

(Re)constructing Indigenous Linguistic Refusal Beyond the Settler Gaze

Rebecca Belmore and Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg

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ABSTRACT: Indigenous art, aestheticisms, and other creative expressions represent a critical threat to settler colonial neoliberalism, working within, between, and beyond the parameters, definitions, and conventions of the Western art world. Using the concept of “Indigenous refusal” as a grounding framework, this article complicates the hegemonic relationship between settler fantasy and embodied Indigenous reality, exploring the ways that contemporary Indigenous artists Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe) and Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg (Sámi) foster Indigenous futurity through their artistic engagements with the presence and absence of language. Through a comparative analysis of Belmore’s 2013 performance piece *Apparition* and Holmberg’s second studio album, *Luodik* (2024), this paper argues that Belmore and Holmberg’s respective works map distinct geographies of refusal, exercising a sonic sovereignty in the service of disrupting the settler gaze. Building on previous decolonial scholarly work on the politics of refusal, reconciliation, and representation, this comparative approach makes obvious the thread of transnational Indigenous solidarity that links Belmore and Holmberg’s respective works together.

RÉSUMÉ: En travaillant à l'intérieur, entre et au-delà des paramètres, des définitions et des conventions du monde de l'art occidental, l'art, les esthétismes et les autres expressions créatives autochtones représentent une menace critique au néolibéralisme colonial. S'appuyant sur le concept du « refus autochtone », cet article complique la relation hégémonique entre la fantaisie des colons et la réalité autochtone vécue et incarnée (embodied) à travers une analyse des manières dont les artistes autochtones contemporains Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe) et Jalvvi Niilas Holmberg (Sámi) facilitent la futurité autochtone à travers leurs engagements artistiques avec la présence et l'absence de langage et de langue. À travers une analyse comparative de la performance *Apparition* (2013) de Belmore et du deuxième album studio de Holmberg, *Luodik* (2024), cet article soutient que les œuvres respectives des deux artistes cartographient des géographies distinctes du refus, exerçant une souveraineté sonore au service de la perturbation du regard de colon. S'appuyant sur des théories décoloniaux sur les politiques de refus, de réconciliation et de représentation, cette approche comparative met en évidence le fil de la solidarité autochtone transnationale qui relie les œuvres respectives de Belmore et de Holmberg.

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SCANDINAVIAN-CANADIAN STUDIES

VOLUME 32

ÉTUDES SCANDINAVES AU CANADA

2025

DOI: 10.29173/scancan274

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he construction and dissemination of the concept of “art” within the settler colonial nation-state has undoubtedly functioned as a prong of assimilationist genocide, operating along stratified racialized and gendered lines that fundamentally devalue Indigenous aestheticisms whilst upholding an individualistic narrative of creative expression based in colonial concepts of ownership. Thus, the crucial and ongoing (re)shaping of art fielded by groundbreaking contemporary Indigenous artists through a variety of mediums and languages engages a direct mode of defiance to settler epistemologies that view the Indigenous subject either outside the bounds of the holistic “creative” or, when included, as monolithic “traditional” representations of a “dying” culture curated for a settler gaze. I assert that the work of Anishinaabekwe¹ performance artist Rebecca Belmore and Sámi poet Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg strategically employ both the absence and the presence of language in a direct act of Indigenous refusal to the dominant settler paradigm, fostering Indigenous futurity through an act of linguistic cultural (un)intelligibility.

For the purposes of this paper, *refusal*, as theorized by Kanien'kehà:ka anthropologist Audra Simpson, will be understood as “an option for producing and maintaining alternative structures of thought, politics and traditions away from and in critical relationship to states” (19). Instead of recognition and the ruse of consent it totes, Simpson (19) proposes refusal both as a political practice and mode of analysis. Building upon Simpson’s work, Black scholar Lindsay Stewart further separates refusal from resistance, noting that “Resistance locks us into a life-and-death struggle with our oppressor for recognition. In contrast, refusal withholds recognition of the oppressor’s power or authority to define our lives” (33). Refusal thus allows for a paradigm shift from seeking the recognition of the oppressor to the struggle for self-definition within one’s own culture, identity, and community (Stewart 33).

