



## **Projecting Cracks, Bending Borders: Exploring Gendered Racial Violence in *Un/bound***

***Elan Marchinko***

*York University (Department of Theatre and Performance Studies)*

### **Abstract**

This article engages performance art as a critical interstitiality in which to excavate those necropolitical forces that mobilize human rights for (white) settlers across the same civic spaces in which racialized others are brutalized and die, in Canada, in 2016. Moving with several scholars of antiracism, dance studies and Indigenous theory, I self-reflexively analyze my piece "Un/bound," that explores gendered racial violence against Indigenous women in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Contextualizing my performance within the larger installation *Storying and Unsettling Ourselves*, I discuss the powers of art to incite shifts in consciousness, where settlers, as artist-scholars, move from spaces of guilt into spaces of direct action in the struggle against colonial violence in Canada, and across the hemispheres.

### **Introduction: Dancing my way in**

*Stories form bridges that other people might cross, to feel their way into another experience. That is the promise of witness.*

*These feelings, these affects, are part of their power of transformation in politically charged arenas, as "embodied pain, shame, distress, anguish, humiliation, anger, rage, gear, terror,*

*can promote healing and solidarity. . .and provide avenues of empathy across circuits of difference.”*

(Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations*, 76.)

[1] Since 2009, I have curated intercultural and Jewish dance in my hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba, where settlers and new immigrants find home and place on the ancestral land of the Métis Nation, and the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Dakota, and Dene people. As a Ukrainian-Canadian artist, I have experienced viscerally how bodies move together in solidarity, and how, by extension, the traumatic cultural histories ghosting these bodies also move with and beside each other. As Lehrer et. al remind us, “curation” is the root of “to care for,” and so my staging of Jewish history through dance, which has included repertoire about the Holocaust, is my way of caring for traumatic cultural memory that is not my own, in the sense that I have not experienced its effects directly or intergenerationally. Indeed, to perform Jewish dance is to embody a complicated history of anti-Semitism, of a people forced into exile, and who have long traversed the world looking for home and place. Dance provides a space to activate this particular past in the present; to contemplate how this past manifests the present; and to find ways in which this past, though painful, may be re-activated in ways that nourish present and future worldmaking.

[2] Although I wax poetic about intercultural performance as a way in to unfamiliar histories, it is not without risks. My dark hair and my whiteness often allow me to pass, as a Jew, and I slip in and out of the diasporic cultures we represent, almost as easily as I do the costumes we wear. I traverse a fraught, shifting space requiring constant, creative negotiation. And, in my other role, as an emerging scholar, fingers dancing across computer keys, I have tracked the ways in which my participation at performative sites, such as the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), marks Winnipeg's rising sense of self as a tolerant multicultural centre, yet, in the Red and Assiniboine rivers just beyond it, Drag the Red volunteers comb the waters for the bodies of those missing and murdered Indigenous women (and men) denied the very right to be viewed as human. I am specifically referring to the Fall of 2014, when the curtain rose for the opening of the CMHR, at an inaugural Rightsfest celebration, on the grounds of the historic downtown Forks site. On a bright Sunday afternoon, I danced at Rightsfest, on the Scotia Bank Mainstage, in the Hora Hopak— a collaboration between my Jewish company and a Ukrainian troupe, two of Winnipeg's oldest and largest folk ensembles. In addition, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet performed an excerpt of their world premiere of *Going Home Star: Truth and Reconciliation*, a piece designed to address the history of residential schools in Canada— those schools systematically designed to “kill

the Indian in the child,” where, up until the mid-1990s, more than 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were incarcerated.

