

HERMENEUTIC LOOPS

Decolonial Echoes: Voicing and Listening in Rebecca Belmore's Sound Performance

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The photographic images of two of Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore's iterative sound art works—*Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991) and *Wave Sound* (2017)—are striking not just for the visual impact of their large conical art objects, but also for how they perform voicing and listening. The similar shape creates a relation across two performances separated by more than a quarter of a century. While both objects are conical in shape, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* emphasizes voicing and *Wave Sound* emphasizes listening. For *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan*, Belmore constructed a large wooden megaphone for participants to speak into and address the land directly, and for *Wave Sound*, Belmore created four sculptural listening cone installations in Canadian national park and reserve sites that invited visitors to listen to the land. In a settler colonial episteme, hearing sound and doing sound are seen as discrete practices. Circumventing this paradigm, the similarity of these art objects performs the epistemological loop of relationality between voicing and listening. Together, they can be heard as effecting an exchange that emphasizes how hearing sound and doing sound are bound up with structures of power. In so doing, both works offer interventions into and against colonial interpretive practices by enacting alternatives to understandings of voicing and listening that have centred the human ear and vocal apparatus. I term this interpretive alternative the echo. My analysis of these performances demonstrates how echo intervenes in relations of human/nonhuman sociality as well as in relations of time and space.

In one image of *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* (1991), Belmore stands in a grassy meadow during a 2008 performance at Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada. Facing away from the camera, Belmore gestures with her right hand held at her side, palm up, as she speaks through the megaphone, the wider opening of which is directed over a forest of pine trees, toward a rocky mountain with some snow, partially obscured by the fog. What is presently referred to as Banff National Park was “reserved and set apart as a public park and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage and enjoyment of the people of Canada” (“An Act” 1887, 120) by the 1887 Rocky Mountains Park Act.¹ Between 1890 and 1920, the Canadian settler-state forcibly removed Stoney Nakoda people living on the lands newly designated as a national park. Their removal made clear that “the benefit, advantage and enjoyment of the people of Canada” is contingent on the forced removal, assimilation, and legal disappearance of Indigenous peoples.

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Rebecca Belmore, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991). Gathering, Johnson Lake, Banff National Park, Banff, Alberta, July 26, 2008. Photo: Sarah Ciurysek. Presented by the Walter Phillips Gallery as part of the exhibition *Bureau de Change*, July 12–September 28, 2008. Image courtesy Rebecca Belmore and the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. Purchased with the support of the York Wilson Endowment Award, administered by the Canada Council for the Arts. Accession #P08 0001 S.

In an image from *Wave Sound* (2017), a person kneels on the grass at Green Point in Newfoundland, Canada, listening through a large aluminum cone directed toward the body of water below the cliff. Located on Mi'kmaq land, Green Point was incorporated into the settler state as Gros Morne National Park in 1973, following Newfoundland's 1949 confederation with Canada. While *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* had not previously been performed at Green Point, it had been performed on Mi'kmaq peoples' lands during the work's 1992 tour, when the megaphone was used on Citadel Hill in Halifax, Nova Scotia—a site where English settlers have maintained a fort since 1749 and where Parks Canada maintains a living history program that invites contemporary settlers to dress in costume, fire a rifle, and become a “soldier for a day,” per their website. While the Parks Canada program demonstrates how settler-colonialism relies on continual reperformances, the sonic returns staged by Belmore's two works on Mi'kmaq lands unsettle Canada's claim to possess these “national” spaces, resituating them as Indigenous lands. Especially since the context of *Wave Sound*'s commissioning meant that the three aluminum listening devices were likely to be used primarily by non-Indigenous visitors to the national parks, Belmore shifted the vantage point from speaking to listening for the 2017 installations.



A person listens through Rebecca Belmore's *Wave Sound* listening cone at Green Point in Gros Morne National Park, Newfoundland. Presented as part of *LandMarks2017/ Repères2017*, June 10–17, 2017. Photo: Kyra Kordoski. Image courtesy Rebecca Belmore.

Belmore's artistic use of sonic return is epitomized by her choice to use Banff National Park—Canada's *first* national park—as a shared location between *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* in 1991 and *Wave Sound* in 2017. In an interview for *Canadian Art*, Belmore (2017) discussed how selecting Banff as a site for one of the *Wave Sound* installations was intentional, and for her represented a way of returning to and rethinking her work with *Speaking to Their Mother*. I understand this nearly thirty-year return within an analytic framework I term the “echo.” Initiated by the act of voicing, echo occurs when sound reflects and returns to the voicing body as the act of listening, a vibrational event that is always multiple (a sonic repetition with a difference). A constitutive component of the difference performed by an echo is a time lag between what is sounded and what is heard, the sounding of a relation between times that is also a relation between spaces. These relations fundamentally redefine “relation” by establishing a sociality between humans and the living but nonhuman bodies of the environment, such as the bodies of water in the image above. Whereas *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* positions land as both listening to and reverberating with Indigenous voices, *Wave Sound* invites all installation visitors to take up the position of listener to each site's nonhuman bodies, including the land and the water.

