methods that include longstanding Indigenous traditions and conceptual frameworks. In this article I focus on the entwined aesthetics of abstraction and blood memory in her works. Generally, cultural studies scholars have considered globalization through patterns of abstraction, or making-autonomous elements previously embedded in a specific context. These thinkers emphasize processes of innovation and change as fundamental tenets of abstraction, culturally and aesthetically. Eschewing this framework, Belmore's framings of abstraction center Indigenous knowledge –what I am calling blood memory (MITHLO, 2011; BENESIINAABANDAN, 2013; LINKLATER, 2013)—in order to uncover the aesthetic foundations of modern abstraction in Indigenous thought. Abstraction has been a continuous and principal element of Indigenous aesthetics in North America for many thousands of years (PHILLIPS and BERLO, 1998).

**Keywords:** Anishinaabe; blood memory; abstraction; globalization; contemporary art

**Resumo:** A artista Anishinaabe Rebecca Belmore responde à globalização por meio de métodos artísticos. Neste artigo vou me concentrar na estética entrelaçada de abstração e memória de sangue em seus trabalhos. Geralmente, os estudos culturais têm considerado a globalização por meio de padrões de abstração, ou elementos de tomada autônomos, infiltrados em um contexto específico. Esses pensadores enfatizam os processos

de inovação e mudança como princípios fundamentais da abstração, cultural e esteticamente. Abstendo-se deste contexto, os conceitos de Belmore sobre abstração dão centralidade ao conhecimento indígena – o que eu estou chamando de memória sangrenta (MITHLO, 2011; BENESIINAABANDAN, 2013; LINKLATER, 2013), a fim de descobrir os fundamentos estéticos da abstração moderna no pensamento indígena.

**Palavras-chave:** Anishinaabe; memória de sangue; abstração; globalização; arte contemporânea

Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore responds to globalization through artistic methods that include longstanding Indigenous traditions and conceptual frameworks. In this article I focus on the entwined aesthetics of abstraction and blood memory in her works. Generally, cultural studies scholars have considered globalization through patterns of abstraction, as in the de-territorialization of the imagination and social life (APPADURAI, 1996) and new patterns of production and consumption in economic, cultural, and technological realms (CANCLINI, 2001), making-autonomous, or separating, elements previously embedded in a specific context. Eschewing this framework, Belmore's framings of abstraction center Indigenous knowledge – what I am calling blood memory (MITHLO, 2011; BENESIINAABANDAN, 2013; LINKLATER, 2013)—in order to uncover the aesthetic foundations of modern abstraction in Indigenous thought. Abstraction has been a continuous and principal element of Indigenous aesthetics in North America for many thousands of years (PHILLIPS and BERLO, 1998). Indeed, these practices continue to unfold in contemporary Indigenous aesthetics in ways that exceed my discussion. These Indigenous foundations, through global colonization, have been and continue to be appropriated and mobilized by settlers (including settler artists), serving liberal and capitalist aims in both artistic and conceptual accounts of modernity. Despite its hegemonic framing, contemporary abstraction is not the sole provenance or impetus of Euro-American modernists and the logic of global capitalism. As Belmore's works enunciate Indigenous contexts on a global scale, she reclaims abstraction through a lens that bears forth the embodied knowledge of contemporary Indigenous peoples, highlighting continuity through abstraction within and across Indigenous traditions and memories.

Belmore practices abstraction as an aesthetic form of relating,

through the concept and practice of blood memory, in three distinct and overlapping historical trajectories. Firstly, she treats economics, assessing notions of economy that endure within Indigenous experiences of globalization. Secondly, she frames Indigenous aesthetics in terms of abstraction within her contemporary Anishinaabe practice. As an artist, she knows that the foundations of abstraction on this continent come through fundamentally different ontological realities from those of settler colonization. Belmore asserts the continuity of Indigenous abstraction, using Anishinaabe worldviews to lay bare or expose conceptual and material violences meted out by Euro-American histories and traditions. Thirdly, and perhaps unexpectedly, her works express and frame embodiment in translocal human relationships through practices of abstraction. Belmore's exhibitions *The Indian Factory* (2001), *Blood in the Snow* (2001), and *Fountain* (2005) articulate, through performance, installation, and new media means, an aesthetic texture that interprets Anishinaabe practices to make global connections to the histories shaping her contemporary conjuncture. These works rely on Indigenous "blood memory," which, for my purposes, is synonymous with the concept of blood history.

