International Art World and Transnational Artwork: Creative Presence in Rebecca Belmore’s Fountain at the Venice Biennale

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Abstract
Drawing from and contributing to the International Relations (IR) aesthetics literature, I analyse how Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore’s 2005 Venice Biennale performance-based video installation Fountain is an enactment of creative presence at an intersection of international and transnational politics. Belmore’s aesthetic method of engaging with water as a visual interface between the artist and viewer, by projecting the film of her performance onto a stream of falling water in the Canadian Pavilion exhibition, offers a method of understanding and transforming settler colonial power relations in world politics. I argue that Belmore’s artistic labour and knowledge production is an expression of Indigenous self-determination by discussing how Fountain is situated in relation with Indigenous peoples’ transnational land and waterway reclamations and cultural resurgences as well as the colonial context of the international art world dynamics of the Venice Biennale. My analysis of Belmore’s decolonial sensibility and political imagination with respect to water contributes to IR aesthetics debates by foregrounding the embodiment of knowledge production and performance artwork as a method of decolonisation.

Keywords
sovereignty, transnationalism, settler colonialism, Indigenous self-determination, artwork, agency

Résumé:
En me fondant sur la documentation concernant l’esthétique des relations internationales (RI) et désireuse d’y apporter ma contribution, j’analyse comment Fountain, l’installation vidéo basée sur une prestation scénique de l’artiste anishinaabe Rebecca Belmore présentée à la Biennale de Venise 2005 est une représentation créative à l’intersection de politiques internationales et transnationales.

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L’approche esthétique de Rebecca Belmore, qui consistait à utiliser l’eau comme interface visuelle entre l’artiste et le spectateur en projetant le film de sa prestation sur un rideau d’eau lors de l’exposition présentée dans le pavillon canadien, propose une méthode pour comprendre et transformer les rapports de force qui s’exercent dans les colonies de peuplement dans le cadre des politiques mondiales. Je soutiens que le travail artistique et la production de connaissances de Rebecca Belmore sont une expression d’autodétermination des autochtones. Je le fais en discutant de la manière dont Fountain se situe par rapport aux revendications des peuples autochtones sur les terres et les voies navigables transnationales et aux résurgences culturelles, dans le contexte colonial que constitue la Biennale de Venise pour la dynamique artistique mondiale. Mon analyse de la sensibilité décologale et de l’imagination politique de Rebecca Belmore au travers de l’utilisation de l’eau contribue aux débats sur l’esthétique des RI en mettant au premier plan les modes d’utilisation de la production de connaissances et des arts de la scène comme méthode de décolonisation.

**Mots-clés:**
- souveraineté, transnationalisme, colonialisme de peuplement, autodétermination des peuples autochtones, arts, organisation

**Resumen:**
Basándome en la bibliografía sobre la estética de las Relaciones Internacionales (RI) y como un aporte a la misma, analizo cómo Fountain, instalación de video basada en una performance de la artista anishinaabe Rebecca Belmore en la Bienal de Venecia de 2005, es una representación de la presencia creativa en la intersección de la política internacional y transnacional. El método estético de Rebecca Belmore, que hace intervenir el agua como interfaz visual entre artista y espectador al proyectar el vídeo de su performance sobre un flujo de agua que cae en la exposición del pabellón canadiense, propone un método para entender las relaciones de poder del colonialismo de asentamiento convirtiéndolas en política mundial. Sostengo que el trabajo artístico y la producción de conocimientos de Rebecca Belmore suponen una expresión de autodeterminación de los pueblos indígenas estudiando cómo se sitúa Fountain con respecto a las reclamaciones sobre tierras y vías fluviales transnacionales y resurgimientos culturales indígenas, y estudiando asimismo el contexto colonial de la dinámica mundial del arte internacional de la Bienal de Venecia. Mi análisis de la sensibilidad descolonial y la imaginación política de Rebecca Belmore con respecto al agua constituye un aporte a los debates sobre la estética de las RI, en cuanto que sitúa en un primer plano la manera de utilizar la producción de conocimientos y las performance artísticas como métodos de descolonización.

**Palabras clave:**
- soberanía, transnacionalismo, colonialismo de asentamiento, autodeterminación de los pueblos indígenas, obra de arte, agencia

**Introduction**

‘The stories of survivance are an active presence’.¹

‘Gerald Vizenor says the meaning is in the telling and in the presence, our individual and collective presence – Creation as presence’.²

The aesthetic turn in International Relations (IR) has questioned how Westphalian sovereign subjectivity and territorial sovereignty problematically operate as foundational categories of inquiry in IR and are socially reproduced in everyday discourse.\(^3\) IR aesthetics attends to artwork and popular cultures as ways of knowing the world, thereby requiring IR scholars to transform positivist research methods, theories, and worldviews in order to treat creativity and imagination as distinct forms of knowledge production rather than as yet another object of analysis to be incorporated into the IR canon.\(^4\) However, the IR aesthetics literature is limiting as it does not analytically engage with the long established interventions of Indigenous, feminist, people of colour, and queer art history scholars, curators, and artists who have theorised how aesthetic forms of knowledge production are embodied and how the canonisation of Eurocentric artworks and aesthetic philosophies marginalises the aesthetic labour and insights of diverse women, people of colour, and Indigenous peoples.\(^5\) My analysis of Rebecca Belmore’s *Fountain* at the 2005 Venice Biennale contributes to IR aesthetics debates on the politics of aesthetic knowledge production by foregrounding an intersectional analysis of settler colonialism and decolonial performance artwork.

