Journal: CTR; Volume 174; Issue: 1
DOI: 10.3138/ctr.174.001

The Relentless Struggle for Commemoration

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Assembling this issue in late summer and early autumn 2017, the majority of "celebrations" of Canada's sesquicentennial have just concluded. Canada's 150th anniversary has been characterized by ambivalence and cynicism, particularly in contrast to the year of national jubilation that marked the 1967 centennial. The sesquicentennial sharply follows the official conclusion, in December 2015, of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Residential Schools and its issuing of 94 Calls to Action and the almost simultaneous establishment of a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. It coincides with the announcement, on 6 October 2017, of an "agreement in principle" for survivors of the Sixties Scoop, which saw thousands of Indigenous children taken from their homes and placed in foster care or adopted into non-Indigenous families.

The connection between these events may seem, at first glance, to be simply coincidental. However, Canada emerged as a "successful" settler colony through the application of the Indian Act, the development of Residential Schools, and the implementation of policies like the Sixties Scoop. By separating Indigenous children from their parents, their language, and their culture, the government of Canada pursued a strategy of cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples—a strategy which allowed settler Canadians to gain access to Indigenous lands and the resources within these lands. Alongside these systems, a culture of racism and violence directed against Indigenous peoples has flourished in Canada.

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Through the long, hot summer of 2017, commemorative monuments became flashpoints where the relentless struggle to control such troubling historical narratives erupted into conflict. Of the many events held on Canada Day, one that gained national attention was a mourning ceremony held at the foot of a statue celebrating Edward Cornwallis as the founder of Halifax. The monument has long been considered offensive, particularly by the descendants of the Mi'kmaq people who survived Cornwallis's October 1749 "Scalping Proclamation," which paid a bounty to anyone who killed a Mi'kmaq adult or child. On 1 July, Chief Grizzly Mama (Gitx̲san) held a ceremony to mourn the loss of her daughter on the Highway of Tears in northern BC and for her "sisters and brothers in Winnipeg and Ontario and New Brunswick and Mi'kmaq territory" (Roache n.p.). After the cutting of her hair and the laying of two braids at the foot of the statue, five men wearing black-and-yellow polo shirts and carrying a pre-1965 Red Ensign flag of Canada disrupted the ceremony. They argued with the people participating in the ceremony for ten minutes and left. Later they were identified as members of the right-wing white supremacist Proud Boys association and as off-duty members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). While the men were disciplined and CAF leadership apologized, the tensions concerning the Cornwallis statue continued over the summer, as local organizers have repeatedly gathered to demand its removal.

The 1 July clash in Halifax was a precursor to grim events on 11–12 August, when a group of white supremacists gathered at a "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of a statue commemorating Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Carrying torches and Nazi and Confederate flags and chanting Nazi slogans, the far-right protestors were met by counter-protestors. The confrontations culminated in the death of Heather Heyer and the injury of nineteen others after a white supremacist drove his car into a peaceful protest.

Less than two weeks later, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario passed a resolution to urge school boards across the province to remove Sir John A. MacDonald's name from public schools, based on the argument that it is highly inappropriate for schools to bear the name of someone who played a central role in the establishment of residential schools.

These public performances concerning the ethics of monumentalizing historical figures whose legacies include racist or genocidal policies demonstrate that the stakes of commemoration are high, particularly when we remind ourselves that commemoration is not synonymous with celebration but rather refers to how we remember together, denoting communal and national memorial practices. Returning to the TRC's 94 Calls to Action, it is striking that eight of them directly address issues of commemoration.[1] Calls 74 and 75 address the commemoration of children's burial locations—through identification, maintenance and, if appropriate to families' wishes, ceremony. These calls poignantly remind us of the suffering, abuse, and loss of life that was part of young children's experiences at the hands of the adults who ran the system. Calls 68, 79 and 83 address the specific responsibilities of federal organizations tasked with institutionalizing narratives of Canadian heritage and history: the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Confederation, the Historic Sites and Monuments Act, the National Program of Historical Commemoration, and the Canada Council for the Arts. Three more calls (80, 81 and 82) promote commemoration of residential schools, through the establishment of a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation and through the commissioning and installation of "publicly accessible, highly visible, Residential Schools National Monument[s]" in Ottawa and the capital cities of all provinces "to honour Survivors and all the children who were lost to their families and communities" (9). These calls together reflect different aspects of commemoration—as actions taken to honour the dead, as a way to emphasize

the significance of past places or events, and as a way to create a national narrative in order to influence the future.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) shadows the TRC's 94 Calls to Action. Mentioned twenty-three times in their Summary Report, the TRC Commissioners repeatedly call for all levels of Canadian government and educational institutions to adopt and implement the Declaration and to educate students about its content.[2] Article 11 of the Declaration states, that Indigenous peoples have the right, "to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature" (6). This Article gestures toward the importance of commemoration in promoting awareness and continuation of Indigenous cultural practices. It is not surprising that Ntlaka'pamux/Irish Canadian theatre artist and playwright Tara Beagan and Cree/Euro theatre artist and designer Andy Moro named their activist theatre company, ARTICLE 11, after this section of UNDRIP.[3] Their first performance, *DECLARATION*, engaged explicitly with UNDRIP, inviting Indigenous artists to participate in an "artful opportunity to declare your endorsement, declare our truth."[4]

