

SINGING OUR BONES HOME

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singing our bones home is a homage to the buried bodies in the Markham Ossuary in Ontario, Canada. Simultaneously, this work reflects the constant relocation of Indigenous bodies that are moved, replaced, or stolen in various colonial geographies. This installation utilizes sound, projections, and sculpture to create a dialogue between the different architectural structures, the wigwam that represents nomadic lifestyles, and the wagon shed that is a symbol of settlement.

My work as a researcher, scholar, and artist is to reveal the ontology of land, which contains memory, knowledge, and living histories. This installation attempts to narrate stories located in Indigenous archeological sites that lie beneath the city. These buried bones and artifacts mark the history of the land and record the human relationships to this vast landscape that are established in Indigenous “deep time stories.”¹ Indigenous people recognize the power of particular spaces, artifacts, and bones because these items witness and embody much of the Indigenous knowledge of the land. This installation seeks to convey this powerful relationship between the spirit worlds and the human realm.

For many Indigenous groups objects, artifacts, and bodies are considered living entities, which are to be treated with respect. Indigenous archeologist Heather Harris argues, “many native people believe they communicate with the dead at times through their lives in dreams, visions, and even encounter them occasionally in the ordinary world.”² One of the major results of this belief system is the difficulty Indigenous people face to “consider human remains or even artifacts which are evidence of past lives in a detached manner as data or archaeological materials.”³ Therefore, the archeological sites throughout Canada have meaning and are part of both the spirit and human world.

Many of the burial and archeological sites in many Canadian cities remain unseen or invisible. This inability to “see” is rooted in settler ideologies of the occupation





of space. “The power-knowledge of what is “out of sight” is interrupted by the inadequate trickery of visual representation.”⁴ Seeing the bodies of the Indigenous past challenges the foundational settler myth, which is perpetuated through the absent Indigenous body. The power of seeing becomes a tool to keep particular histories and stories buried and others above ground, thus erasing the genocidal, colonial, and violent historical scars on the land we now know as Canada.

In this installation the projections convey static or monochromatic landscapes that appear to be dismal or uninhabited, with ghostly figures moving throughout the sky. This contrasts with the diverse population currently living in Markham and other large urban spaces. The wigwam was constructed of natural material (willow saplings) and was covered with projection fabric to produce a light box effect. The ground was covered in cedar branches. When the viewer moved around the structure, sensors were triggered to arouse different sounds allowing the participants’ bodies determine the composition of the sound. The activation of the 360 binaural recordings consisted of outdoor ambient noises with the inclusion of four different honour songs in the languages of Iroquois, Cree, Anishinaabemowin, and French/Métis. These songs are to honour the bodies and to begin to sing those bodies back home to the spirit world or, at the very least, give them some form of peace.

NOTES

- 1 Margaret Bruchac, “Earthshapers and Placemakers: Algonkian Indian Stories and the Landscape,” *Indigenous Archaeologies Decolonizing Theory and Practice*, eds. C. Smith and H. M. Wobst (New York: Routledge, 2005), 56.
- 2 Heather Harris, “Indigenous Worldviews and Ways of Knowing as Theoretical and Methodological Foundations for Archaeological Research,” *Indigenous Archaeologies Decolonizing Theory and Practice*, eds. C. Smith and H. M. Wobst (New York: Routledge, 2005), 36.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2006), 97.