Rebecca Belmore (b. 1960) is an Anishinaabe multidisciplinary artist who specializes in the medium of performance, particularly focusing on the inherent sociopolitical interrelationality between Indigenous bodies, land, and language within the imperial core, and the intricacies of place and identity (“Biography” par. 2). A member of the Obishikokaan (Lac Seul) First Nation, Belmore was born and raised in what is now called “Upsala, Ontario” in Treaty 3 Territory (Berlin par. 2). Belmore is arguably one of the most well-known performance artists in the contemporary imaginary, with accolades including the Jack and Doris Shadbolt Foundation’s VIVA Award (2004), the Hnatyshyn Visual Arts Award (2009), the Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts (2013), the Gershon Iskowitz Prize (2016), and has been the recipient of three honorary doctorates from the Ontario College of Art and Design University (2005), Emily Carr University of Art + Design (2018) and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University (2019) (“Biography” par. 4). As the first Indigenous woman to

represent “Canada” at the Venice Biennale in 2005 (Berlin par. 2), Belmore has become a critical driving force in disseminating, (re)shaping and refuting global perspectives of Indigeneity and Indigenous art, with past exhibitions in Greece, Germany, Italy and Cuba (“Biography” par. 3).

Despite operating within vastly different mediums, Sámi poet, filmmaker and musician Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg similarly challenges Western, individualistic conventions of “art” through multidisciplinary creative work that actively defies the dominant settler paradigm. Born 1990 in Ohcejohka (“Utsjoki”) on the “Finnish” side of Sápmi, Holmberg’s art, written and performed primarily in his mother tongue of North Sámi, occupies and describes a liminal space shaped by complex explorations of identity, linguistic and cultural translation, land-based knowledge and anti-colonial epistemologies, all inherently grounded within a Sámi understanding of place and tradition (Prusynski 19). Albeit relatively removed from the public eye, Holmberg’s art has reached international critical acclaim. Holmberg’s works have been translated into Estonian, French, German, Norwegian, Finnish, Spanish and English and performed globally, earning him numerous awards, including the Eino Leino Literature Prize (2023), the Art Prize of the Lapland Regional Fund (2021), the Premio Giovani Literature Prize (2015), the Saami Council Literature Prize (2014), a winning spot in the Sámi Grand Prix (2005), Sámi of the Year (2016), two separate nominations for the Nordic Council Literature Prize (2015 & 2020, respectively), and an Honorary Doctorate of Arts from Lapin yliopisto (2024) (“Jalvvi Niillas – Niillas Holmberg” par. 6). Active in larger Sámi creative spheres since 2009 (Prusynski 19), Holmberg remains dedicated to decolonial, anti-capitalist activism, particularly focused on documenting and disrupting extraction occurring in traditional Sámi areas like Deatnu, Fovsen Njaarke, Aanaar and Gállok (“Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg” par. 3). This activist epistemology inherently structures his creative endeavors—as Holmberg’s biography notes, “Land-based knowledge and anti-colonial aspects are at the heart of his work” (“Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg” par. 3).

Belmore weaves a similar thread of radical decoloniality throughout all elements of her work, a theme most poignantly highlighted through her pieces exploring the ongoing, intergenerational trauma of residential schools and the hegemonic politics of reconciliation. Directly exemplifying this focus is Belmore’s 2013 piece *Apparition*, a looping video installation displayed at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery for their exhibit *Witnesses: Art and Canada’s Indian Residential Schools* (Gaertner 13). Roughly four minutes in length, *Apparition* opens with a slow fade to Belmore kneeling in front of a blue background, duct tape covering her mouth whilst she vacantly stares down the barrel of the lens (Gaertner 13). Her empty gaze appears to look *through* the spectator, a constant, haunting presence until Belmore moves from a praying position to a cross-legged position, slowly ripping the duct tape from her mouth

(Gaertner 13). Upon removing the tape, Belmore breaks her vacant stare, moving out of frame, before the clip begins to loop again (Gaertner 13).