In the context of Manitoba, Canada, Cree elder D'Arcy Linklater, from Fox Lake Cree nation, has described blood history as traditional knowledge that needs to be considered within situations of relationship. Below he speaks to the concept during a hearing concerning resource development in Manitoba "...the Creator gave us blood history, through those customary laws and customary law principles that we get reminded, we never lose anything because of our blood history, and it is always there. And we must use what was given to us and apply it to things that make our lives difficult. And that is the purpose of that, why we are here, try and understand the art of listening and also the art of understanding [...] So it is important to try and understand our people and our laws...who we are and where we come from" (LINKLATER, 2013, p. 6339). Both blood memory and history are central to "the art of listening and understanding," as Elder Linklater describes, in both Indigenous and cross-cultural relationships that include resource hearings and art exhibits. Similarly, Chiricahua Apache scholar Nancy Marie Mithlo writes, "The iconic placeholder of "the blood" as an organizing principle is ...a productive means of articulating the interior renderings of an indigenous aesthetic and recognizing the essential saliences of communal place-based logics and current political realities" (MITHLO, 2013, p.104). Mithlo makes this argument in the context of

Indigenous art history, wherein she argues settler frameworks distort or confuse the significance of Indigenous arts.

In the frameworks set by settler scholars, many cultural theorists understand abstraction, or the making-autonomous of elements previously embedded in a specific context, to be the hallmark and underlying condition of modernity and globalization. For the most part, its expression in the arts has been discussed in terms of this historical trajectory, where abstraction “makes it new.” However, against this sense of abstraction or what Lawrence Grossberg calls “disembedding,” (2010) as with resource development processes (where corporations and governments go about abstracting value from an ecosystem), abstraction has been part of Indigenous practice in North America for millennia. Indigenous artists’ understandings of the contemporary function of abstraction are, in my view, foundational to visioning globalization and modernity. North American settlers have, of course, been attempting to theorize these contexts on their own for some time. But Indigenous visions of and through abstraction are not peripheral to this larger context. Rather I argue that they should be centered, due to the knowledge that Indigenous peoples hold in understanding the processes of globalization and their accompanying aesthetics. I read Belmore’s works to suggest that this intellectual provenance is a facet of blood memory, which she conveys through abstract forms in global contexts. In this she stages a genealogy of what Cree Elder Linklater describes as blood history, in which abstraction, and its correlating terms, autonomy, are understood within Indigenous framings.

Belmore’s work conveys decolonized understandings of abstraction and autonomy through Indigenous aesthetic genealogies. The latter term, autonomy, can be understood in a number of ways: in Euro-American terms, the roots *auto* and *nomos* (self/law) refers to the right of individuals (firstly propertied males in Europe) to make decisions that shape their own lives –regardless of relationships or context. This notion of autonomy is based on the idea of separation from context: as Blaser, Coleman, De Costa, and McGregor write, “to speak about the environment in the way we do today is to presume to act autonomously upon that environment (6).” This notion of abstraction as autonomy, or separation, is a settler concept, one that supports colonization as the right of autonomous individuals to act progressively upon their environment, and it is very different from abstraction as an expression of relationship and continuity for Indigenous peoples. In the latter version of abstraction, the Indigenous self starts from

the outside, a relational world in which, and only because of which, the self exists (Osca, 2010). As Blaser, Coleman, De Costa, and McGregor note, this is fundamentally unlike the inside-to-outside (autonomous) Cartesian model of Euro-American individualism (2010). On the one hand, then, Belmore uses forms of abstraction to critique concepts and contexts embedded in the relational realities of Indigenous communities today: those that inhere in exploitative resource development projects; the semantic logics of global capitalism; political violence; and the genocidal erasure of Indigenous histories on this continent, creating historically specific visibilities. On the other, drawing upon Indigenous understandings of abstraction, she conveys Indigenous relational ontology in sophisticated aesthetic visions through the tropes of blood memory across varying and interconnected terrains.