[3] I was bursting with pride as our two groups, each ghosted by traumatic cultural memories, of the Holocaust and the Holodomor (the forced starvation of Ukrainians by Stalin), moved together. But at the same time, I felt a growing sense of unease that we were dancing on contested land, and that in the waters just beyond us, the body of Tina Fontaine, a fifteen-year-old girl from the Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba, had been retrieved only one month earlier (“Tina Fontaine”). As we danced at centre stage, our colourful spectacle of human rights and truth and reconciliation effectively *upstaged* the murder of Indigenous women, as if there was room for only one chapter of Indigenous history. The picture became violently clear: truth and reconciliation, as it is deployed within the current neoliberal version, where rights disappear for some in order to appear for others, is “the only show in town” (Million 73). In Canada, in 2016, as Indigenous resurgence sweeps through stages and streets alike, as was crystallized in the Idle No More movement, whose story gets told— and what version— spotlights who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not, and, ultimately, who dies and who lives— the measure of sovereignty Achille Mbembe calls *necropower* (14).

[4] As Indigenous theorists such as Dian Million and Glen Sean Coulthard suggest, Canada is the first Western nation to adapt a Truth and Reconciliation Commission yet its denial of its colonial past engenders programs that produce survivors as trauma victims and personifies Canada as moving to heal from past violence while obscuring the manifestations of present violence. Highlighting a burgeoning therapeutic industry in North America to “heal the Native from traumas,” Million suggests that this psychic turn to self-determination and self-management is a tactic of shifting neo-colonial forces that put the onus of healing on the Indigenous subject who therefore must “continuously manage [their] own emotional and mental hygiene” (150). More critically, this biopolitical focus on truth and reconciliation both re-directs moves toward Indigenous sovereignty, and obfuscates a longer history of colonial violence against Indigenous women (7). That the studios and concert halls, stages, and streets, in which I access portals of worldmaking, are those same spaces where others are brutalized, throw my identity as a settler, and the privileges I enjoy, into sharp relief. Furthermore, my complicity in performances that operate in the neoliberal human rights mode, thrusts my identity as an artist in tension with my politics as a feminist anticolonial scholar. I return to the same questions: how can I, as a settler scholar-artist, *move* in solidarity without speaking for racialized others, and without co-opting their trauma as my own? Something that intercultural dance has taught me is that we may never move *in*

someone else's shoes but we can certainly move *with* and *beside* them. If intercultural performance can re-imagine borders of country and culture, creating common languages that bring us closer together, what are the implications of this ethical space in which we move *with and/or beside*, for settler and Indigenous relations?

### **Storying and Unsettling Ourselves: (Re)Actions to Doris Salcedo's Shibboleth and Tanya Tagaq's "Fracking"**

[5] These questions tumbled through my mind as I moved from Winnipeg to Toronto to begin my PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies at York University, in 2015. The irony that I moved from one contested space to another for some perspective is not lost on me, but to subscribe to such white guilt is counterproductive.<sup>i</sup> I choose instead to focus on how my move brought with it my plunge into performance art, both cerebrally and physically, in my graduate courses. Performance art became my testing ground to wrestle with my questions, as was realized in *Un/bound*, my contribution to the seven-piece installation, *Storying and Unsettling Ourselves: (Re)Actions to Doris Salcedo's Shibboleth and Tanya Tagaq's "Fracking."* The performance was the final assignment for the Theatre and Performance Studies graduate course Performance in the Americas: Affect, Memory, Colonialism and Power, taught by Dr. Alberto Guevara.<sup>ii</sup> Deploying various mediums such as movement, photography, textiles, chalk and mirrors, in our individual vignettes, my co-collaborators and I spoke to



issues of land rights, globalization, and missing and murdered women across the hemispheres. Moving past our hesitancy at being non-Indigenous scholars in a course heavily focused on Indigenous content, we invoked Margaret Kovach's "story methodology" to view ourselves and our stories as active agents within a relational world, and to consider how story as method, in the artistic works we produced, could not be decontextualized from ourselves. From Paulette Regan, we sought "to unsettle ourselves and our relationship to the content of our own performance" whereby we suggested that it was not just by the words we spoke, but in "our direct action to confront the history of colonization, violence, racism and injustice in the Americas through performance" (Davies et. al).