The emerging IR decolonial aesthetics literature calls attention to how political imagination and sensibilities are central to self-determination struggles and are empowering aspects of collective actions against intertwined colonial material and symbolic violences.\(^6\) In this article I bring together IR literatures on aesthetics and sovereignty with multidisciplinary Indigenous theorists’ analyses of settler colonialism, decolonisation, and self-determination. The first section, ‘Settler Colonialism,
Decolonisation, and IR Aesthetics’, provides an overview of IR and Indigenous resurgence literatures on sovereignty. I outline how I situate my decolonial analysis of sovereignty and aesthetics within these literatures. In the second section, ‘The Venice Biennale and the International Art World’, I analyse the tension between the institutional colonial international politics and the transnational political relationships expressed through the work of Indigenous artists at this global event. In the third section, ‘Rebecca Belmore’s Transnational Artwork Fountain at the Venice Biennale: Disrupting the Colonial Gaze’, I analyse how Fountain disrupts the colonial erasure of Indigenous peoples from the domain of the Westphalian international order through Belmore’s decolonial artistic labour of reclaiming water as a performing material and medium of transnational visual encounter between the artist and audiences. I argue that Belmore’s aesthetic method of engaging with water as a visual interface between the artist and viewer, by projecting the film of her performance onto a stream of falling water in the Canadian Pavilion exhibition space, offers a method of understanding and transforming colonial power relations in world politics. In the fourth section, ‘Creative Presence: Decolonial Political Imagination and Sensibility with Respect to Water’, I analyse how Belmore’s decolonial labour and knowledge production is an expression of Indigenous self-determination by discussing how Fountain is situated in relation with contemporary transnational Indigenous lands and waters reclamations and cultural resurgences.

My analysis contributes to IR aesthetics and sovereignty debates by foregrounding the embodiment of knowledge production and performance art as a method of decolonisation. I argue that Belmore’s Fountain is an expression of what I call creative presence: providing a method of cultivating a decolonial sensibility and political imagination with respect to water and analytically making sense of the political struggles over ongoing settler colonialism, Indigenous self-determination, and decolonisation in global contexts. By bringing together the IR aesthetics and IR sovereignty literatures with multidisciplinary Indigenous theorists’ analyses of settler colonialism, decolonisation and self-determination I contribute a decolonial analysis to IR of aesthetic labour, sensibility and political imagination. I show how the creative presence of Indigenous artists working within conditions of settler colonialism and the international art world not only represent ideas about political struggle but rather their artwork is intertwined with political struggles over lands and waterways reclamations and cultural resurgences. My analysis of Belmore’s Fountain shows how contemporary artwork can unsettle the understanding of modernity as a progressive force in world history and problematise the imagination of Westphalian sovereignty as a universal mode of world ordering of communities. Belmore invites viewers to decolonise the imagination of hierarchical world ordering as a natural inevitability by reclaiming water as a visual interface for confronting the violence of colonial genocide in Canada experienced by Indigenous peoples. By foregrounding water as a performing and performative presence in this work of contemporary art, Belmore’s decolonial sensibility and political imagination of international relations disrupts Westphalian notions of power as the capacity to claim exclusive territorial sovereignty and unsettles anthropocentric worldviews of agency by affirming the inherent power of water.
Settler Colonialism, Decolonisation, and IR Aesthetics

Sovereignty is a debated concept in IR theory and lived experiences of world politics. IR postcolonial interventions have demonstrated how conventional IR theories, methods, and pedagogies reproduce material colonial power dynamics in world politics through the epistemological normalisation of Westphalian territorial sovereignty as the universal mode of world ordering. IR realist and liberal theorists understand security and power in terms of state capacities for expressing sovereignty through military dominance, the rule of law, and accumulation of capital. IR postcolonial and decolonial theorists analyse how sovereign power produces systemic colonial violence and hierarchies in processes of constituting territorial borders and by inventing categories of legal identification to unjustly assert systems of governance that treat self-determining Indigenous peoples as domestic populations. These analyses call attention to and problematise how material sovereign power relationships emerge through and inform the colonial political imagination of Westphalian territorial sovereignty as the universally desired and experienced mode of global governance.

IR has systemically undertheorized settler colonial genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples as well as Indigenous peoples’ inherent self-determination in global contexts. Indigenous decolonial scholars emphasise how genocide and dispossession have historically been and continue to be central to the consolidation of settler colonial sovereignty claims through interconnected processes of capitalist primitive accumulation, patriarchal social relations, and the establishment of a colonial world order characterised by Westphalian territorial sovereignty. Makere Stewart-Harawira argues that the historical ‘contracting out
of indigenous peoples from the emergent world order of nation states’ through colonial academic knowledge production, political discourse, international law, and international political institutional formations work together in the present to normalise neoliberal political economies and settler colonial governance of Indigenous peoples. In this way, the power, agency, and authority of Indigenous peoples as self-determining political communities has been systematically undermined through the assertion of Westphalian territorial sovereignty and management of settler colonial power relationships through this mode of world ordering.