My article is separated into four sections. Firstly, I discuss abstraction through Euro-American genealogies, histories of abstraction under capitalist modernity, as they are centered within a dominant (settler) tradition of historiography and cultural studies. I look at how these play out in Art Historical framings both in North America and globally. Secondly, I advance Indigenous abstraction in aesthetic and economic terms, centering the abstract concept of blood memory as a way of relating, across both figurative and literal domains. This reorientation centers Indigenous priorities and methods. Third, interweaved through the above, I discuss Belmore's works and their intersection with geopolitical aesthetic domains.

The concept and practice of abstraction connotes dominant explanatory frameworks centering Euro-modernity, disseminated by media, universities, and what one might call a general societal common sense. Abstraction in relation to economics and art is understood in a number of Euro-centric terms that need to be decolonized. Firstly, hegemonic descriptions of modern Euro-American art history elide the millennia-old Indigenous forms from which artists such as Jackson Pollock took their inspiration and iconic style<sup>3</sup>. The prevailing notion of the individual genius modernist (male) artist belies the collective Indigenous contexts through which the stunning formal qualities of these painters derived. This movement, taking an aesthetic wildly out of context, is very much in line with the capitalist ethos dominating the societies of these painters, supposedly repudiated through their art. I use the word theft to describe this move for at least two reasons. Firstly, the discourse surrounding modernist artists in North America, disseminated through institutions such as the

Guggenheim, does not cite Native American art as inspiration –the source of the aesthetic is erased. Instead, these discourses centre the individual genius of the lone artist, within the context of Euro-American history that, for the most part, blithely ignores the global context in which is unfolded. This is a conceptual violence because these aesthetic forms derive from Indigenous ideas and practices of collectivity, not liberal individualism (expressed through framings and abstracted forms of modernist art). Secondly, to follow through with this example, in a context of extreme economic marginalization for Native American communities, it is the Guggenheim, and not the Navajo, who profit from the Navajo’s appropriated aesthetic. This is profoundly similar to the processes of appropriation of Indigenous land and ecological resources. This perspective immediately opens up another element of modernist abstraction that places it within an Indigenized comparative view –one where abstraction, understood as autonomy, entails theft.

In the same vein, both aesthetic and conceptual abstraction has been understood in the 20-21<sup>st</sup> centuries as resulting from capitalism, culminating in finance capital that inheres globally today, meting out some of its most vicious consequences in the lives of Indigenous peoples worldwide. This economic context melds with aesthetic domains, wherein modernist abstract art has been seen as an expression of autonomy from the capitalist system of semantic and material instrumentality. Where Western citizens have had their lives increasingly governed by means end rationality, supposedly leaving little room for imagination or freedom, abstract art is understood as a “useless” utopian site, ungoverned by the instrumental logic that settler artists sought to critique. Contrarily, Indigenous artists see claims of settler art history as situated, insisting on their own epistemic priority via experiences of capitalist Euro-American systems of abstraction –aesthetic, conceptual and material.

The North American Cultural Studies philosopher Fredric Jameson is best known for wedding aesthetic and capitalist modes of abstraction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His reflections have been constrained to settler art. Still, he has advanced “modernism” and “postmodernism” as cultural dominants in modernity in which “abstraction” is a dominant figure. Jameson describes modernism in terms of artists’ goals to exceed traditional Western categories of art: “[modernism] is an art that . . . seeks to transcend itself as art” (JAMESON, 1998, p.101). Jameson argues that modernist abstraction, in its production, circulation, and expression, was consonant with the “the