[6] *Un/bound* is a piece in which I improvise through weighted movements along a projection of Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth*, with a long chain of knotted red rags attached to one ankle, and secured to the floor. In 2008, Salcedo, a Columbian artist, was commissioned by London's Tate Gallery to install a piece in its Turbine Hall. Salcedo installed *Shibboleth*, a 548 ft crack in the floor that varies in width and depth. The artist vaguely described the work as "the immigrant experience in Europe," leaving it open to multiple interpretations as viewers contorted their bodies and minds around its fissures ("Doris Salcedo"). *Shibboleth's* jagged edges speak to the geographic, social and political borders not only in Europe, but to those faced by all minoritized persons across the world, where barriers of country and culture enact very real violence on people, and produce them as bodies that do not matter. *Un/bound* was my exploration of how Indigenous women in Canada are particular bodies that do not matter; that within Winnipeg's downtown spaces of the Red River and the Forks, Indigenous women are dehumanized, rehearsed as disposable, and cast outside of the coordinates of intelligible personhood. Following Sherene Razack, because Indigenous women are assumed to be prostitutes and addicts, they are marked as synonymous within these degenerate spaces of the cityscape, where the "inner city is racialized space, the zone in which all that is not respectable is contained" (129). Indigenous flesh becomes a measure through which (white) subjects access themselves as more human than others, and as the



normative subjects of Western universal law. We need only look to the re-routing of the Dakota Access Pipeline through Standing Rock Reservation to see how the health of a white community is secured through the absolute disregard for Indigenous life; or that the rape of the land through fracking is directly related to the rape and murder of Indigenous women— as is underscored in Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq's song "Fracking" which we put on loop as our soundscape.

[7] Indeed, gendered racial violence against women is something Indigenous artists have long been articulating. Tagaq, as well as Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe) and Jaime Black (Anishinaabe/Cree) continue to produce art about this very subject, and often deploy red dresses to memorialize the dead. In Belmore's site-specific performance, *Vigil*, she nails the red dress she wears to a pole and then tears herself away from it to incite the scattered remains of Indigenous women dehumanized in Vancouver's Lower East Side (Lauzon 166). Black's *ReDRESS Project*, which is featured inside the CMHR, is a touring installation, where empty red dresses hang in various urban and rural areas to highlight the having been thereness of those whose deaths continue to ghost these spaces. Thus, while I wanted to reference these important contemporary Indigenous works in my performance, I did not want to appropriate them. By requisite of my white settler body, and the larger cultural history attached to it, my taking up of red fabric was meant as an acknowledgement of my part in the

colonial relationship. Knotting the pieces together in a chain was my working through the complicated torsions and blurrings of this relationship, exacerbated by hundreds of years of settler-colonialism, where the roles of “colonizer” and “colonized” are less clear cut; and where cities are palimpsests of past and present, and colonial institutions, such as museums, sit literally right on top of sacred territory, and thousands of years of Indigenous history. Instead of speaking for Indigenous women, I was summoning my ancestors, and the history of settler-colonialism that ghosts my body. As I rolled, crawled, and writhed through the studio space, along the projection of the *Shibboleth*, I moved physically and cerebrally with being bound as a character in Canada’s continuing story. As I have experienced in performing intercultural and Jewish dance, the human body, as Theresa Buckland describes it, is “both recipient and manifestation of a local history that claims authenticity through its modes of transmission where cultural memory as performance constructs and consolidates identities, even if that cultural memory is at odds with personal memory” (16). In this way, Settler and Indigenous bodies each conjure different sides of our shared story of colonialism, a history, as Coulthard describes it, “of land dispossession, political domination, and genocide of which residential schools form only a small part” (125).

