
Honoring the Disappeared in the art of Lorena Wolffer, Rebecca Belmore, and the *Walking With Our Sisters* project

DEBORAH ROOT

It is 2002, and Lorena Wolffer lies on a bed. She slowly sits and begins to remove her shirt. She reveals her breasts to the audience, and then bends to remove her trousers. As she caresses her body the background music fades and we begin to hear the monotone voice of a police report. Wolffer pulls out latex gloves and displays them to the audience before putting them on. The reports of dead women continue, and we hear details of the victims' clothing. One is six months pregnant, raped and strangled. Wolffer removes a pen and begins to carefully mark her body, as if to prepare it for an autopsy, making lines around her breasts, between her legs, her neck. Every now and then she stops, and sits in a meditation pose. Then the marking continues, and the lines become something else, less medical and more a circumscription of the parts of the body that are a focus of rage and desire. Finally she closes the pen and replaces her clothes, slowly transforming herself into an ordinary woman again. She shrouds herself with black blankets and wraps a sheet around her neck and head, covering herself completely.

In performances like *Mientras dormíamos (el caso Juarez)* (2002-04), Mexico City artist Wolffer locates a mystery at the heart of violence, a black hole of negation, and a paradox. It is a place where desire and hatred are closely intricately, where society's violence against women is cut into the flesh. Physical wounds kill and maim. Yet psychic wounds are inscribed as well, wounds from silence, from memory being driven deep inside into a place of suffocation and emptiness. And this violence not only marks the body of the individual, but the body of the nation as well.

The title of Wolffer's piece translates as "while we were sleeping," and speaks to the hundreds of women murdered in Ciudad Juarez, a city on the border between Chihuahua and Texas. This border is lined with *maquiladoras*, or factories, where poor, mostly indigenous, women come to find work. It is a place where the atmosphere of violence is palpable, and fear permeates the energy of the streets. One is struck by the contrast with El Paso just across the river, bright and shiny and dead in another way. People all across the globe know what's going on here. Everyone has seen images of the black crosses that have been painted on telephone

poles as memorials to Juarez’s murdered women. Everyone deplores the ongoing murders and disappearances, but it seems impossible to stop the killings.

How can we understand this? Wolffer is telling us that, at some level, we choose not to see; we prefer a kind of unconscious dreamstate, which allows us to sleepwalk through what is taking place on the margins of society. But who is this “we,” and why are we sleeping, still, when so much information about what is happening is at hand? We can no longer say we don’t know what’s going on—what is at stake in our silence?

There are days when the bad news is overwhelming, the bad images, the killings and bombs, the acidification of the seas. It sucks you in, and can make you feel helpless. Twenty-four hour news and internet feeds promise connectedness, but it is a connectedness that circulates around bad energy, and ultimately tempts us to hole up and shut the world out. It is easier to sleep. But isolation is deadly; isolation is the enemy

For many of us who live outside the communities in which the disappearances of First Nations girls and women are taking place, it can be a bit too easy to veil the reality of what is happening, and to imagine the extreme violence in Juarez, Vancouver, Winnipeg and elsewhere in Canada, as something that happens to “them”, to poor women, streetwalkers, aboriginal women, Mexicans, a displacement that derives from a deep fear of our own complicity, and a fear of waking up to the ways in which “them” and “us” might be linked.

As our eyes skim across new reports, it can be reassuring to focus on the facts of place and circumstance where these things happen—places far away from our own worlds. In this way we distance this violence from our everyday lives, and assure ourselves that it has nothing to do with us, not really.

I don’t know anyone who’s been murdered; it’s possible I’ve met one or two who’ve disappeared, but they’ve not been part of my daily world. Like most of us I’ve had friends who’ve suffered abuse and sexual assault, friends who’ve not received adequate responses from the legal system. And I’ve known a few who did what they had to do to survive. But my relation to the social and historical structures that subtend both systematic violence and its elision, is at most peripheral and, like most other non-Natives who inhabit these lands, I’ve benefitted from these structures. And because of this distancing, it can be harder for those on the outside to connect the dots and see that the violence that happens to “them” is related to the violence that happens to “us”, to all of us, Native and Non-Native, urban and rural, male and female.