new social forms of abstraction peculiar to capitalism” (MOOERS, 2001, n.p.). Jameson tracked how the money-form abstracted concrete forms of life. Particularly, under production capitalism, human labor was understood according to abstract, as opposed to concrete, value. Herein, social abstraction proliferates under the universal money-form, which figures as equivalent to various human and social activity. This capitalist logic is reflected in forms of human society based on a globalizing imperative, as in the UN declaration of abstract universal rights. As Mooers writes, “Jameson’s point is that abstraction also became the dominant “way of seeing” and representing the world aesthetically” (MOOERS, 2001, n.p.). This abstraction also applied to cognition and affect, centering instrumental rationality, and isolating means-end economic activity as the human value. The supposedly “concrete” or “material” aspects of life became stigmatized and imaginatively relegated to those who were barred from participating in the capitalist economy as agents –women, colonized peoples, and laborers. Their association with the “base” or “concrete” or “natural” then justified this exclusion. Supposedly “rebellious” abstract art, expressing utopian urges for non-representational, non-instrumental forms, –presents as an “outside” of the systems of circulation (note the blood metaphor) through which capitalist ontology flowed. However, Jameson suggests, this art is also the apotheosis of the abstraction undergirding the capitalist regime it supposedly opposed.

In this vein, Jameson argued, postmodern aesthetics followed modernist forms, beginning after World War 2 (1945) with consumer capitalism in the West, as the product of intensifying forces of reification, where objects in capitalist social relations appeared to naturally embody their accrued value contingent on their circulation in the system. So, then, capitalist abstraction consolidated globally as a universal from the perspective of these dominant cultures. Jameson writes, postmodernity “makes the cultural economic at the same time that it turns the economic into so many forms of culture,” making abstract economic rationality dominant within our hearts so to speak (JAMESON, 1998, p.86). Enter the dominance of finance capital, which appears to generate value from its own operations –a totally abstract process. At the level of culture, this has produced a “new ontological and free-floating state” (JAMESON, 1998, p.161). In modernism, concepts and materials were “unmoored” or made autonomous from their previously social embeddedness. Postmodern culture, then, reflects “a new cultural realm or dimension



which is independent of the former real world” (JAMESON, 1998, p.161). This version of abstraction, where disembeddedness dominates in terms of economics and aesthetics is one that allows for the radical forces of neoliberal capitalism to reign on earth. When all resources are conceptually and materially disembedded from the ecosystems in which they exist, when aesthetic forms that have developed over millennia are sold on T-Shirts at Urban Outfitters, having been assembled by workers whose labor value is totally decontextualized from their subsistence needs, abstraction understood as “disembeddedness” or “autonomy” thrives. These forms of free-floating abstraction serve the aims of a rapacious Empire, which means to persist in monetizing, or abstracting, the ends of the Earth to the extinction of humans and innumerable other species on the planet. These abstractions are anathema to Belmore’s aesthetic visions that I discuss in this article.

Here, though, aesthetics is resolutely settler colonial. Western capitalist abstract aesthetics, based on autonomy and self-reflexivity, center the aims and experiences of the Western subject. As Cherokee scholar Andrea Smith writes in her essay, “Unsettling the Privilege of Self-Reflexivity,” “the human is already a racial project, one that aspires to universality [which is itself] a project that can only exist over and against the particularity of the “other” (SMITH, 2014, p.265). Here the form of the abstract universal –formally enunciated as money, utopia, or humanity itself—affirms totalizing globalization. Self-reflexivity in abstract art (it references itself, and not an object “in the real world”) affirms and empowers Western forms of subjectivity. As Rey Chow writes, self-reflexivity in practice “was long ago established by Hegel as the distinguishing trait of Western Man, his capacity to be aware of himself” (CHOW, 2013, p.243). This transcendent overcoming of capitalist circulatory systems through autonomous mastery of the self, imputed to the art object, ironically safeguards the Western subject as agential over and against others –people, places, and things whom he can effect, and who can be affected by him –but from whom he is autonomous. This consciousness aligns with the abstraction of capital –resonating with the “inalienability” of universal rights discourse.