Multidisciplinary inquiries into the effects of settler colonial knowledge production emphasise how academic discourses and institutionalised relationships normalise political violence through the epistemological erasure of Indigenous peoples as self-determining political communities in the realm of global politics. Analyses of settler colonial governance and political imagination demonstrate how state violence operates through intertwined symbolic violences of visual culture and material violences of dispossession, assimilation, and genocide. Analyses of the role of settler colonial political economies in the consolidation of a Eurocentric global sensibility have shown how the hierarchical racialisation of labouring subjects has historically been foundational to the emergence of settler colonial sovereignty claims. Within these conditions of political violence, Indigenous communities’ reciprocal relationships with traditional lands and waterways unsettle colonial, capitalist, patriarchal worldviews and material relationships of power assumed to be natural or normative in the Westphalian world order, such as the commodification of lands and waterways in extractive industries.

The Canadian federal government policy the Indian Act (1876) has been and continues to be a method of systematically dispossessing Indigenous peoples from traditional lands and waterways, through the settler colonial invention and regulation of the legal identification Indian Status and the reservation system. Canadian settler colonial claims to territorial sovereignty have been produced and enforced through such systemic and institutionalised processes of dispossession, genocide, and assimilation of Indigenous peoples by the settler colonial state and society. Indigenous communities and scholars emphasise how cultural resurgences (intergenerational reclamations of Indigenous

17. Lawrence, ‘Gender, Race and the Regulation of Native Identity’.
languages, ceremonies, and land/water-based knowledge systems) are a vital dimension of Indigenous political self-determination. Indigenous analyses of knowledge production and ways of knowing through storytelling and place-based philosophies emerging from ‘living on the land’ and waters emphasise the role of Indigenous women as knowledge keepers and land defenders/water protectors in decolonising political violence perpetrated by the Canadian state and settler society. By centralising the labour and knowledge production of Indigenous women in processes of decolonisation and practices of self-determination in the context of Canada, these analyses honour and affirm how Indigenous women’s work in community-based organisations, scholarship, and arts communities has been a condition of possibility for the emergence of public discourses on the politics of reconciliation and academic decolonial thought.

Indigenous transnational movements such as #IdleNoMore and collaborations to ratify the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples emphasise that nation to nation relationships of rights and responsibilities are embodied in treaty relationships between settler communities and Indigenous communities. Further, while practices of Indigenous self-determination call on settler governments and societies to honour treaty relationship and often work strategically within settler colonial political institutions, Indigenous decolonial scholars emphasise that this is not a mirroring of Westphalian sovereignty in an effort to secure Indigenous sovereignty on colonial terms. Rather Indigenous self-determination struggles that engage settler societies and states’ treaty relationships by foregrounding Indigenous communities’ historical and ongoing reciprocal relationships with traditional lands and waterways unsettle the assumed universality of the Westphalian territorial imaginary and practice of world ordering by demonstrating the presence of political communities and modes of governance that cannot be contained within the Westphalian political imaginary, international law, and settler governance.

My reading of Belmore’s Fountain as decolonial artwork demonstrates how this project is connected with Indigenous peoples’ lands and waterways reclamations in world politics. Indigenous nations and scholars emphasise how contemporary lands and waterways reclamations are not only acts of resistance against settler colonial claims to exclusive sovereignty. Rather Indigenous peoples’ reclamations of traditional relationships with lands and

waters that have been violently dispossessed through settler colonialism are enactments of responsibilities to Indigenous laws that have emerged through Indigenous communities’ traditional reciprocal relationships with lands and waters.24 Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, Glen S. Coulthard describes contemporary Indigenous resurgences within conditions of settler colonialism as ‘rejecting the colonial politics of recognition’ through such processes as land claims agreements with settler states and instead enacting ‘self-recognition and anti-colonial empowerment’ through the labour and knowledge production of Indigenous lands and waterways reclamation.25 The violence of settler colonial commodification and occupation of lands and waters continues to be a site of intense political struggles in the present. The Oceti Sakowin/Seven Council Fires Camp of water protectors standing with the Standing Rock Sioux community embody the land and water-based philosophy that ‘mni wiconi/water is life’ by demonstrating their commitment to be ‘united in water protecting against the Dakota Access Pipeline’ construction by Energy Transfer Partners under the Missouri River. Their embodiment of a decolonial worldview and relationship with land and water has been met with the full force of the United States of America’s settler colonial state institutions. Police surveillance and the cruel weaponisation of water through police use of water cannons, as well as rubber bullets and tear gas, against water defenders in freezing overnight conditions have been mobilised in a violent effort to remove people from the land and waters by force.27

In the context of settler colonialism, my analysis of Belmore’s decolonial artistic labour, sensibility, and political imagination expressed through *Fountain* stretches the current boundaries of the IR aesthetics debates. I am making the case that Belmore’s creative presence embodies Indigenous self-determination through her aesthetic method of engaging with water as a performing material and medium. In other words, *Fountain* is not merely a metaphorical representation of ideas about sovereignty, decolonisation, and self-determination. Indigenous self-determination struggles are increasingly prioritising collective resources, energy, and attention to Indigenous reclamations of traditional lands and waters (such as through reclaiming Indigenous place names and ceremonial practices at particular sites) and cultural resurgences (such as through learning and teaching Indigenous languages). Further, since the colonial assimilation of Indigenous peoples is a systematic process in the settler colonial genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples,28 Indigenous communities and scholars emphasise how lands and waters reclamations and cultural resurgences are interconnected processes. In this context, Belmore’s *Fountain* rejects the

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objectification of the colonial gaze and is a powerful expression of Indigenous self-determination that foregrounds empowerment through the embodiment of aesthetic knowledge production and the inherent power of water in global contexts.