A snapshot of *Apparition*, in lieu of the video clip. Credit: Leif Norman / Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery / 2013.

Whilst *Apparition* itself is a piece reflecting upon the profound loss of language through the genocidal apparatus of residential schools, as reflected by Belmore in her artist statement, what I wish to specifically highlight is her embodied use of silence and the *absence* of language to engage in a direct act of Indigenous refusal. In remaining silent after the duct tape has been removed, Belmore actively refuses to reproduce a testimony, thus subverting the dialectic of testimony/apology that shapes settler/Survivor interactions within a politic of reconciliation (Gaertner 14). The customary logic of “forgiveness” embedded within contemporary state-sanctioned reconciliation is wholly removed, thus forcing a settler audience to contend with their own culpability and uncomfortability in ongoing assimilationist colonial genocide.

Moreover, through such an absence of language, Belmore refuses to allow her body to become the “bridge” (Anzaldúa and Moraga xxxvii) between settler audiences and her lived experiences of Indigenous womanhood: she refutes what *xwélmexw* (Stó:lō) scholar Dylan Robinson (96) calls “*xwelítem*² hunger,” the consumptive desire of settlers to devour knowledge. Belmore thus combats settler ideations of knowledge, testimony, and depletion as ownable,

consumable commodities by exposing the population of the settler state to an environment wherein knowledge, through a state of absence, is rendered inaccessible. In refusing to reproduce the language of the colonizer, Belmore enacts a sovereign space in which her identity and personhood remains unintelligible within a settler epistemology, a space wherein her Indigeneity exists in direct defiance to a colonized practice of “reconciliation” shaped by a politic of hegemonic, white respectability.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that when discussing Belmore’s performance pieces, as I do with *Apparition*, I do not use the language of “absence” to signify deficit—instead, I assert that Belmore’s silence maps a geography of refusal, an active practice that examines the power in what is left unspoken, but not unsaid. As local curator and author Glenn Alteen notes in the foreword to *Wordless: The Performance Art of Rebecca Belmore* (2019), Belmore “use[s] her body to ‘speak’ without language...going beyond language, Belmore wrestles meaning out of thin air” (4). Belmore’s practice of silence, then, is both deeply laden with meaning and an inherent act of refusal: Belmore refuses to be understood within a linguistically colonial cosmology, echoing Stewart (33) in withholding a recognition of colonial power and refuting its ability to define the parameters of Indigenous life. Shirking the inherent coloniality of English as a medium of expression, Belmore instead communicates meaning through active silence, utilizing her body as a vessel to transmit an ongoing praxis of refusal.

Holmberg, directly echoing Belmore’s storied tapestry of refusal, weaves a similar thread of resilience through his 2024 studio album *Luodik*, produced by Sámi sound designer Pekka Aiko and published by DAT, a Sámi publishing house located in Sápmi (“Music” par. 1). On his website, Holmberg describes *Luodik* as a “yoik-soundscape album recorded on a Deatnu river boat. Jalvvi Niillas Holmberg rows the boat while reminiscing his ancestors and their relatives through *luohti* - yoik” (“Music” par. 1), thus grounding *Luodik* in a “Sámi cultural context, and specifically in a Sámi understanding of space and a tradition of Sámi writing about space” (Prusynski 21). Through *Luodik*’s sovereign soundscape, Holmberg, like Belmore, maps a geography of refusal, actively utilizing the *presence* of a distinctly Sámi language and means of being on, with, and part of land to invert the subjugator-subjugated relationship, thereby constructing the settler body as the ostracized Other, unable and prohibited from fully comprehending the profundity of Holmberg’s linguistic, place-based refusal.³