Settler aesthetics in the Americas advance a related form of autonomy in the other modernist imperative, to “make it new,” resonating with capitalist globalization while at the same time opposing Indigeneity. In a recent interview with Jian Ghomeshi on CBC Radio, Ghomeshi’s asked



Belmore, as an artist, “Do you feel like a pioneer?” She retorted: “No. No I don’t feel like a pioneer. I’m an Indian!!” This exchange highlights a tension across settler and Indigenous communities. Settlers value aesthetic newness, “innovation,” “progress,” and “autonomy” because it supports their history and economics, where they are centered as rightful inheritors of Indigenous lands. Indigenous artists, and communities, often value continuity and tradition for exactly opposing reasons. Indigenous artworks such as Belmore’s do not valorize art that is “self-reflexive” or “non-instrumental” –occupying a supposed “outside” to the settler “inside” of the capitalist system. Nor do they celebrate the free-for-all of postmodern aesthetic values. Belmore challenges framings of abstraction reflecting these processes of circulation. As Grossberg writes, “we must never forget that abstractions and concepts are themselves always contextual, and have their own material conditions of possibility” (GROSSBERG, 2006, p. 6). Belmore deploys abstraction to provide a context for understanding both the material conditions of her art and the Indigenous concepts, including blood memory and history, that she centers in her works.

Many perspectives on blood in politics center a limited history, focusing on European peoples, ontologies, and how these have bled out to infect and irrigate other locales, erupting in hemorrhages of violence. Within this Western configuration, blood is a taboo or atavistic subject. Blood memory, or group identity through blood relations, connotes Nazi genocide, or wars of auto-extirpation in Africa. This understanding of blood and politics secures a genealogy, an animate orientation in space and time, excluding other ways of framing blood such as those presented in the works of Indigenous artists. It is fashionable today to advance a “universal” vision of humanity, centering Euro-Americans abstractions expressed in the discourse of human rights. Against this logic, Gil Anidjar writes, “Western political concepts, such as nation and emancipation, kinship and race, law and capital, sovereign and citizen, property, inheritance, and freedom, all are connected by blood” (ANIDJAR, 2011, n.p.). For Anidjar, blood has figured as the only possible ground for community in the West. He cites Henry James Summer Maine, who writes “the history of [Western!] political ideas begins, in fact, with the assumption that kinship in blood is the sole possible ground of community in political functions” (SUMMER MAINE, 2008, p.99). It is fascinating to note, with Anidjar, that contemporary thinkers committed to dismantling the structures of Western modernity, such as Donna Haraway, would

like to eschew blood. Haraway writes, “I am sick to death of bonding through kinship and ‘the family...ties through blood have been bloody enough already” (HARAWAY, 1997, p.265). Haraway wants to dismantle the Western system of blood affiliation as it contributes to class, race, and gender oppression. Similarly, Indigenous curator Richard Hill sees Western notions of blood as a foundation for continuing oppression, and is aghast by Indigenous artists advancing the concept of blood memory. For Hill, anything aligning Indigenous worldviews with racism, and its supposed Nazi apotheosis, is an internalized colonial idea to be rejected. Hill suggests that blood memory is not a philosophical concept inherent to Native worldviews. Similarly, postcolonial intellectual Pheng Cheah disavows blood: “the decolonizing nation is not an archaic throwback to traditional forms of community based on the blind ties of blood and kinship” (CHEAH, 1999, p.197). I disagree with Hill and Cheah’s emphasis on the “archaic” and “racist” valences of blood in decolonial contexts, aligning myself with Native artists who elaborate the imperial nature of Western blood to distinguish it from Anishinaabe blood cosmologies.

Belmore’s art, deploying blood, critiques Western understandings of circulation in imperial modernity. Many contemporary philosophers articulate similar projects, but they make different periodizing gestures –constructing their own genealogical visibilities. Ann Stoler especially emphasizes the concept of circulation. Unlike Anidjar, who advances the Christian community of blood, accounting for laws regulating kinship, citizenship, ownership, and international law, Stoler looks at how right and property, based on blood, coagulated in colonialism. Philosopher Michel Foucault, in his work *History of Sexuality*, describes the ways that blood founds intersectional oppressions constituting liberal modernity. Unlike European feudal societies, ruled by blood in terms of both aristocratic inheritance (bloodline) and the threat of its shedding, modern jurisprudence focuses on the vitality of the social body and the race. Blood justifies an imperial apparatus where the social body was subject to the same control as the body of the “individual.” No longer about the aristocratic bloodline, from the French revolution onwards the shared blood of the Aryan, the Christian, claims supremacy. Here blood is imbricated with the “universal” claims of Christianity and capital –understood against the particularity of “others” (SMITH, 2013, p.266). In this schema, Indigenous blood identity makes Indigenous peoples “other” to the “universal” human figured above. As an Anishinaabe artist Belmore queries this notion of the human

by positing Indigenous schemas in her works.