### The Venice Biennale and the International Art World

In 2004, the Canada Council for the Arts selected Rebecca Belmore to represent Canada at the 51st Biennale in Venice, Italy in June 2005. Belmore was the first Indigenous woman to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale, which is widely considered to be one of the most prestigious festivals in the international art world. The Venice Biennale is often referred to as the ‘Art World’s Olympics’ due to artists’ participation as national representatives and the institutionalisation of this festival as a mega-event enacting nationalisms on a global platform. Serendipitously, one of Belmore’s mentors, Luiseño performance artist James Luna, was selected to represent the United States of America in 2005.\(^{29}\) With 55 national pavilions and several collateral events, the 51st Venice Biennale was co-directed by Spanish curators María de Corral and Rosa Martínez.\(^ {30}\) The catalogue statements discussing the curators’ vision of the Venice Biennale underscores how the event operates as a global platform that embodies the tensions between institutionalised hierarchical international power relations and possibilities for transformative subject formation through artwork. Martínez says:

> The biennale model offers a wonderful chance to analyse the new concept of internationality and to redraw topographies of alterity. However, the illusion of creating a temporary global agora cannot hide the existence of a new cultural and technological apartheid in which the poor are rendered ever more dependent.\(^ {31}\)

de Corral and Martínez’s co-directorship marked the first time the event was organised by two women. The participation of Belmore, Luna, de Corral and Martínez, was a notable departure from the historical privileging of almost exclusively white male directors, national representatives and curators exhibiting paintings and sculptures.

The Venice Biennale’s inaugural exhibition was held in 1895 at the height of the popularity of European and North American World Fair exhibitions displaying national pride through the achievements and promises of scientific discoveries, technological innovations, and cultural displays. The ‘City of Water’ was well situated to be a site for a global gathering of artistic exchange and commerce, as Venice had already been a site of global relations for centuries. From its strategic military position as a naval power and its colonial trade route location, Venice provided a gathering place for generations of artistic communities. Speaking about the requirements for curators to undertake the organisation of 19th and 20th century international European world fair exhibitions and major art exhibitions, Lawrence Alloway said:

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31. Ibid.
to deal organizationally with such abundance requires the well-organized setting of goals and schedules and logistic efficiency on an international scale. That is to say, the exhibition has to work like an industrial or military operation.\textsuperscript{32}

Alloway’s analysis points to how the exhibition of artworks on a global platform required the institutionalisation of ongoing international power dynamics. The foundation of the Venice Biennale as an institution within the mutually constituting conditions of European capitalist industrialisation, patriarchy, militarisation, and colonisation continues to inform its present day operation as a dominant hub in the international art world. As demonstrated in the 2005 Biennale, under de Corral and Martínez’s Artistic Directorship and with Belmore and Luna’s performance-installations, many participants engage with the tensions between the historically specific conditions of its foundation, the current conditions of the elite international art world, and possibilities for socially transformative artwork that transgresses conventional cataloguing, programming and exhibition methods.

Canada was first represented at the Venice Biennale in 1952. The catalogue essay focuses on the role of the National Gallery of Canada in establishing a national identity and diplomatic international relations through visual art exhibitions of Canadian artwork in the Americas, Europe and the Commonwealth.\textsuperscript{33} The catalogue essay and exhibition expressed a Canadian settler nationalism and practice of institutional visual methods that existed in relation with Canadian art institutions’ colonial ethnographic knowledge production about the artwork and cultures of Indigenous peoples. Canadian state investment in the Venice Biennale joined a growing number of states seeking to participate in and capitalise on the international art world. While the 1895 Biennale displayed 516 artworks with 186 pieces sold, by 1952 there were 3,439 artworks exhibited and 562 pieces sold.\textsuperscript{34}

Métis artist Edward Poitras was the first Indigenous artist to represent Canada in 1995 with an exhibition of his photography and sculptures.\textsuperscript{35} In the exhibition catalogue curator Gerald McMaster describes Poitras’ preparation of the work and his engagement with gold as a material and medium of a visual storytelling through the trickster figure Coyote:

During a recent trip to Venice, Poitras was struck by the quantity of gold used for religious and lay objects, gold which mainly came from the conquest of North America. Had he found out that beneath the layers of these objects lay the true story of “America”?… Poitras wants us to understand that there still exist connections between Europe and (aboriginal) America, that America is no longer far away, or, as the title of one of his works suggests, \textit{At the Edge of the World}.\textsuperscript{36}