This refusal, forged through a culturally (un)intelligible, untranslated linguistic space, directly refutes what Robinson (85) calls the colonial *landscape*—relationships of displacement and hostility to place and land, structured through colonial language and the extractivist epistemologies that accompany it—by privileging an inherently Sámi mode of being. In refusing to provide a

translation or milieu, Holmberg, like Belmore, combats the consumptive desire of a *xwelitem* audience, thus embodying a space made both by and for Indigenous Peoples: *Luođik* (re)centres oral histories and performance as crucial ways of knowing and learning that enforce the validity of traditional Indigenous epistemologies. Utilizing his exclusively Sámi lyricism and expression through yoik, Holmberg simultaneously speaks to both his ancestors and descendents, daring to envision a future of fluent Sámi speakers: Holmberg's refusal, then, is a message of survivance to generations past, present, and future. Here, a linguistically sovereign space is established through an active rejection of the language of the colonizer, refusing colonial vanishing narratives of language "endangerment" that datify Indigenous life, instead asserting the continuous resilience, presence, and vitality of extant Indigeneity.

In situating Indigenous life, art, and expression within a contemporary context, Holmberg further challenges the so-called juxtaposition of the "traditional"/"modern" binary implicit in *Luođik*'s production, refusing a stereotypical, one-dimensional and dehumanizing portrayal of Indigenous Peoples as the last vestiges of "traditionalistic," "dying" cultures by directly (re)shaping the very concepts of "traditionality" and "authenticity" themselves. Playing with the assumed "traditionality" of the yoik, Holmberg refutes a settler hunger for "authenticity" by placing yoik within the larger, "modern" context of a mass-produced commercial album available to global audiences on the largest streaming platforms. This cultural hybridity is imperative in (re)contextualizing and (re)defining Indigeneity within an increasingly globalized world, (re)constituting representations of Indigenous lived experiences and settler understandings of "traditional" practices as living, evolving, and adapting alongside contemporary Indigenous temporalities.

Destabilizing a colonial politics of recognition by directly nurturing a space for Indigenous joy and pride in identity, Holmberg employs agency in his refusal to "play the white man's game" (Stewart 35), a mode of being that reduces Indigenous life to a constant struggle against settler encroachment, land theft, and violence—instead, Holmberg privileges a journey of self-determination and self-definition outside these settler paradigms, a praxis of refusal that challenges the limits of "change" within a colonial system by semantically refusing the presence and participation of the created settler Other.

Whilst Belmore and Holmberg operate within and between widely different mediums, utilizing unique, place-based knowledge that firmly roots their work in distinctly Anishnaabe and Sámi temporalities, both chart a poetic of refusal, "refus[ing] to refuse" (Aparna and Hamzah 227) on the colonizer's terms. To weaponize the false dichotomy of linguistic absence/presence in Belmore and Holmberg's pieces is to smother the intimate throughline of refusal that connects their work across space and time, manufacturing difference to constrain geographies of transnational Indigenous solidarity. Refusing a

colonial politic of “respectability,” Belmore and Holmberg actively challenge the settler consciousness, refusing to reproduce the language, testimony, and expectation of the oppressor, instead situating their own embodiments of identity and Indigeneity outside a colonial, sociolinguistic boundary.

NOTES

1. Roughly translates to “Anishinaabe woman.”
2. A term used to describe settlers in upriver Halq’eméylem, although it more accurately translates to “starving person” (Robinson).
3. I think it is similarly crucial to acknowledge here that this nuance is not something I, as a non-Indigenous, and more specifically, non-Sámi person would ever claim to understand. Situating my positionality as a white settler is key in contextualizing my analysis here, and while I comment on Holmberg’s mode of delivery, the full impact of his work is, as it is with all other non-Sámi folks, inaccessible to me.

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