Belmore approaches “blood memory” through video, performance, computation, and painting, weaving Indigenous temporality in a translocal space. She works in many cities around the world, situated within a geographic and cultural system emphasizing Native blood genealogy. According to Mithlo, in line with Elder Linklater, Indigenous blood relationships:

reference not only the common understanding of what is considered biological heritage or race but also, in an expanded sense, the internalized memories of communal history, knowledge, and wisdom....This common tribal value of multigenerational remembrance runs directly counter to prevailing Western traits of individual achievement, lack of transgenerational memory, and transcendence of one’s genealogical fate and place of origin [abstract universalism]. (MITHLO, 2011, p. 106)

For Mithlo, using blood memory as a “qualitative approach to contemporary Native arts criticism,” by attending to 1) the body, 2) belonging and 3) group memory in relation to place “has merit due to its centrality in the scope of indigenous collective thought and political realities” (MITHLO, 2011, p.106). She also argues that when Indigenous understandings of blood memory, both material and conceptual, are denied by settler academics, Indigenous knowledges are placed under erasure. While corporeality has been a focus of studies centering the body in theories of art reception, Mithlo calls for a distinctly Indigenous corporeal aesthetic. Belmore has been developing one for years.

Belmore’s staging of blood memorializes many events for different Indigenous nations in specific historical moments. Repeating themes, gestural, material, visual, and historical, Belmore treats the translocality of Indigenous experience in North America, as she has put it, making visible what is invisible. Her method might be called “a political ontology of form” (ZIEDLER, n.d., n.p.). Works of art by Belmore, working with abstractions of blood memory, propose visibilities for Indigenous worlds, for who “inhabits such worlds, and for the psychological, political, and phenomenological relations in which they engage within them” (ZIEDLER, n.d., n.p.). Belmore’s project stages Indigenous abstraction in multiple

spaces across cities and continents and centers blood memory as a form of literacy in the civic archive.

Belmore's works highlight industrial landscapes in which she figures her own body. Paradoxically, her work's enunciation of corporeality is a kind of abstraction of Indigenous contexts, because her performances and installations create contexts of Indigenous knowledge through distinct semantic forms that articulate relationships of varying scale. Her 2000 work *The Indian Factory* responds to the tragic freezing deaths of Indigenous men in Saskatchewan who were driven outside of the city by police, in what were called "Starlight Tours."<sup>4</sup> These men were left in the snow to die near the Queen Elizabeth Power Station. Belmore recalls that the word "Factory" came to mind when she saw photographs in the newspaper accompanying information about the deaths of these men. Belmore grew up in Northern Ontario, where industrial scenes like those in the photographs were common. In this work, she considers how Indigenous bodies are imbricated in resource extraction and development on Indigenous lands, figured as raw material to be exploited. She wanted the space of her performance to convey this landscape. The performance involves five vignettes, which are translations (abstractions, distillations) of the newspaper's description of events. First, Belmore comes into the performance space, with her assistant Osvaldo Yero, in white overalls with feathers fastened to them. She sets down five buckets of water. On the wall, initially covered by a cloth, is a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, in her youth. After she takes a good long look at the portrait of the Queen, Belmore goes to a washstand where she wets five shirts and places them beside each bucket. Yero mixes the water in the buckets to make plaster. Then, Belmore takes five men's shirts and sinks them into the plaster buckets. Once they are covered, she rehanges them on the wall, and begins to set lit candles in the wall above each shirt. As Lynne Bell and Lori Blondeau write, the "stiffening shapes of the white shirts invoke the (absent) presence of the five men" (BELLE/BLONDEAU/BELMORE, n.d., n.p.). Clearly, the stiffening plaster recalls the freezing of bodily fluids that took place during these horrific deaths. Belmore notes: "The very idea of men freezing to death outside an industrial plant that is named Queen Elizabeth II draws my attention to the treaties and the relationship between First Nations people and the Crown" (BELLE/BLONDEAU/BELMORE, n.d., n.p.) Then, she and Yero move to the other side of the gallery space where a fan blows a feather in the air, towards a sheet of