Poitras’ artwork and McMaster’s curatorial work demonstrate how historical colonial encounters and present day hierarchies in international relations between Indigenous peoples in the Americas, European peoples, and settlers profoundly affect all peoples involved.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Lawrence Alloway, \textit{The Venice Biennale, 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl} (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 38.
\item \textsuperscript{33} \textit{XXII Biennale Di Venezia Catalogo, Seconda Edizione} (Venezia: Alfiere Editore, 1952), 197.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Alloway, \textit{The Venice Biennale, 1895–1968}, 193.
\end{itemize}
Theorists of the international politics of public art museums have shown how these institutional sites have historically produced colonial visual knowledge through collections and methods of display that inform hierarchical national subjectivities.\(^{37}\) My analysis of the Venice Biennale as a contested site of knowledge production focuses on the ways in which present day settler colonial subject formation is disrupted and the possibility of decolonisation is introduced in this international art space through the transnational aesthetic labour of Indigenous artists and curators. Indigenous artists at the Venice Biennale engaging with the materials and stories that make up shared and contested experiences of colonialism create possibilities for transformative modes of analysing, sensing, and embodying global relations. Such interventions demonstrate how colonial power as an international relationship emerges through and informs the institutional organisation of spaces of exhibiting artistic expression in relation to ongoing histories of colonial sovereignty and capitalist commodification. Indigenous artists, curators and scholars at the Venice Biennale analysing the current conditions of colonial power that inform the international art world create possibilities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to engage in transnational artwork. This work enacts a decolonial transnational agency by calling attention to the forum’s colonial methods of national representation, by creating spaces for Indigenous artists’ self-expression within these settler colonial international conditions, and by creating possibilities for decolonising audience engagements with Indigenous artists’ work as a global experience in Venice.

**Rebecca Belmore’s Transnational Artwork Fountain at the Venice Biennale: Disrupting the Colonial Gaze**

Belmore discussed her experience of being selected as the first Indigenous woman to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale in conversation with Scott Watson for the exhibition catalogue. Belmore said:

> It makes me think of the Olympics. I have to admit a strange pride when an athlete from Canada excels, but at the same time these forms of identification conceal as much as they reveal about the complexity of our experience. Some aboriginal people will identify only with their aboriginal nation. While there is an aspect of resistance to this, I want to be careful not to limit my identity or to be disingenuous about the complexity of those social or political structures that, for better or worse, have framed my experience. My work is really happening at the intersection of many identities. It is seeing how these sit together, often through my own body and the power relations that affect it, and that is what my work is about.\(^{38}\)

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38. Jann L.M. Bailey (Director of The Kamloops Art Gallery) and Scott Watson (Director of The Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery at the University of British Columbia) were the exhibition curators. Scott Watson and Rebecca Belmore, ‘Interview’ in *Rebecca Belmore: Fountain* (Kamloops: Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, 2005), 28.
Belmore foregrounds the embodied tensions of the conditions of the international art world facilitating the Venice Biennale by challenging the colonial desire for pure subjectivities. Rather than reducing the complex intersections of her subjectivity, Belmore emphasises that one aspect of her performance artwork is an act of exposing how the multifaceted power relations that underpin global colonial political structures are embodied.

Indigenous contemporary performance artists’ work that directly engages with the conditions of colonial representations in art institutions take place at intersections of international relationships with settler societies and transnational relationships of self-determination. Decolonial performance art, such as Belmore’s Fountain, embodies the global politics of artistic labour and aesthetic knowledge production. By focusing on decolonial performance art I read Belmore’s Fountain as a site of embodying aesthetic theories and methods, which extends beyond IR positivism and IR aesthetics discourse analyses. While the aesthetic turn in IR has importantly challenged the abstractions and universal claims of positivist IR methods of explaining power, violence and agency in world politics, its focus on discourse analysis of artworks and popular cultures conflates European modern art history/philosophy as a universal framework. IR aesthetics theorists draw almost exclusively on the Western canon of aesthetics philosophy (such as Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Rancière) to make universal claims. There is an absence of comparable analytical engagement with postcolonial and decolonial scholars of global aesthetics (such as Aimé Césaire, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Sylvia Wynter) and feminist artists and art historians of global aesthetics (such as Griselda Pollock, Peggy Phelan, Lorraine O’Grady, Trinh T. Minh-ha). The few IR scholars who do engage with these literatures discuss the systemic lack of engagement with postcolonial and decolonial aesthetics philosophers within the IR aesthetic turn and their analyses and methods demonstrate the vital insights on global power articulated through postcolonial and decolonial aesthetics.

In the Millennium journal ‘Forum: The Aesthetic Turn at 15’, Brent J. Steele notes that the IR aesthetics literature has largely ‘directly or indirectly excluded the role and function of aesthetics outside of or against those Western locations’ through the reliance on the Western canon of aesthetics philosophers and therefore he encourages...
'marshaling non-Western and postcolonial accounts to open up visual frames of research in IR'. My engagement with postcolonial, decolonial, and feminist aesthetics literatures contributes to the IR aesthetics literature an intersectional analysis of aesthetics as an embodied process of knowledge production.

Performance artwork can disrupt the objectification of the colonial gaze by emphasizing embodiment as a site of political struggles and making political claims. By foregrounding embodied presence as the medium of artistic creation, performance artwork disrupts popular ideas and practices of treating art as an object of representation. Belmore’s performances and installations consistently engage with artwork as a method of naming, transforming, and transgressing the material conditions of colonialism in global contexts. Belmore’s performances call attention to how settler colonial conditions marginalise Indigenous artists’ methods of self-representation along with the systemic distribution of art institutions’ resources, art history discourses, and popular visual culture that privileges non-Indigenous Canadian artists. These historical and contemporary material conditions shape the intersection between the international art world that facilitates the Venice Biennale and the transnational artwork *Fountain*.