I enter the hermeneutic loop between voicing and listening that the works coactivate through *Wave Sound*'s 2017 return of the echoes *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* began in 1991. When *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* was first performed, I was three years old, living in Madison, Wisconsin, and being socialized into norms of whiteness and femininity. My presence as a settler would have been

inappropriate at some of the work's iterations. A thirty-year (at least) project, the echo interpolates me now as an adult settler-listener hearing Belmore's echo through the digital presences of *Wave Sound* in videos, documentaries, interviews, news articles, and photographs, as well as an interactive website where I virtually visited the installations. While the settling of history via the archive is part and parcel of the settler colonial project, this settling project—like the settling of lands—is always being reperformed because it is not complete; settler colonial power is always subject to being disrupted. Just as *Wave Sound* disrupts the Parks Canada performance of settled “public” lands, the echo disrupts the boundedness of the archive. For me, the works' digital presences generate a relationality where I become a coparticipant in Belmore's performative echo.

My coparticipation with the echo foregrounds that my embodiment and politics condition what I hear and cannot hear in the works. Dylan Robinson's *Hungry Listening* engages decolonial and settler practices of listening through the framework of critical listening positionality: a self-reflexive praxis of considering how structures of power, including race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, cultural background, and state apparatuses condition our listening such that we might learn to reconfigure our listening practices (2020, 10–11).² My understanding of my own listening as partial and embedded in power is informed by Robinson's work, as well as contributions from feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock 1983; hooks 1984; Collins 1986; Harding 1992) that emphasize how knowledge production always emerges from a particular location/person and works in critical race sound studies that interrogate the racialized and gendered production of the modern listening self (Kheshti 2015). By socially locating me, Belmore's echo enacts a performative intervention on the settler colonial structuration of my listening—sounding the spatial and temporal disjuncture between the performance sites and myself and interpolating me into a critique of colonial regimes of the sensible such that I might identify, confront, and disobey settler practices of listening.

By making listeners both registrants and reflective surfaces of sound—at once audience and coparticipants who shape the performance as it continues to unfold both in person and mediated through the archive—the echo becomes a mode of transformative action. This relational work of the echo to restructure epistemic and sociopolitical relations is decolonial work. My use of decolonial is informed by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), who theorize decoloniality as praxis that requires delinking from coloniality and the presumed universality of Western theoretical constructs, such as the modern nation-state.

I argue that the echo across these performances decolonizes not only conceptions of nationhood by delinking from the nation-state as exerted through national parks/reserves, but also sound performance by delinking from colonial regimes of space/time and voicing/listening—regimes that I will show *enable* the exercise of settler nation-state power and are meant to detract from First Nations sovereignty. Aligning voice with the human has been a central component of the colonial project of modernity. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier (2014) notes in her work on listening and personhood in nineteenth-century Colombia, conceptions of sound and voice were linked to understandings of life itself. Creoles and European colonizers used ideas about the voice to regulate the boundary between the human and the nonhuman (Ochoa Gautier 2014, 5), implementing a power structure under which some would be recognized as fully human, and some would be deemed not properly human and thus outside political life—rendered “voiceless” via colonial discourses (Ludueña 2010, 13). In this colonial interpretive framework, sound becomes a human-centred activity, whether through the evaluative act of listening or the agentive act of voicing. Voice thus became aligned with the sociohistorical production of Man as the human, where the hegemonic

ethnoclass of Man—an ethnoclass that Sylvia Wynter (2003) identifies as secular, white, Western, and bourgeois—has overrepresented itself as the human.

This liberal episteme that aligns voice with Man continues to subtend neoliberalism and the ongoing structure of settler colonialism.³ Neoliberal policies in both Canada and the United States since the early 1990s have reinvested in producing the category of the voiceless in order to support settler-state extractivism, particularly on Indigenous land,⁴ and to dismantle legal protections regarding race, ability, sexuality, and gender that were instituted in response to and in attempts to contain the liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s.

I hear Belmore's Indigenous feminist artistic practice as responding to a neoliberal political context, where the Canadian settler state's supposed commitment to multiculturalism and "dialogue" occurs simultaneously to their disregard for First Nations sovereignty and treaty rights. Belmore herself (2017) situates her interest in embodiment as connected to the rupture of Indigenous languages, where her own positionality of "being Anishinaabe and being a non-speaker of the language" led her to "develop a way of communicating without the spoken word, with the body." Echo, which delinks voicing and listening from the human body to any vibrating body and creates communicative relations that are not dependent on words or oral speech, is a powerful tool with which to intervene in and ultimately bypass this neoliberal framework.⁵

My methodology of listening to how these works echo in the archive is linked to my analysis of how they echo in performance. The sounded and sensory relations activated by the echoes of *Ayuum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* and *Wave Sound* unsettle colonial ideologies of space, time, bodies, and senses—a complex regime of the sensible. Together, these works demonstrate the endurance of performativity such that I might hear an echo begun years ago; the continued unfolding of echo indicates that transformative action may occur felicitously over decades, interpolating additional listeners/coparticipants as the performance shape-shifts. The echo thus becomes a praxis and method for decolonial action in both "live" and "mediated" instantiations. Thinking about performance as an echo, the effects of which are felt across multiple temporalities, spaces, and bodies, both human and nonhuman, allows Indigenous and settler scholars, performers, and artists to think more broadly about what performance can do, and how to align our work with goals of Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and resurgence that the institutions through which we move (the university, the museum) obstruct.