And there are differences in the way violence circulates around each of us. The killings and disappearances of poor, indigenous women reflect both a long history of racism and colonialism, and the existence of what artist Christi Belcourt, an organizer of the *Walking With Our Sisters* project, calls a “parallel universe,” in which the official response to missing aboriginal women is often indifference, with no Amber Alerts issued for missing girls, and missing person reports refused by the police. When Native women go missing there tends to be less fuss in the media than when non-Native, middle-class women disappear.¹

The unwillingness of media to provide consistent and in depth coverage of missing and murdered indigenous women makes it easier for those of us outside the families and communities to slumber through the violence, and to refuse the connection between “them” and “us.” But what is this connection, which so many of us have been encouraged to sleep through?

Certainly, sleeping through the violence enforces the distinction between “us” and “them.” If this separation between us were to collapse, we’d all have to consider the implications of colonial history and the ongoing struggles around First Nations sovereignty and land rights.

Foucault wrote that what takes place on the edges of empire reveals the nature of that empire.² “Empire” can be a state of mind—a focus on money and privilege, or on the activities of celebrities—but it also remains a system of political power, with police and armies, politicians and cartels. With respect to the Juarez killings, if we recognize the United States as an empire, the countries that lie on its borders can show us something about the structures that make its authority possible. Would the U.S. exist without Mexico (and Canada)? Empire is also a center, a place where wealth and power congeal, a constellation of big cities, places where, for some of us, comfortable lives seem distant from disappearance and murder. And so we tell ourselves the system works, and has the potential to be reasonably fair. The center’s shininess can disguise the brutality at its edges that inevitably subtends imperial power.

And so I ask: would the present social system exist without the women murdered on its margins? If we are all implicated by what happens elsewhere, then the killings in Juarez, Vancouver, on the highways lacing the country together, in eastern Ontario (where I live), all reveal that our lives are underlain by systems of violence that are closer to home than we may wish to think. They reveal a truth about the disposability of women; of certain kinds of women, and of all women. The center does its best to show the benign face of power, but the disappearances and dead women strip away the mask, revealing the reality that lies underneath.

* * * *

Like Wolffer, artist Rebecca Belmore puts her body on the line in *Vigil* (2002), a street performance honoring the disappeared and murdered women of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.

At least fifty women had disappeared from this poor, urban neighborhood in the years before the killer’s arrest in 2002, and many of the women who died had been working the street, or were addicted to drugs. Many were First Nations women doing what they could to survive. For years families and people in the community had been aware of the disappearances, and had long called for police action. There had been vigils by family members and activists. When the killer was finally arrested in 2002 many stories emerged of police refusing to listen to people about what was happening to the women on the street, and ignoring information that might have led to the killer. In 2010 the Vancouver Police Department issued an apology to the families.

Belmore’s performance took place on the Vancouver sidewalk where many of the women were last seen before their disappearances. She laid out objects in plastic bags, then scrubbed the sidewalk, then lit votive candles. Once the setting was created, she stood. Belmore looked down at the names of the missing and murdered women, which she’d written on her arms, then shouted their names one by one, as she drew roses across her mouth, ripping the petals off with her teeth.

She then lifted up a red dress and pulled it over her jeans and tank top. She rinsed her mouth. Wearing the red dress, she picked up a hammer and a bag of nails and walked over to a nearby telephone pole. She nailed several parts of the skirt to the pole, then yanked at the fabric, desperately trying to pull herself away. Finally the fabric tore free, although scraps of the dress remained affixed to the pole. Belmore stood and faced the audience, now dressed in her underwear.

The video installation based on the performance, *The Named and the Unnamed*, was in part a screening of the documentation of *Vigil*. But shining through the projection of this documentation were about fifty lightbulbs set behind the screen, providing a moving reminder of the spirits of these women.

In her discussion of *Vigil*, artist and writer Lara Evans suggests that, even before they went missing, the women's social invisibility meant that they had already disappeared, or been disappeared:

Consider... that Belmore is using cut flowers rather than live plants. One of the authorities' justification for not taking any action regarding these disappearances for so long is that, in some respects, the women had "disappeared" already. They left their home communities, often a reserve, for the big city. They were, in a sense, cut off from their homes, their sources of cultural sustenance. The women who disappeared were supporting themselves through prostitution.³

I am reminded of how the verb "disappear" functions, particularly in the Latin American context, as a politicized, transitive verb—one is disappeared, usually by the state or its minions. If the women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside had already been disappeared, by virtue of their invisibility with respect to non-Native, so-called "respectable" society, we can ask by whom, and in whose interests. The answer is more than the killer who was prosecuted and convicted in the courts.