Belmore’s performance of *Fountain* was filmed in collaboration with Director Noam Gonick and a production crew on Iona Beach in Richmond, British Columbia, where the waters of the Strait of Georgia and Pacific Ocean meet the shores of Coast Salish territories. This beach location is a threshold of many overlapping natural elements and human activities. At Iona Beach, where water meets land, the film focuses on the international dynamics at play through the sight of sewage from a nearby filtration plant flowing from a pipe into the water and the sound of airplanes at the nearby Vancouver International Airport. Belmore described the performance/film location at Iona Beach as ‘an amazing and totally charged site’ due to the sewage pollution, airport, driftwood scattered across the beach (‘renegade logs from the logging industry’), and the location of the beach in the Musqueam peoples’ traditional territories. The performance/filming location on Iona Beach and exhibition location at the Venice Biennale are both international sites that Belmore engages with through transnational artwork.

The film begins with a panoramic view of a cloudy sky. The frame moves slowly and steadily downwards to the water and the land, then careens across the shore scattered with logs. As the pace of the frame moving across the beach speeds up, an airplane can be heard flying high above in the sky. The frame comes to rest on a pile of wood that spontaneously bursts into a fire that glows brilliantly against the grey sky and bleak landscape. As the flames roar and the burning wood crackles, the frame gradually shifts upwards towards the sky again.

The second sequence shows Belmore struggling in shallow waters. Belmore is sitting waist-deep in the water, drenched and she shakes her head. Her gestures, moving her hands and arms across the surface of the water and moving her body erratically through the water, suggests that she is struggling to break away from a force that is not visible to

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42. Ibid., 207.
43. Merson, ‘International Relations and Contemporary Artwork’.
the camera lens. She breathes heavily as she crawls through the water and tries to gain her footing. Belmore grunts as she fishes a well-worn bucket out of the water. The film alternates between slow motion and standard speed as she thrashes around in the water, grunting from the effort of trying to fill the bucket with water.

The third sequence begins with Belmore resting waist-deep in the same shallow, placid waters. Belmore is kneeling in meditative stillness. Eventually she inhales deeply and rises. The frame, from below, looks upwards to show only Belmore, moving, against the sky. She is breathing heavily, walking slowly and steadily forward.

The fourth sequence is a panoramic view from the land, with the beach filling the bottom half the screen and the ocean and sky across the top half. From afar on the shore, Belmore is approaching. The only sound is her footsteps in the distance. As she comes closer it is clear she is carrying the bucket in her left hand. From her gestures, the bucket appears to be full and heavy to carry. Once she is near, suddenly Belmore stops walking. With a deep groan she throws the contents of the buckets at the camera. Shockingly, it is blood red.

The field of view is entirely flooded in an opaque bloody redness. The redness coating the lens in the film production appeared to be blood flowing in the Canadian pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In the exhibition, where the film was projected onto a stream of falling water that acted as the screen, at this point the flowing water as the visual interface through which the audience experienced Fountain suddenly appeared to turn into blood and the room was bathed in red light. As the performance-installation continues, Belmore’s laboured breathing can be heard clearly but the image of her body is heavily distorted through the thickness of the bloody redness between the viewer and the artist.

Belmore’s naming of the project Fountain speaks to an international art world audience from an Indigenous perspective about her engagement with how the power of water is expressed in Western cultural archetypes. As architectural features in European city-centres, fountains have been commissioned, designed and constructed as expressions of wealth and status of established religious, state, and social elites. Since the prominent display of monuments in common spaces has been a systematic way that European colonists throughout the world historically sought to assert sovereign claims to settlements, fountains are common features in city centres in many settler colonial societies. Discussing how Fountain engages with the present day significance of the colonial history of European fountains, Lee-Ann Martin notes that the present day construction of grandiose fountains in city centres that have been commissioned by wealthy private investors is an expression of global political economic relationships, as such projects deflect attention from how state-corporate partnerships profit from undermining communities’ well-being. Martin says: ‘These fountains dramatically and effectively equate nature with the economic stability that such institutions promise to provide to communities’.45 Martin’s analysis points to how colonial capitalist power dynamics are dependent not only on the commodification of water in ways that produce massive inequalities and hardship for communities but also require the normalisation of these

Figure 1. Rebecca Belmore. *Fountain*. 2005. Installation View. Courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: José Ramón González.

Figure 2. Rebecca Belmore. *Fountain*. 2005. Production Still. Courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: José Ramón González.
Figure 3. Rebecca Belmore. *Fountain*. 2005. Production Still. Courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: José Ramón González.

Figure 4. Rebecca Belmore. *Fountain*. 2005. Production Still. Courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: José Ramón González.
**Figure 5.** Rebecca Belmore. *Fountain*. 2005. Production Still. Courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: José Ramón González.

**Figure 6.** Rebecca Belmore. *Fountain*. 2005. Production Still. Courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: José Ramón González.
Figure 7. Rebecca Belmore. *Fountain*. 2005. Production Still. Courtesy of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Photo: José Ramón González.


conditions by instilling the belief in the collective imagination that this is natural and beneficial to all. A critical view of the fountain as a public display of international politics through the medium of water expresses not only the aesthetic pleasure of viewing the movement of water but also allows us to see how the desire to control the movement of water is a contested process. Building on IR analyses of how monuments can function to normalise how political violence and inequalities are understood in the popular imagination46 I argue that, while such fountains commemorate the prestige and wealth of elite people, Belmore’s *Fountain* is a performance-installation that treats water itself as inherently powerful.