Through my analysis of these two iterative performances, I propose the echo as a feedback loop that reconfigures voicing and listening as a set of social relationships between bodies and space/time.⁶ The echo in (and across) these performances is a mediating force that facilitates, re-members, and enacts social relationships across bodies, both human and nonhuman. In so doing, the echo suggests alternative orderings of the sensorial that do not reproduce the violences of modernity's sensorial regime.⁷ As a vibrational event, the echo disrupts colonial assumptions of time and performance as linear and space as empty, and proposes instead a listening practice that is attuned to how places reverberate with the sense memories of "past" events, demonstrating "past" events as ongoing and places as layered with multiple histories and relationalities.

Voicing Situated Relationality to Land

Belmore conceptualized *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* during a 1991 residency at the Banff Centre. Described by Belmore as a sound installation, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* is an overtly political, iterative performance that features a six-foot-long, seven-foot-wide wooden megaphone as the central art object. Belmore explains on her website that, “This object was taken into many First Nations communities—reservation, rural, and urban. I was particularly interested in locating the Aboriginal voice on the land. Asking people to address the land directly was an attempt to hear political protest as poetic action.”

On her website, Belmore situates this piece in relation to the many protests mounted during the summer of 1990 “in support of the Mohawk Nation of Kanasatake in their struggle to maintain their territory,” otherwise known as the “Oka Crisis.” The so-called “Oka Crisis” involved Mohawk land in the Quebec province that since 1717 had been repeatedly reassigned to serve the political and economic aims of the various settler entities that claimed trusteeship and later ownership of the land. Throughout, the Mohawk nation asserted their land rights by using multiple tactics—petition, armed resistance, and legal challenges, among others. In the summer of 1990, in response to the Oka mayor’s announcement that the land would be used for a golf course expansion and housing development, fifty-five members of the Mohawk nation took up arms to defend their land and were met with settler state violence in the form of 2,650 Canadian soldiers (Simpson 2014, 152).

In a documentary by Métis filmmaker and activist Marjorie Beaucage, Belmore (1992) explains that she eventually decided to build a megaphone for and with Indigenous peoples. She elaborates: “And instead of aiming it at the government, and taking it and aiming it at that building or at those people, I wanted to instead take it out to the people, to Native people, and turn it towards the land, so that the people could speak to our Mother, to the Earth . . .” While the colonization of the land has depended on the process of rendering Indigenous peoples and epistemologies “voiceless,” this work intervenes in these twinned processes through sound performance: creating the opportunity to decolonize land by “locating the Aboriginal voice on the land.” I understand the echo as Belmore’s mode of collocating voice and land—this collocating produces relationality as an intervention against state attempts to cleave this relationality. Speaking through the megaphone generates a vibrational echo that confronts the speaker with their own relationship to the land (Belmore 2017), so voice is redefined and reenacted as situated relationality.

An electric handheld megaphone fits into the base of *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan*’s large wooden megaphone, which can be disassembled into two parts for transport between performance sites. According to Belmore, “The beauty of the piece is that the enlarged size of the wooden form doesn’t make the voice much louder, but it does shoot the voice much further so it finds an echo” (O’Rourke 1997, 29). While loudness functions as a neoliberal metaphor for political agency, in the sense of “having one’s voice heard,” Belmore moves away from that paradigm. Prioritizing the vibrational movement of the echo over the voice’s amplification and turning the megaphone toward the land, as opposed to the Canadian government, enacts a refusal of settler state-defined politics of sovereignty. Liberal recognition-based politics maintain colonialist relations between Indigenous nations and the Canadian state by reaffirming the state’s power to recognize Indigenous sovereignty or not (Coulthard 2014). Alternatively, the vibratory politics of *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* enact Indigenous sovereignty by bringing First Nations people and the land into relation with one another

through the echo. This reaffirms Indigenous nationhood as autonomous rather than reliant on settler-state recognition.

In redefining voice as a relation of people to land, the echo enables tribal specificity through differences in performance contexts, in the content of what is expressed through the megaphone, and in the modes of expression, where what is offered has sometimes been spoken softly, shouted, or conveyed through music, for example. Since *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan's* initial 1991 performance in Banff National Park, performances have occurred in 1992, 1996, 2008, and 2014 at multiple sites within Canada and the US, including the Kanasatake reserve—the site of the “Oka Crisis” (DeBlassie 2010, 52). In 1992, as settler states commemorated the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s landing, Belmore began touring the work, hoping to ground her practice by receiving feedback and criticism from Indigenous communities rather than white art critics (Belmore 1992). With project assistants Michael Beynon and Florene Belmore, she transported the megaphone using a cargo van, beginning with a performance at Parliament Hill in Ottawa and subsequently transporting the megaphone to “First Nation communities located on reserve land, towns, cities, and an active logging blockade” (Belmore in Nanibush 2014, 214). For each of the ten stops on the tour, organizers from the First Nation communities Belmore collaborated with selected the location and set the agenda for the megaphone’s use (O’Rourke 1997, 29). Given that different Indigenous peoples understand relation to the land differently, this collaborative practice enabled the work to be taken up in ways that exceeded Belmore’s initial framing of speaking *to* the land, as communities also used the megaphone to speak *with* or *for* the land, such as to raise public awareness regarding extraction.



Rebecca Belmore, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991). Gathering, Citadel Hill, Halifax, 1992. Photo: Michael Beynon. Courtesy Rebecca Belmore and the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. Purchased with the support of the York Wilson Endowment Award, administered by the Canada Council for the Arts. Accession #P08 0001 S.