In the early 90's Michael Taussig wrote about the activism of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Latin America, arguing that the political disappearances in the continent's various dirty wars, and the fear generated by these, became a way to break and fragment collective memory, and to "refunction" it into something private.

[It] best serves the official forces of repression when the collective nature of that memory is broken, when it is fragmented and located not in the public sphere but in the private fastness of the individual self or of the family. There it feeds fear. There it feeds nightmares crippling the capacity for public protest and spirited intelligent opposition.⁴

In this sense Belmore's naming of the disappeared becomes a powerful act of resistance, an insistence that these women lived, despite what happened to them, to their communities.

By using their bodies to reveal violence and its consequences, artists such as Wolffer and Belmore also remind us of its intimacy, even when violent acts occur in larger historical and socio-political contexts, and underline the paradox of desire and disposability, intimacy and fear. By manipulating her nude body, Wolffer underlines the way violence can also come from someone we know and often love. But whether it comes from a stranger or an intimate enemy,

hatred remains linked to desire, with the connection between the two operating through bad intensity. Another paradox, and one that, for many, cannot be said.

Looking at the documentation of these performances, I am reminded of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, which he wrote in 1914. In this story, a machine called the harrow inscribes the condemned prisoner’s sentence on his back, eventually killing him. The machine works slowly and the prisoner, unaware of the nature of his transgression, understands only at the moment of death his crime and sentence.

I ask myself: what is the crime? Being female? Aboriginal?

And yet Belmore’s action of writing the names of the dead and disappeared on her arms becomes a refusal of Kafka’s harrow, instead revealing that what was done to “them” is written on “us”, whether we see it or not.

* * * *

After the arrests in Vancouver, and after an inquiry into the various permutations of police inaction, there was some hope for change. Despite the example of Juarez, where talk and more talk has done little to stop the killings, some of us imagined that in Canada, the authorities would no longer drag their feet when women were at risk. After all, hadn’t the Vancouver Police Department issued an apology? We hoped lessons had been learned.

But soon stories began to surface about more missing aboriginal women, well over a thousand by now. This time, there’s been more media attention (although not enough), along with grassroots actions, including vigils and marches across the county. There are campaigns that try to stop the disappearances, and the systemic racism that underpins them, and to reveal how these women have been treated by the justice system. Information has been gathered by organizations such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada, which runs the *Sisters in Spirit* database, and Amnesty International Canada’s *No More Stolen Sisters* campaign. Social media has been active as well. You can Google Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and there is a Twitter feed (#MMIW), along with various Facebook groups. The information is out there.

After years of calls for a national inquiry, which would coordinate data about disappearances across provincial and territorial jurisdictions, in August 2016 Canada launched a

public inquiry into the missing and murdered women. In October, Prime Minister Trudeau attended the annual vigil for MMIW on Parliament Hill and spoke of reconciliation between Native and Non-Native communities. So we'll see—thus far, the inquiry's slow process has caused some concern, as has the lack of an explicit mandate to examine police conduct and the criminal justice system.

But learning “the facts” of these disappearances, collecting information and investigating systemic causes, apportioning blame, and saying what must be done is only one way to deal with these issues. It's less easy to sit with the idea of these women's lives, allowing room for positive energies to circulate, and for a kind of healing.

A starting point might be to ask what are the effects of these disappearances? Christi Belcourt of the *Walking With Our Sisters* project says that each missing woman leaves behind a large ripple. These touch the families and communities to which the women belonged most intensely, but also affect the larger society. For one thing, the disappearances bring home the question of how to confront—if that's even the word—extreme violence without being poisoned by it.

It's true that it can be an effort to keep going, to believe that violence can be stopped, that the weight of colonialism and related structures will give way to something more positive. People have utilized a range of strategies to engage with these issues, including political activism, art practice and ceremony. Many of us are taught that these are discrete entities—but what if the three were brought together?