Belmore’s naming of *Fountain* and her bodily gestures in the performance call attention to restrictive archetypes of the Eurocentric art canon and art history scholarship about women in art and the work of women artists. Two common figures in Western paintings are the images of a nude European woman bathing and the image of an anonymous woman or girl performing the labour of fetching water to care for or serve another person or group. Feminist art historians, curators and artists have shown how the pervasiveness of such images in the Eurocentric art canon works to privilege the heteronormative white male gaze and marginalises both the lived experiences of women and artwork by women artists that engages with broader ranges of social relationships and power dynamics, including relationships and inequalities that women experience with other women, particularly in relationships of domestic

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labour and social reproduction. In Belmore’s *Fountain*, her presence in the water at Iona Beach and her labour of gathering, carrying, and throwing water do not conform to conventional representations of women in the Eurocentric art history canon that objectify women in a passive position for the viewer’s pleasure or portray women as anonymous servants.

Belmore’s *Fountain* problematises the status quo gendered dynamics of the Western art canon and art criticism and her work speaks to the contemporary international art world community from her positionality as an Indigenous woman artist. Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) is often cited as a pivotal work in the emergence of contemporary art. Duchamp’s *Fountain* problematised the established belief that artistic creation mainly involved an individual’s exceptional vision to transform pure materials, such as a block of marble or oil paints on a blank canvas, to create unique objects for purchase by collectors and viewing in art museums. Duchamp’s *Fountain* and his concept of ‘readymade’ art emphasised how artistic creation involves the expression of ideas that can be done with ordinary objects and materials, with a view to establishing a more equitable relationship between artists and audiences, thereby challenging gatekeepers of international art communities who benefit from cultivating an elite art market. Belmore’s decision to create a waterfall screening of *Fountain* expresses her understanding of the power of water as aesthetically moving, as a commodified resource in international economies, as a force of nature, and as a significant element in Anishnaabe cosmology.

Rather than treating water as an abstract material to be acted upon and rather than projecting the video onto a static wall or screen made of synthetic material, Belmore draws on earthworks methods to engage with the performative power of water and create a space of transnational encounter between the artist and the audience. Belmore’s decolonial sensibility and political imagination with respect to water demonstrates how the global politics of settler colonialism, decolonisation, and Indigenous self-determination are embodied in relationships and materials that cannot be contained within the Westphalian territorial imaginary and state institutions. In conversation with Robert Enright, Belmore discussed the political significance of *Fountain’s* final sequence:

> when I’m throwing the blood on the screen in this formal shape of a fountain and I’m bringing back the fountain to Venice – it’s like saying “colonization is a killer.” And it’s still doing the same thing in Canadian contemporary culture. My question is, when will it stop?.

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47. Pollock, *Vision and Difference*.
In conversation with Watson, Belmore discussed the visual significance of the final sequence:

I hope that a transformative connection is made as the viewer and I face each other across this screen, where water changes into blood, blood into water and history into art.53

Belmore’s statements provide insights into how to trace the transnational political claims made in her performance and exhibition of *Fountain*. Belmore’s labour as an artist and the audience’s labour of experiencing the exhibition, together, enact a transnational encounter that confronts the international violences of colonialism. Belmore’s labour in her performance in the icy water at Iona Beach and her gesture of throwing back the bloody consequences of colonialism are met by the viewer’s labour of returning this visual exchange in an international forum. Richard William Hill has discussed how Belmore’s *Fountain* engages ‘the embodied physicality of the audience’54 and foregrounds the role of contemporary artwork in the mutual subject formation of the audience and the artist.55 Where computer, television, and projection screens are ubiquitous static surfaces that facilitate one-way spectatorship, *Fountain*’s water screen offers a fluid medium of imagined visual exchange between the artist and the audience. Belmore’s method of communicating a decolonial performance with the audience opens up a transnational space to reflect on the devastating impacts of colonialism and potential for artwork to create decolonial modes of analysing, sensing, and enacting political relationships. Such creative visions are vital in this current global era of state-centred reconciliation projects, as Indigenous communities are renewing calls for settlers to engage in decolonisation and affirm the inherent self-determination of Indigenous communities beyond the colonial boundaries of Westphalian sovereignty.56

**Creative Presence: Decolonial Political Imagination and Sensibility with Respect to Water**

The decolonial imperative to imagine worlds otherwise from within present colonial conditions necessitates affirming the agency of Indigenous artists’ labour and insights on global power relationships. Anishinaabe scholar, poet, and fiction writer Gerald Vizenor demonstrates how Indigenous peoples’ active presence not only unsettles colonialism but expresses Indigenous self-determination in ways that cannot be reduced to settler colonial academic categories of description or political institutions.57 Vizenor demonstrates how settler colonialism is dependent on asserting the imagined absence of Indigenous peoples, in order to claim exclusive settler entitlement to territorial sovereignty, through imagining and depicting the colonial figure of ‘the Indian’.58 In these conditions, Vizenor describes the power of Indigenous peoples’ presence:

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55. Ibid, 51.
57. Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*.
58. Ibid., 152.
Survivance, in the sense of native survivance, is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence. The Indian has no native ancestors; the original crease of that simulation is Columbian. The native stories of survivance are successive and natural estates; survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy and victimry... transmotion, that sense of native motion and an active presence, is *sui generis* sovereignty. Native transmotion is survivance, a reciprocal use of nature, not a monotheistic, territorial sovereignty.59