Echoing allows for the relationalities between human and nonhuman bodies that shape everyday instances of voicing to become audible and sensible as such when the land returns voice to a speaker through the echo. This return constitutes a social relation. For the 1991 performance in Banff—lands from which the settler state had forcibly removed Stoney Nakoda people—Belmore invited thirteen First Nations people, including Stoney Nakoda Chief John Snow, to speak through the megaphone from a meadow (McMaster 91). Their voices echoed off the mountains, returning to them nine times. In Beaucage’s documentary, Belmore (1992) describes what it was like to hear her voice echoing off of the land during the first performance in Banff:

And when I first spoke through it in Banff and it echoed off the mountains and all over the place, and it was my voice, I could hear my voice way over there, separated from my body and bouncing off of and echoing off of Mother Earth, the land. And I really felt that, wow, I felt really humble because I felt so small. I felt that she’s really powerful. And I felt my place as a human being as part of the land and as part of her. And that I have to respect. But also I felt really strong at the same time, because I felt that our people have lived here for so long and they’re in the ground, and my parents are in the ground, and we have been here for so long, and she’s listened to us for so long. It made me feel really good. It made me feel like I belong here. When, you know, that whole, the Bering Strait theory just flew out the window for me. Because I thought, we’ve been here for a long time, and this is my home. I don’t come from anywhere else.

Whereas the settler-state abstracts land to understand it as property, for Belmore, land is powerful, embodied, fleshy, and living. Belmore’s comment on hearing her voice “all over the place . . . separated from [her] body” demonstrates the relational materiality of the body, which I understand as a form of (extra/em)bodiment—where the body is not a closed system but rather fundamentally open to and in relation to the surrounding space and bodies, both human and nonhuman. Hearing her voice echoing and bouncing off of the mountains affectively reminds her of her positionality and relationalities “as a human being as part of the land and as part of her,” evoking feelings of humility, respect, strength, and belonging, a connection to home that is grounded in relationalities as opposed to an ideology of property ownership and enclosures.

Belmore’s description of being humbled and strengthened by this affective awareness suggests that *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* also activates a pedagogical relationship with land, what Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist Leanne Simpson (2014) terms “land as pedagogy”: to “learn both *from* the land and *with* the land” and nonhuman beings (7, emphasis original). Distinguishing Anishinaabeg nationhood from the idea of the nation-state, Simpson (2013) describes nationhood as “a web of connections to each other, to the plant nations, the animal nations, the rivers and lakes, the cosmos and our neighbouring Indigenous nations” that is both “an ecology of intimacy” and “a series of radiating responsibilities.” The concept of radiating responsibilities reminds me of the way echo moves and connects bodies, where Belmore hears the echo of her voice connecting her to the land and her peoples’ history and presence. To extend Mishuana Goeman’s work on (re)mapping as a materially grounded discursive practice whereby Native authors refute colonization’s ordering of land and bodies based on hierarchies and binaries, and in so doing produce new possibilities (2013, 2–3), the echo effects a sonic (re)mapping of relationships between bodies and space. Returning to Simpson (2013), this sonic (re)mapping of relationalities constitutes a sovereign act of Indigenous nationhood. As the bodies present at Banff—both human and nonhuman—vibrate and absorb the echo to differing degrees, the act of voicing performs a material relationality that holds the potential

to reaffirm social relationships of responsibility and reciprocity, affirming bodies not as discrete but as intimately connected and dependent on one another: an (extra/em)bodied experience that connects to Anishinaabeg conceptions of nationhood, even as Belmore is not addressing her own land.

These reverberations might also be thought of under the rubric of nonhuman ontologies, where rather than the land passively echoing back the human voices filtered through the megaphone, the land becomes an active participant in shaping what Nina Eidsheim terms the “intermaterial vibration” that constitutes voicing (2015, 164). Under this rubric, land is not a passive object to be acquired or a natural feature that can be universalized through a European planetary consciousness (Pratt 1992, 11). Rather, land is a Mother to be engaged, for the peoples Indigenous to the land to voice their desires to, and who possesses the capacity to voice her own desires in return—a distinct departure from the liberal episteme of Man and the fixation on human vocal cords. By including the land as a participant in this circuit of voicing, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* displaces the human as the universal voicing and listening subject. The performance sites’ differing material conditions shape the forms of coparticipation, impacting how voice is both returned to the human body and absorbed by the bodies of land and water. In addition, the act of speaking to the land through the megaphone and feeling the echo’s reverberations throughout the body—along with the “touch” of sound that happens when our eardrum vibrates to the sound echoing back to/within us—troubles the human/nonhuman divide. Such a divide adheres to a temporality that values particular forms of life and devalues the possibility of ongoing relations with/to those buried in the ground as a part of relationality to land, or of understanding human being as being part of the land. Belmore’s evocation of her ancestors who are buried in the ground during the initial Banff performance recalls that her ancestors, too, become part of this intermaterial relationality across space and time, which I discuss further in the next section.