Walking With Our Sisters began in 2012 as an ongoing community project, in which beading groups come together to create moccasin vamps to represent and honor the lives of the missing women (and sometimes children). By early 2015 1810 pairs of vamps had been beaded, with beading groups springing up in territories all across the country, and exhibitions of the work taking place in many venues. Helpers install the work according to teachings from elders, who transport the bundles from place to place. All work is collective, and there is no government funding for the project.

These vamps are not stitched onto moccasins, but remain incomplete, like the lives of the women.

Exhibiting this work involves more than simply installing an art show. In non-Native spaces such as art galleries, the gallery directors must give over to the WWOS organizers—for

instance, smudging must be allowed, despite fire codes. And the installing itself is a careful process. Volunteers gather the medicines and prepare them, then tape the floor and lay the red cloth, then create paths, then place the vamps and other sacred items. In this way the *Walking With Out Sisters* installations become more than art exhibitions, but rather are ceremonies in themselves, focusing on memory and respect, and including honor songs and other commemorations of the disappeared.

Belcourt’s understanding that being for something creates different results than being against something becomes a way of dealing with the disappearances, and of refusing the despair that attends such tragedies. Fear is a function of isolation, and out of that comes passivity. Of all the consequences of individualism, this can be the worst, because it means that we cannot share our stories, or find paths away from hopelessness. For Belcourt, bringing ceremony into the process changes everything, and in this sense the shows are not exhibits, she says, but ceremonies that allow “a grieving, a re-setting of a broken bone,” an acknowledging of those lives. And most important is kindness—that, she says, is the key principle of the project.

One of the ways *Walking With Out Sisters* creates different results is by refusing or ignoring categories that separate different spheres of activity: art, ceremony, activism, commemoration. By enacting the connectedness between different elements of experience and spirituality, the project keeps the missing as part of the circle and turns the viewers into participants, eliciting a response that engages many layers of consciousness and breaks down the distinction between “them” and “us,” helping each of us to understand that even if the disappeared are not our relatives, we are connected.

The artist can weave the strands together in a way that’s sometimes harder for the rest of us, and reveal connections that a newspaper report cannot. In *Mientras dormíamos* Wolffer makes the connection between her (healthy) body and the bodies of women subject to police autopsies. In *Vigil* and *The Named and the Unnamed* Belmore takes the responsibility for naming the disappeared; their names are written on her body, and have become part of her. By shouting their names, she not only breaks the silence, but sends these names out into the air, creating another ripple effect. *Walking With Our Sisters* also commemorates the disappeared, so that the names will not be forgotten, but these community ceremonies do more than show that they are not forgotten; it is the power of the name itself, a refusal to accept the disappearance, and the isolation this absence seeks to enforce.

This allows real movement, rather than something that stops in a black hole of negativity. Perhaps art is a way to confront evil acts without being drawn into the abyss; perhaps it's a way to go around the outside--not to confront the bad, but to sketch a path away from it. And as the exhibition moves, more space becomes Native space, and even if this is temporary a trace of that ripple remains.

Note: some of the material on Lorena Wolffer appeared in: Deborah Root, "The Body Engraved: performances and interventions of Lorena Wolffer," *C Magazine* 105, Spring 2010, pp. 17-26.

Notes

¹ There are many parallel universes, Juarez being an example. On a visit there in 2007, I spoke briefly to a young Oaxacan woman and her brother who had traveled to there to find work. The girl stared into the distance as her brother told me he hoped to keep his sister safe. It was like talking to soldiers on their way to war. Juarez was one of the scariest places I've been in; the violence was thick in the air, and the city and surrounding desert felt like a vortex of bad energy. Yet there are many good people working there and, for some, it's a place to live, like any other.

² In a sense "woman" exists at the border of empire, something Deleuze and Guattari understood when they talked about *devenir femme* as a way of escaping the fixity of power, the molar lines that emanate from the center.

³ Lara Evans, *notartomatic* blog, (notartomatic.wordpress.com, 05/08/10). "Rebecca Belmore: Vigil: The Named and the Unnamed."

⁴ Michael Taussig, "Violence and Resistance in the Americas," *The Nervous System* (Routledge: New York, 1992), p 48.