white canvas hanging on the wall. Belmore repeatedly dips the feather into a pail of blood, and allows the blood to spatter on the wall. Then, both go to wash their hands—their overalls are covered in blood. Belmore thinks of the prairie as a feather blowing in the wind, and her “painting” with blood here resonates on this score, seeing the landscape through the lens of blood—making visible the invisible with blood—the disavowed foundation of Euro-American biopower, and the site of Indigenous ecological memory that exceeds this genocidal tradition. She has also called this segment a “blood blizzard,” commingling, through abstraction, Indigenous blood with the landscape or overall ecology of place.

The third section of the performance has Belmore turn on a police light hanging from the top of a pole in the centre of the room, wrapped in signs that say “Danger Do Not Enter.” In a straw cowboy hat, she dances to “The Fighting Side of Me” by Merle Haggard. Starting as a whirling reference to pow wow, an Indigenous appropriation of country music, her dance turns into a sort of drunken, exhausted, staggering motion.

Belmore turns to a photograph of the buffalo rubbing stone at Wanuskewin (a First Nations’ heritage park on the outskirts of Saskatoon). She takes roofing nails and, totally absorbed, hammers the nails over the image of the stone until it is completely covered.

Then, she goes and lies down on the floor. Yero, who has been working with wet clay all the while, comes and leans over her, covering her in clay, as though to bury her alive. Her clay-covered form moves up and down with the rise and fall of her lungs. When her breathing becomes laboured, audience members move to help her get out of the hardening casket. The clay outline that remains on the floor resembles an enlivened, police chalk outline—where the dead got up and walked away, with help from the human community surrounding them.

There are many elements at work in this performance, many aspects of semantic slippage going on simultaneously. These abstract conceptual moves highlight the embodied human relationships Belmore stages in this performance. The organic material of the clay replaces chalk outlines for the dead figure on the ground, the police light stands in for a disco ball during her dance, the feather and fan replace the hand and brush, the nails completely overlay the stone. The photograph represents the rubbing rock, another absent presence, like the men that are gone. Belmore reflects the impossibility of hammering into a stone—as the bison rock is sacred for First Nations peoples, it resists industrial interference, though it can be

all but hidden from view due to the latter. For those who paid very close attention to this performance, Yero is actually dressed to convey police when he buries her, as there are subtle red stripes on his outfit. Speaking of color, Mohawk curator Lee-Ann Martin writes of:

The prevailing symbolism of the color 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...". (MARTIN, 2005, p. 57).

Similarly, in *blood on the snow* (2002), Belmore articulates these ideas with a white chair, surrounded by a white down comforter and covered – upholstered?—with the same material. The top of the chair looks dipped in blood, and almost like a used tampon. This work commemorates the 1890 United States Cavalry massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, where they murdered 300 unarmed Sioux, mostly women and children, who lay frozen “under a blanket of snow” (RICKARD, 2005, p.70). Perhaps the most minimalist of the works discussed here, *blood on the snow* uses abstraction to secure Indigenous histories in space and time, creating a gendered genealogy of what can be seen and said about these events. Here, the blood looks like something revealed that was hidden inside a woman’s body, something incredibly private and foundational to life itself. This visual reference to women and childbearing capacities suggests genocide in that it was precisely this, a nation’s women and children, who were killed in the massacre. The work also resonates with the gendered framing of North American land, understood to be “conquered” by the thrust of male imperialist power. The abstraction, though, in the weirdly anonymous quality of the tampon-like chair, not only suggests “aloneness” in that the chair seems forlorn at the centre of what should be a comforting blanket, the color of which is consonant with the pristine white walls of the gallery, but also connection across multivalent intimacies and vulnerability.