The vibrational production of these relationalities is functionally true for anyone speaking through the megaphone, whether Indigenous, settler, or “alien”—a fungible category proposed by Iyko Day to emphasize North American settler colonialism as a racialized project and account for migrations of enslaved Africans and Asian migrants based not on settlement but on labour and exclusion (2016, 24). For instance, during the Parliament Hill performance in Ottawa, the first stop of the work’s 1992 tour, then-constitutional minister Joe Clark—a conservative white settler politician who had previously been prime minister—spoke through the megaphone at Belmore’s invitation (Belmore 2008, 45). However, that does not mean that everyone speaking through the megaphone would or should feel a sense of belonging to the land, such as Belmore described in her experience. In 2014, for example, Belmore and curator Wanda Nanibush (Beausoleil First Nation) brought the megaphone out of the Justina M. Barnick Gallery for use in an Indigenous women-led political action protesting the pollution of waterways. For this performance, the megaphone was transported to Gibraltar Point, a peninsula on the Toronto Islands, and directed across a body of water (Lake Ontario), toward Toronto—lands stewarded by Anishinaabe, Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Mississauga peoples. As Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson notes, the performance that day was marked by “resounding silences” (2019, 236) from the large audience composed primarily of tourists and art students. Robinson describes how rather than a sense of belonging, speaking to lands on which he is a guest returned to him a sense of his responsibilities to the communities who steward those lands (237–38). I understand Indigenous peoples speaking through the megaphone to their own land as enacting what Beth Piatote (2016) terms sonic sovereignty by vibrationally sustaining intermaterial relationalities that exceed settler-state logics. As Robinson’s reading of the Gibraltar Point performance demonstrates, the decolonial echo might enact sonic sovereignty in several additional

ways, including by disarticulating settler connections/claims to land or strengthening Indigenous diasporic speakers' practices of nation-to-nation recognition of the land's caretakers.

Redefining voicing as echo is part of the sonic sovereign work Belmore undertakes. The intermaterial vibrations of the echo, as movement and return, produce a rapprochement between the speaker and the land that constitutes voicing as intersubjective. The vibrational movements of voicing that “return” to the speaker are no longer “their” voice alone—if they ever were—but inflected with the contours of the land, while the land, too, is transformed by the voicings it absorbs: a multiply produced event of voicing. While colonial logics enclose on the body as contained (and human), on space as property, on time and performance as linear, and on voicing and listening as discrete, the echo disrupts the power and directionality associated with colonial epistemes of voicing and listening that assign “voicelessness” to Indigenous communities protesting for the decolonization of their lands. Belmore’s use of the echo thus exemplifies her call to “*bear* political protest as poetic action” (emphasis added), where the return of the echo is also about the return of the lands. Under the analytic of the echo, listening becomes the “return” of voicing, a reminder that the past-ness of the past is not settled; rather, the reverberations of the echo mark “past” events as ongoing. I lean more into the epistemological loop linking voicing and listening through the return of the echo via *Wave Sound*, the title of which both rhetorically echoes and inverts the concept of the sound wave and compels listeners to engage water as a sounding body.

Listening for the Echo’s Temporal Returns through Wave Sound

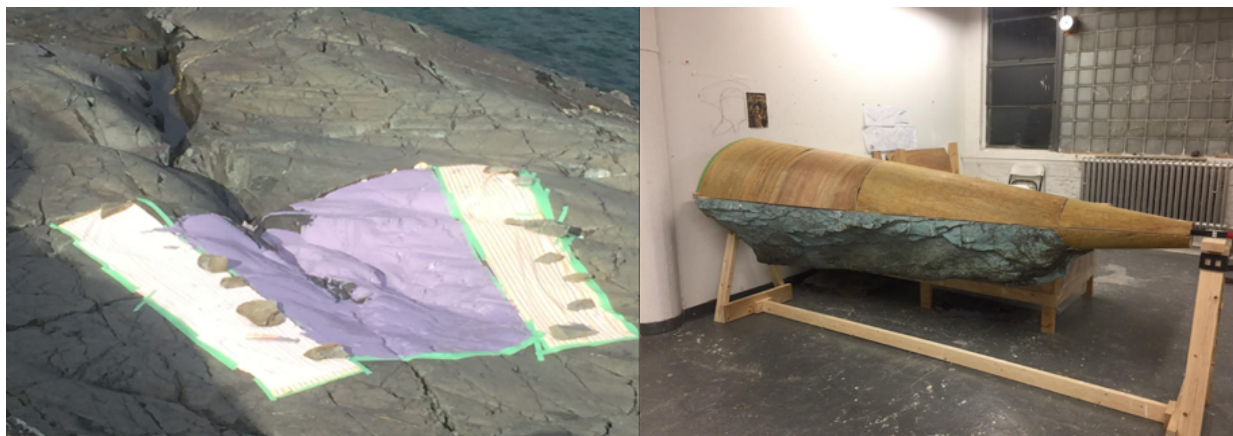
While the echo in *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* emphasizes voicing, Belmore’s 2017 installation series *Wave Sound* uses the echo to refigure listening practices. For *Wave Sound*, Belmore and her partner, artist Osvaldo Yero, created four large-scale conical listening devices—three of cast aluminum and one of copper—that invited visitors to the installation sites to listen to the land. The aluminum listening cones were installed in three Canadian national park sites—Banff National Park, Pukaskwa National Park, and Gros Morne National Park—while the copper listening cone was installed on Chimnissing Island, reserve land of the Beausoleil First Nation. The listening devices were positioned with the wider openings facing bodies of water and the smaller openings propped up against rocky outcroppings in some cases, or on a small heap of large stones in others, as in the Banff and Gros Morne installations, respectively. To use the listening devices, visitors crouch or kneel on the ground, placing an ear and the side of their head to the smaller opening.