### Creating my chain of meaning

[8] I also wanted to highlight white privilege as a naturalized force that exerts both symbolic and physical violence on the bodies of racialized others, and upholds the boundary between “us” and “them.” I wanted to work through the ways in which, from Razack, Indigenous death is rehearsed as a “natural by-product” of the violent, racialized spaces and social contexts in which they appear (144); and how these ascribed meanings map onto their bodies and become like links on a chain, descriptive of what Stuart Hall calls racist “chains of meaning,” where ideologies are summoned through discursive chains or clusters of meaning (104). I wanted to create my own chain of meaning, and explore how white supremacy subsumes Indigenous



bodies within a rigid matrix of oppression. I wanted to make visible how this matrix normalizes Indigenous women, as Razack suggests, through their equation with prostitution and degeneracy, as “in their place” as occupants of the periphery and core areas of urban spaces, while the (white) men who dehumanize and kill them, move freely back and forth over these “degenerate” Indigenous spaces, and into white “civil” space. Tying the chain to my ankle like a shackle, then, my goal was to express the tethering of the racialized and sexualized bodies of Indigenous women to dangerous spaces. Rolling, balancing precariously, and even scratching at the doorframe between myself and a fellow performer, I was venturing into a risky “embodied empathy” where my exploration of violence against Indigenous women became a kinesthetic witnessing that is more than simple spectatorship in its engagement and tangling of the psychic, sensory, and physical body (Underiner 13).

[9] Straddling the projected *Shibboleth*, I was expressing those “chains of meaning” that wrap around minoritized bodies, and thrust them through the cracks of white supremacy. However, as exacerbated by my whiteness, I was also expressing my settler privilege; that I, too, am able to traverse so-called “degenerate” spaces freely and relatively safely. I had proposed to end the performance by unwrapping my body from its bindings to say just that. But the performance ran for an hour in length, and the duration that I rolled and crawled along the floor caused me to feel so weighted that I

remained tangled up in the fabric, and finished the performance that way. The contrast of red fabric on pale skin highlighted my white privilege, and, to quote Shannon Jackson, the “specific difficulty of recounting [my] own obliviousness” (49). Twisting myself up in the cloth, I thought about Tina Fontaine and the thousands of women whose names I do not know, who go missing and murdered across the world. I was moving beside events I have only read about in the news, and beside the trauma of racism that I am so often blind to. Canada’s deployment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission yet— with its halting steps towards a federal inquiry into missing and murdered women, and by extension, admitting its history of colonialism— is a shackle, impeding moves toward Indigenous sovereignty. And Indigenous and settler peoples are characters entangled within the folds of Canada’s neo-colonial story; converging within the physical and social spaces to knot together tightly, enmeshed within a complicated history of colonialism, displacement, genocide, and gendered racial violence.

[10] Returning to *Restoring and Unsettling Ourselves*, each performer injected a different medium of performing affect, memory, colonialism and power. In so doing, we highlighted the power of certain media and genres to affect people differently. The multiplicity of forms performance can take bolsters its agency to cut through webs of social inequality. It is in this sense why, perhaps, performance art is so often misunderstood and disavowed as some abstract indulgence and, more precisely, why some governments want

to maintain as narrow a vision of history as possible— that in limiting the frequencies of learning about history, this pacifies the frequencies with which to question and intervene into current power structures. Our decision to stage seven performances simultaneously invoked an anti-hierarchical layering of our individual stories and our shifting subjectivities. We made room for our unique voices and expressed our sensitivity to the danger of speaking for others. We demonstrated that positionality is not fixed but relational, and, therefore, changeable. Most critically, in our moving with issues of land rights, globalization, residential schools, incarceration, missing and murdered women, treaties, and environmental racism, we brought them all to centre stage, and as everyone's to care for.