In the work *Fountain*, commissioned for the 2005 Venice Biennale, a video image is projected through falling water, showing Belmore on Iona Beach, an industrial zone releasing Vancouver City’s sewage, as well as logging detritus, into the ocean. There is a fire burning nearby on the



beach. Belmore takes a metal pail and, fully dressed, wades into the ocean to carry out pails of water. After a long effort with the heavy water, she approaches the screen, on the beach, and throws the water out of the pail at the lens: the water turns into blood. She stands, still visible but now through a screen of blood. She stands, resolute, with a weird and difficult autonomy or self-determined stance, in the midst of clearly staged global relationalities based in Western abstraction, and made visible through Belmore's Anishinaabe forms.

Finally, at an Idle No More protest in Winnipeg in 2013, four of us stood and held up Belmore's work in the wind and snow, in front of the new, not yet opened, Canadian Museum for Human Rights. The work was a series of shirts hanging upside-down from wood poles, with blood spatter on a white towel in the middle, and stained onto women's shirts. Long straight black hair dangles from the collars and armholes. On each shirt, the letters "N O M O R E" are displayed, one letter per shirt. The shirts, and the hair, blows in the wind.

Belmore practices abstraction and blood memory in her art as ways of relating. Conversely, Euro-Americans employ abstraction and blood as methods of separating and disembedding, while conveying the concrete as universal (ie. in abstract universal rights). When Belmore stages what Linklater and Mithlo call Indigenous blood history and memory, she connects blood's figuration as an "abstract universal" of Western humanity with processes of resource exploitation and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. Conceptually, her treatment of blood reveals the material and imaginative violence of this genealogical orientation. While centering universality as a condition of the human, Euro-American thinkers and politics erase Indigenous specificity and disenfranchisement, unfettering capitalist globalizing modernity. Belmore, through Indigenous blood memory, responds to these processes in their specific forms as industrial economic exploitation, dehumanizing, ongoing genocide, and corporeal locatedness. Her work is not productively understood through the binary of representation/non-representation set up by a dominant art history. In the latter, the push and pull of abstraction and autonomy, through semantic instrumentality, are understood through the aims of Western capitalist culture. Rather, then, Belmore conveys distinct and interrelated contexts through blood: the almost impossibly difficult work of decolonization, culpability towards the dead, environment as Native blood (blood blizzard), red blood on a pristine blanket, mimicking the white walls of a pristine art

gallery and women's menstrual blood, blood spatter on a towel blowing in the wind, and perhaps ultimately, cleansing visions of Indigenous personhood through a "screen" of blood—blood (memory?) as a screen to see the land, and its scenes, through. All of these works reframe Western forms of abstraction and autonomy, suggesting they are best understood in the lens of abstraction developed by Indigenous peoples' blood memory. Belmore's blood screens and blizzards onlooking industrial zones and Canadian winters; blood irrupting in the white space of the galley on a comforter, or against a backdrop of snow outside a human rights museum, all signalling mass murder—these works insist on the relationship between blood memory and context in ecologically located Indigenous knowledges. They also produce newly visible relationships to and in these situations.

Belmore positions spectators to consider their relationship to these histories, both in their specificity and in their almost sublime or transcendent vastness. These are histories of Indigenous blood, calling on notions of time, based in relationships, that differ from the genealogies of blood in European modernity, even as she registers the vastness of the latter's brutal genocidal impact on the former. She states, "This "gift"—the contents of the bucket—carries the weight of colonial history and I am able, through art, to wash it from my body and splash it onto the screen where it becomes an object for reflection. It is my way of painting this history, of making the invisible, visible" (WATSON/BELMORE, 2005, p.28). A supposedly universal human project is laid bare for what it is: genocide and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and lands. Creating historically specific visibilities through blood, Belmore's abstraction contextualizes knowledge of history on this continent through her own Anishinaabe methods of knowing and relating. She composes specific epistemes in her work, advancing blood memory to create a future from Indigenous pasts, as historically specific visibilities.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> Pollock was inspired by the practice of Navajo sand painting.
- <sup>4</sup> I did not attend this performance, but read a description of it in "High Tech Storytellers, Unsettling Acts, Decolonizing Pedagogies," by Lynne Belle and Lori Blondeau on the site: Aboriginal Performance Art: INDIANacts. <http://indianacts.gruntarchives.org/essay-high-tech-storytellers-bell-and-blondeau.html>

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