The temporary installation series *Wave Sound* was commissioned as part of *LandMarks2017/Repères2017*, a Canada 150 Signature Initiative commemorating the 150th anniversary of Canada’s confederation. This initiative involved a partnership between the Toronto-based Partners in Art, Parks Canada, and sixteen Canadian arts universities and featured twelve commissioned artists, including Belmore. According to the project’s website, “*LandMarks2017/Repères2017* invites people to creatively explore and deepen their connection to the land through a series of contemporary art projects in and around Canada’s National Parks and Historic Sites . . . *LandMarks2017/Repères2017* inspires dialogue about people, places and perspectives that have shaped our past and are vital to our futures.” On the one hand, this initiative seems to flatten relationality to land without accounting for the differential positions of Indigenous peoples, settlers, and aliens. For instance, the practice of settlers “deepen[ing] their connection to the land” is constitutive of settler colonialism.

In addition, while one purported goal of the project is to “inspire dialogue” about these differential histories and presents, this initiative participates in the erasure of First Nations sovereignty because it’s commemorating Canada’s confederation. “Inspiring dialogue” does not require the state to commit to substantive change. “Dialogue” in this context is a neoliberal euphemism for conversation that assumes the guise and language of equity but actually reifies power relations that benefit the settler colonial state. Moreover, this celebratory, settler-state context implies a limit to the imaginary of how “people, places, and perspectives . . . are vital to our futures”—where the abolition of the Canadian state is not imagined by the Canada 150 funders as one such desired future—and raises questions regarding who is included in the “our” of “our futures.” Nevertheless, Belmore’s decision to create *Wave Sound* suggests that despite this initiative’s colonialist, neoliberal-multicultural framing and funding sources, *Wave Sound* holds the potential to exceed the initiative’s performative framework. As a decolonial critique of “dialogue,” the echo of *Wave Sound* liberates practices of voicing and listening from the hollow performance of “talking and listening” that neoliberal epistememes rely on to halt substantive change.

In a 2017 interview for *Canadian Art*, Belmore stated that in *Wave Sound*, “it’s the body and the ability to listen—to listen well, and experience not what we think is the ‘quiet,’ but what is the world outside of our bodies. Moreover, it’s about listening to the water and the land and all the other beings that live out there, too.” This praxis of listening that *Wave Sound* facilitates expands the relationality of the body by registering echoes of the sites’ historical contexts. Harkening back to Belmore’s remembrance of her ancestors at the first performance of *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan*, in what follows, I demonstrate how *Wave Sound* registers and amplifies the echo as remembrance and nonlinear time. The nonlinear time of the echo can be activated when the impact an event leaves on a place recurs through remembrance, so the presence of the “past” event is felt in another moment, in a way that represents a simultaneous return to and departure from that past moment, vibrationally refracted by the contours of different ways of remembering.

To make the listening devices for each site, Belmore cast moulds from the features of the sites themselves—imprinted by time, erosion from wind and waves, and human and nonhuman use—thus shaping possibilities for how sound can travel, resonate, and be heard. For the aluminum listening cones, for instance, Belmore and Yero first took silicone casts of rock formations at each site, as depicted below for the Pukaskwa site—land traditionally stewarded by Anishinaabe people. The silicone castings were then used to make positive models, as the image of the Banff positive illustrates. The completed listening devices were placed at their corresponding park sites where the castings had been made, functioning as a material/aesthetic echo not only of the megaphone but of the land where they were installed.



Silicone casting (Pukaskwa) and positive model (Banff) of *Wave Sound* listening cones (2016). Photos courtesy Rebecca Belmore.

For me, this artistic practice and its resulting aesthetics underscore how listening can be defined as a set of social relationships between bodies and space. Rather than a smooth conical listening device, the contours of the land filter the site visitors' sensorial experiences when listening through the cast aluminum cones. This materiality is inseparable from the histories of its formation, including the ongoing structure of Canadian settler colonialism that enables the land to be read as National Park property. Listeners are invited, in part, to hear the history of settler colonialism, since the shape of the cone impacts its acoustics. The shape of the cone both echoes the settler colonial histories of that land and allows for a very specific type of listening to the space that presents the listener with the situatedness of their listening.

The large conical structures of *Wave Sound* externalize what is typically imagined to be an internal process of listening through the human ear to demonstrate listening as situated, relational, and subject to power. The act of approaching the smaller opening to listen through the cone physically demonstrates that listening, too, occurs from a particular location. What I hear will be different from what you hear, not only because of different material conditions, but also because of the different memories, social histories, positionalities, and relationalities that condition our listening praxes as interconnected to our lives. Like voicing, listening is never just about a single sense or a desocialized materiality; rather, listening and voicing are always connected to the social-historical context that produces the conditions to listen, to voice, and that has conditioned understandings of what it means to do so. By engaging the different place-based memories and orientations to this site that *Wave Sound* visitors carry with them (including and exceeding their different positionalities as Indigenous, settler, or alien), *Wave Sound* evokes what may be thought of as spatial-temporal echoes.