Vizenor’s concept of survivance, as an analysis of Indigenous peoples’ presence in contesting colonialism and enacting self-determination, is influential in contemporary theorisations of Indigenous lands and waters reclamation and cultural resurgences. Drawing from Vizenor’s emphasis on Indigenous ‘Creation as presence’60 Anishinaabe scholar and storyteller Leanne Betasamosake Simpson demonstrates how conventional settler academic theories of social movements cannot analyse the power dynamics of Indigenous reclamation and cultural resurgences when social movement theory focuses on how political groups make claims to sovereign state representatives or institutions.61 Simpson says:

Transforming ourselves, our communities and our nations is ultimately the first step in transforming our relationship with the state. Building diverse, nation- culture-based resurgences means significantly re-investing in our own ways of being: regenerating our political and intellectual traditions; articulating and living our legal systems; language learning; ceremonial and spiritual pursuits; creating and using our artistic and performance-based traditions.62

Simpson’s analysis speaks to how Indigenous resurgences transgress settler colonial theories of power and agency as the capacity to claim exclusive territorial sovereignty.

The centrality of water in Indigenous cosmologies, laws, political systems, and everyday life practices problematises Canadian settler colonial claims to exclusive sovereignty and enacts Indigenous self-determination through transnational practices.63 Mi’kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence calls attention to how land claims processes attempt to compel Indigenous peoples to assimilate their political struggles to the Canadian settler colonial legal and political systems. Lawrence’s analysis of Algonquin peoples’ self-determination struggles focuses on how the Canadian settler colonial invention of the legal category of Indian Status through the *Indian Act* was a method of dispossession. She discusses how the Algonquin peoples’ experience of the colonial imposition of Indian Status and settler political borders have had devastating impacts on their relationship with the *Kiji Sibi* (Ottawa River) watershed, which historically has been the main source of food, trade, and travel routes and is central to Algonquin cosmology and identity experienced through ceremony and storytelling. Lawrence discusses the impact of colonial settlement and establishing the Canadian capital city on the border between Ontario and Québec along the *Kiji Sibi*:

59. Ibid., 15.
60. Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 43.
61. Ibid., 16.
62. Ibid., 17–18.
Algonquin systems of land tenure (like those of most Indigenous people) are organized around watersheds rather than the rivers that run through them. In this way of thinking, the natural divisions between territories are the high grounds that divide watersheds. For Europeans, where rivers are merely lines on a map, the river itself becomes the boundary between territories. Thus, when the British chose the Ottawa River as the border between Upper and Lower Canada, they drew an artificial line through the territories of those whose lands had been situated on both sides of the Ottawa River, with the result that the boundary ruptured family and band territories. Communities were forced to adapt as the people settled on one side of the river or the other and began dealing with two different provincial administrations – and were treated as different communities.64

Lawrence also accounts for how Status and non-Status Algonquin communities pursue diverse strategies of land claims, land reclamations, and cultural resurges in order to fulfil their particular understandings of their rights and responsibilities to traditional lands and waterways.

As Coulthard has demonstrated, ‘the colonial politics of recognition’ approach by settler state institutions focuses on settler legal systems’ rights-based approaches and land claims processes that seek to compel Indigenous peoples to assimilate political struggles to a system established by the Canadian settler state.65 In this context, Indigenous peoples’ lands and waters reclamations and cultural resurgences transgress IR theories and methods of understanding exclusive territorial sovereignty as the ultimate expression of international power by demonstrating the centrality of water in Indigenous peoples’ practices of creative presence in world politics. Simpson’s analysis of the interconnection between Indigenous lands and waters reclamations and cultural resurgences characterises this process of collectively transgressing colonial assimilation and erasure of Indigenous presence in the global realm through the creation of a Nishnaabeg ‘society of presence’.66 Within this context of understanding how Indigenous lands and waters reclamations are interconnected with cultural resurgences, I argue that Belmore’s Fountain enacts an Indigenous creative presence that both decolonises the conditions of the international art world and expresses Indigenous self-determination in global politics through transnational artwork.

**Conclusion**

Belmore’s artwork enacts Indigenous creative presence through her decolonial treatment of water as an artistic material in her performance at Iona Beach and as a performing element in the installation at the Canadian pavilion in Venice. Belmore has discussed how her decision to project the filmed performance onto water in the exhibition meant: ‘the water in the space becomes the performer and brings performance back into the edited video version, which makes me happy’.67 Belmore’s decision to mediate the visual encounter between the artist and the audience by projecting her performance onto the

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64. Lawrence, *Fractured Homeland*, 46.
waterfall screen emphasises the performativity of water. Belmore’s gesture of throwing the bucket of Pacific Ocean water that turns into blood foregrounds the bloodshed of settler colonialism, the role of water in subject formation in global contexts, and Belmore’s perspective on the centrality of water in Anishinabe cosmology. As the sequence continues, Belmore’s figure is present and distorted through the opaque redness. She is visually inaccessible but her presence, breathing heavily from the performative labour of gathering, carrying, and throwing, and the editing of the performance to maintain the frame on this exchange between the artist and the audience cultivates a decolonising sensibility and political imagination with respect to water. Belmore’s performance gesture that transforms water to blood and the visual encounter between the artist and audience through the water/blood screen creates both a space for the international art world audience to reflect on the violence of colonialism and enacts an Indigenous creative presence that affirms the elemental role of water as ‘the lifeblood of the earth’. In this way, Belmore’s artistic labour and knowledge production call attention to how settler colonialism violently objectifies water while a decolonial sensibility emphasises cultivating respect for the inherent power of water and understanding water as a foundational element of decolonising political relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers.

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