### **Conclusion: Building bridges, moving towards solidarity**

[11] In this article, I have demonstrated the ways in which performance art opens up generative spaces for social action, where we as settler scholar-artists work through the borders within ourselves, and examine our complicity in Canada's difficult history of colonialism and its neo-colonial present. I have highlighted the power of art to plunge us into new territories of consciousness, to crack open Canada's benevolent veneer, and critically examine the complex intimacies between settler life and Indigenous death. Moving with playwright Yvette Nolan (Algonquin), who traces thirty years of Indigenous theatre in Canada in her book *Medicine Shows*, theatre creation is a means of making medicine where Indigenous artists expose and expel

the poison of colonial violence. Settler-Canadians share this responsibility, and this is where intercultural performance and performance art offer substantial ways to care for and make room for Indigenous cultural memories and felt experiences. When settlers *story and unsettle ourselves*, we crack open the nation's benevolent veneer to expose its colonial past, its neo-colonial present, and our embeddedness within both. It is an uglier, more complicated Canada within which we find ourselves, but such fractures in our schema are necessary if we are to achieve an equitable future for settler-Indigenous relations, a future that we are already haunting.



---

<sup>i</sup> I acknowledge that Toronto is on the sacred territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River.

<sup>ii</sup> Gratitude to my classmates and collaborators Megan Davies, Todd Martin, EmmaRose McDonald, Hannah Rackow, Tania Senewiratne, and Cara Whitfield, and to our professor Alberto Guevara.



### ***Works Cited***

Belmore, Rebecca. *Vigil*. Performance. Firehall Theatre, Vancouver, Talking Stick Festival, Full Circle First Nations Performance. 2002.

[rebeccabelmore.com/video/Vigil.html](http://rebeccabelmore.com/video/Vigil.html). Accessed 10 November 2016.

Black, Jaime. *The REDress Project*. Installation. [theredressproject.org](http://theredressproject.org).

Accessed 10 November 2016.

Buckland, Theresa. *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, and Identities*. Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Davies, Megan et. al. Artist Statement. *Storying and Unsettling Ourselves: (Re)Actions to Doris Salcedo's Shibboleth and Tanya Tagaq's Fracking*. 7 December 2015. Centre for Film and Theatre. York University.

"Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*." *Khan Academy*.

[khanacademy.org/humanities/global-culture/global-art-architecture/a/doris-salcedo-shibboleth](http://khanacademy.org/humanities/global-culture/global-art-architecture/a/doris-salcedo-shibboleth). Accessed 10 November 2016.

Failler, Angela, Ives, Peter and Milne, Heather (eds). Special Issue: Caring for Difficult Knowledge: Prospects for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights." *The Review of Education and Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 37, 2-3, June 2015.

- Hall, Stuart. "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the PostStructuralist Debates." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1985, pp. 91-114.
- Jackson, Shannon. "White Noises: On Performing White, On Writing Performance." *The Drama Review* vol. 42, no. 1, 1998, pp. 49- 65.
- Kovach, Margaret Elizabeth. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2010.
- Lauzon, Claudette. "What the Body Remembers: Rebecca Belmore's Memorial to Missing Women." In Asselin, Oliver, Johanne Lamoureux, and Christine Ross, eds. *Precarious Visualities: New Perspectives on Identification in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture*. McGill-Queen's Press, July 2008, pp. 155-179.
- Lehrer, Erica, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson, eds. *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 2011.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11-40.
- Million, Dian. *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*. The University of Arizona Press, 2013.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Nolan, Yvette. *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture*. Playwrights Canada Press, 2015.

Razack, Sherene. "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George." *Race, Space and the Law: Unmapping White Settler Society*. *Between the Lines*, 2002. pp. 121-156.

Regan, Paulette. *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*. University of British Columbia Press, 2011.

Tagaq, Tanya. "Fracking." *Animism*. Six Shooter Records, 2014.

"Tina Fontaine, 15, Found in Bag in Red River." *CBC News Online*.

[cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/tina-fontaine-15-found-in-bag-in-red-river-1.2739141](http://cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/tina-fontaine-15-found-in-bag-in-red-river-1.2739141). Accessed 10 November 2016.

Underiner, Tamara L. "Playing at the Border Crossing in a Mexican Indigenous Community . . . Seriously." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2011, pp. 11-32.