The placement of the listening devices close to the ground so that visitors must crouch, kneel, or sit on the ground to use them further facilitates this situated form of multisensory and multi-temporal listening. Such a pose works in opposition to the colonial pose of the surveyor, whose imperial eye scouts the land to map and bring into order/violence. To sit or kneel on the ground near a body of water is a reorientation to the material components of land and water: the listener might feel the slight spring of the ground, the rockiness; they might taste, smell, and feel the lake water in the air and on the grass. Building on Eidsheim's description of voicing as "internal corporeal choreography" (2015, 111), I argue that *Wave Sound* enacts listening as an (extra/em)bodied, relational posture—a listening praxis that remains open to hearing, feeling, and sensing "the world outside of our bodies." While the body here may seem to be posed in opposition to "the world

outside,” they are actually contiguous rather than discrete or oppositional materialities. Recalling Belmore’s description of her voice leaving her body during *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan*’s 1991 performance repositions the body not as an a priori contained entity but as relational, a materiality that extends into the environment and registers the environment beyond her subjectivity. As opposed to the anthropological construction of “thick description” (Geertz 1973) that also animated the imperial eye and early travel writing’s practice of cataloguing and anthologizing, visitors are invited to listen across bodies, temporalities, histories, and contexts through the acts of kneeling on the ground and bending to listen through the metal cones.

For Geertz, the ethnographic praxis of thick description involves first grasping and then rendering the complexity of multiple superimposed concepts that he glosses as “at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit” (1973, 10). On the other hand, the echo of *Wave Sound* does not activate an anthropological or ethnographic mode of listening. Rather, the echo proposes an (extra/em)bodied praxis of listening that foregrounds the interwoven complexity of the social and sensorial, yet asks listeners to defer any immediate recourse to grasping and rendering this complexity. Instead, it asks listeners to engage the time lag of the echo as a generative mode of indeterminacy that can encourage a suspension of assumptions about what they are listening to, how listening engages the senses, and what enactments of voicing are worth listening to or “count” as voicing.

Listening through the *Wave Sound* sculptures for “the world outside of our bodies” may also enable us to hear how our own listening practices echo back to us when refracted through the cones’ physical amplification of the land’s features and social histories. Articulating a relationship between listening and Indigenous nationhood, Audra Simpson questions whether “The very notion of an *indigenous* nationhood, which demarcates identity and seizes tradition in ways that may be antagonistic to the encompassing frame of the state, may be simply unintelligible to the western and/or imperial ear” (2000, 114). Rather than erasing or smoothing over the different social histories of listening that frame each listener’s experience or advocating for a return to some supposedly preconditioned state of listening, *Wave Sound* reconstitutes listening as the return of voicing. The looped nature of this performance, where the act of listening is an attunement to alternative modes of voicing, recalls how the echo in *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* returns voice as listening: voicing turns to listening, and listening returns to voice. In this way, *Wave Sound* is also a speaking installation, and *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* is also a listening installation—emphasizing the hermeneutic loop of these practices that the Western/imperial ear obscures.

I propose that, through encouraging such a listening experience, the listening cones of *Wave Sound* allow visitors to experience echo as vibrational, as sonic, as position/posture, and as an orientation to history and meaning. Producing the occasion to listen to the thirty-year return of the decolonial echoes of *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan*, *Wave Sound* in particular generates a way to think about the temporality of the echo as durational and nonlinear. The meanings and work of the echo coalesced between these two works but also over a period of at least thirty years. In a sense, it is thus the time between these two pieces through which Belmore establishes the *longue durée* of the echo as a sustained performance, one that remains necessary for the durational work of unsettling settler colonial power.

Sensing Resonances across Space and Time

By producing the occasion to listen deeply to the continued echo and resonances of these spatially and temporally intertwined histories and presents of settler colonialism, performances of *Wave Sound* and *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* offer decolonial potentialities that not only critique the prevailing settler colonial spatial-temporal-sensorial order, but also “offer a language of possibility, a way out of colonialism” (Smith 2012, 204). Through Belmore’s ongoing artistic practice, she has focused on developing an alternative language of the body in the context of profound losses, including that of ties to language, where using the body becomes a method of voicing (Belmore 2017). Embedded within this practice is a politics of possibility and futurity. A cross-temporal feedback loop between voicing and listening, the decolonial echo enacts intermaterial relations across and between bodies and land to produce alternatives to settler colonial frameworks of voice and voicelessness that anchor neoliberal democracy. Through its mediated return, the echo situates voicing and listening bodies in relation to one another, and as capable of learning from and through that relationality. In this way, the echo is a kind of reimagined language of the body that can enact decolonial options for voicing and listening when ties to spoken language have been foreclosed on, and when coloniality forecloses on possibilities for meaningful relationalities through its violent assertion of governance, epistemologies, and borders based on binaries and hierarchies. Rather than treating settler colonialism as *fait accompli*, the *longue durée* of the echo can orient us—Indigenous, settler, and alien listeners—toward Indigenous survivance and decolonial praxes as requiring sustained engagement and political work over time.

As a settler listener whose body was not present at the performance sites, I cannot speak to how my body might have affectively registered the echo’s activation of intermaterial relationalities with the specific Indigenous lands and nonhuman bodies at the different sites. However, thinking with and in relation to the echo of these works has impacted my critiques of and embodied departures from the normative colonial framing of voicing and listening. I began to question these concepts as a vocalist at a Western school of music—where ear training and music theory courses were certainly invested in inculcating practices of hungry listening (Robinson 2020). While pursuing that arc of questioning enabled me to come into my queerness and feminist politics, the decolonial echo of *Wave Sound* and *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* interpolates me into the performance as a settler to divest from colonial praxes of listening and voicing that attempt to possess, hypostatize, or depoliticize sound performance. In emphasizing the specificity of relationalities between bodies and space/time, the echo interpolates everyone differently.

While my experiences of *Wave Sound* and *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* have been through their digital, photographic, sonic, and narrative iterations, at the *Revolutions in Sound* symposium, I had the opportunity to be in conversation with Dylan Robinson, who visited the *Wave Sound* installation at Gros Morne in addition to participating in the Gibraltar Point action and performance of *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan* discussed earlier. Robinson explained that rather than the sound of the waves, he heard only “the intersensory experience of the ground alongside [his] body” and the wind moving through the cast aluminum: “What I wish I heard in *Wave Sound* is the echoes of the land and sovereign territory of Mi’kmaq people. And yet perhaps it merely marks the very point at which I do not / cannot know how to listen to this history that is already there.”⁸ Robinson’s account of his listening experience foregrounds how the *longue durée* of the echo and its power begins across the bodies of specific listeners in relation. *Wave Sound*’s evocation of a generative indeterminacy—of being confronted with that which is not (yet) heard or known—demonstrates the false promise of

the rush to “dialogue.” Whereas dialogue presumes a shared language—the terms of which are overdetermined by coloniality—the echo repositions listening and voicing as modes of transformative action, returning to the listening body a sense of the ongoing work and responsibility to decolonize by delinking from colonial regimes of the sensible and advancing Indigenous resurgence against settler-state extractivism and colonial power. Finding the echo might take a long time, but it’s offering us the tools to get there eventually. In this way, the vibrational gesture of the echo may be understood as decolonial in that it orients us away from the art object as enclosure and toward the way that the echo—the epistemological loop between voicing and listening—acts on and through bodies over an extended period, expanding our relationalities for a futurity that’s not yet heard, but will be.

By resituating voicing and listening as interconnected acts that articulate a relationality to land and power, the echo functions as an alternative language that can be a tactic for the politics of sovereignty. When understood as an alternative language, the echo is also outside the speaking/listening duality that has been such an immense roadblock to substantive change, particularly when the neoliberal Canadian settler-state mobilizes dialogue as an end in and of itself. As a project that has coalesced over a period of thirty years and continues to resonate in the bodies of listeners, the decolonial echo of *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* and *Wave Sound* enacts a nonlinear durational politics of relationality that models the long duration of decolonial politics and also allows for the long duration of a certain type of imaginative work. Pursuing and enacting decoloniality is a long-term project that requires persistent, sustained, difficult, and sometimes unexciting/unglamorous work, attention, and commitment. The longue durée of the echo speaks to the longue durée of Indigenous survivance (Vizenor 2008) and the politics and possibilities of the decolonial echo.

Notes

1. As Binnema and Niemi (2006) note, in 1885, the Canadian government “reserved” land surrounding a hot spring with an eye toward resource extraction and capitalist development. The 1887 Rocky Mountains Park Act expanded the reserved land to include Lake Minnewanka (a *Wave Sound* installation site) and designated it as Canada’s first national park. The 1876 Indian Act, which codified both who would be recognized as an “Indian” and what would constitute a “reserve” according to the newly confederated Canadian settler state, was revised in 1886 to divest Indigenous peoples from their hunting and fishing rights on nonreserve lands. In 1890, following park superintendent George Stewart’s assertion that “Indians should be excluded from the Park” (cited in Binnema and Niemi, 729), hunting was banned in Banff National Park, and the settler state began forcibly removing Stoney Nakoda people from the park to serve the interests of tourism and sports hunters.
2. While works engaging Indigeneity and sound have primarily focused on the dynamics of settler colonialism (Brady 1999; Rath 2003; Tomlinson 2007), a growing body of literature in Indigenous sound studies prioritizes Indigenous epistemologies, theorizing, and praxes regarding sound and the senses. These works engage Indigenous modernities (Levine and Robinson 2019), centre Indigeneity within American music studies (Perea and Solis 2019), theorize sonic sovereignty via performance (Reed 2019) and listening (Tahmahkera 2017), and address ecological stakes of Indigenous sound art (Galloway 2020).
3. Following Patrick Wolfe (1999) and Kēhaulani Kauanui (2016), I understand settler colonialism not as an event but as an ongoing structure.
4. Melamed (2015) identifies racial capitalism’s constant expropriation of natural resources as a method of ongoing colonialism as up to 50 percent of existing natural resources are on Indigenous land.

5. Sound studies has recently invested in unsettling sound from the ear by attending to vibration. Musicologist Nina Eidsheim (2015), for instance, demonstrates the relational and multisensory dimensions of sound that may be produced by any vibrating body, Eidsheim (2019) resituates the vibrational practice of voicing as produced by a community of listeners, and Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich (2012) engage work on low frequencies that are heard by feeling vibrations in one's body.
6. My understanding of the social is not bounded to the formation of the human. In dialogue with Mel Chen's (2012) attention to queer socialities between humans, nonhuman animals, and objects, I define the social as encompassing relationships between humans and land, between human and nonhuman bodies, and between time and politics; in effect, I understand relationality as inherently social.
7. I understand modernity's sensorial regime as the partitioning of the senses and the body, where hearing, for instance, is configured as discrete from vision and associated with the ears, and where the Cartesian perspective separates the body from the mind. For the colonizing work of this sensory order, see Robinson (2020) and Classen and Howes (2006).
8. Dylan Robinson, written response to the author, February 29, 2020.

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