These frameworks contextualize this special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review*, which immediately follows the sesquicentennial and explores how commemorative practices emerge today, not only in relation to Canada's 150th, but also in response to other histories and counter-histories, most notably in looking back on the 1967 centennial. We also work to expand the consideration of commemoration beyond the nationalist determination, to think about how a "calling to remembrance" (OED definition) can be enacted performatively and what implications this might have outside of the official Canadian sesquicentennial frame. As Paul Connerton points out in *How Societies Remember*, commemorative performances not only recall the past

but also claim continuities with it, emphasizing relationships between the past and the present (48). In this issue, we consider how performances preserve memory, create space for public celebration, and expand the range of what we—officially or unofficially—remember together. Our understanding of public memory is premised in three ways: that Canada is, first and foremost, historically and geographically, a settler colony (or settler-invader colony) and a consideration of decolonization and Indigeneity is always necessitated by this history; that memory, particularly officially sanctioned memory, emerges through a complex interrelation between remembering and selective forgetting; and that cultural memories erupt in complex, contradictory, unbidden, and surprising forms.

A number of articles engage with the deployment of bodies—racialized, Indigenous, and settler bodies— in acts that challenge the possibilities of commemorative narratives. Lilian Mengesha, in "Where the Water Meets the Land: Water's Time and Place's Thought in Rebecca Belmore's *Fountain*" examines the Anishinaabe artist's contribution to the 2005 Venice Biennale, which Mengesha describes as "a site of staging mythical modernities." She interrogates this work within the weight of Canada's colonial history and in doing so, demonstrates how Belmore's performance destabilizes the singular event of colonial discovery by using materials, like water, blood, and fire along with her recorded, projected and screened body, to show its messy, reiterative structure. Colleen Kim Daniher's "Forgetting Asian Canadian Experimental Performance: Haruko Okano and Fred Wah's *High(~~bridi~~)Tea*" considers this performance work, staged multiple times between 1998 and 2001, as a challenge to both dominant and "marginal" accounts of history and memory, specifically to how "Asian Canadian" theatre criticism has not yet taken experimental, transnational, politically activist performances such as Okano and Wah's into account. Okano and Wah's participatory performance event

articulates this history through an embodied exploration of the high tea service as commemorative cultural ceremony in the present. The issue also includes two articles about recent collaborative projects that directly engage with celebrations of Canada's confederation. Helene Vosters's "Stitch-by-Stitch: An Unsettling Labour of Re-inscription" documents her efforts to embrace what Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson and settler scholar Keavy Martin call everyday "aesthetic actions." Vosters reflects on the practice of embroidering the TRC's 94 Calls to Action onto Canadian flags, and the sustained nature of the collective reckoning settler Canadians are undergoing as the country inches, stitch by stitch, toward redress. Leah Decter's photo essay, "Oh-oh Canada: Sweet Treats for Unsettling Futures," documents a durational performance intervention which began during the 2016 Canada Day celebrations on Parliament Hill in Ottawa and continues on through a website, "reverse shoplifting," and targeted mailing. Mimicking the form of the iconic box of Canadian maple sugar candies, the *oh-oh Canada project* instead distributes a box of maple sugar candies designed to convey missing or misrepresented information within the colonial imaginary.

The performances that the articles by Mengesha, Daniher, Vosters, and Decter engage with are all deeply informed by the places of performance, as are a number of other features in this issue. In "Memory, Milestones, and Monuments: A Peripatetic Exploration of the West Side of UBC Campus," Kelsey Blair, Sandra Chamberlain-Snider, Katrina Dunn, and Julia Henderson describe a performative *Amble*, a guided tour held on unceded Musqueam territory/Vancouver's UBC campus, that demonstrates how walking can function as a commemorative practice and generate possibilities for embodied historical scholarship. Ashley Williamson's "Negotiating Multiple Narrative Authorities at *Eve of Confederation*" explores the complex relationships between commemoration, history, and financial sponsorship demonstrated through a site-specific

performance celebrating the sesquicentennial at Upper Canada Village, which she argues may appear to subvert, but ultimately reinforces, structures of authority. Denyse Lynde's article "Canada Day/Memorial Day" reflects on the significance of the first of July in Newfoundland, as both Canada Day and the anniversary of the World War I battle of Beaumont-Hamel, during which the Newfoundland Regiment sustained terrible losses. Lynde examines two plays that address how the battle was remembered by Newfoundlanders, performances that demonstrate Memorial Day's cultural significance as equal to official celebrations of Canadian Confederation, which Newfoundland did not join until 1949.

Three other articles also examine official national narratives, but focus on fraught efforts during the country's Centennial to either create or subvert national narratives through theatrical performance. Alan Filewod's "A Confederation Minstrel Show: *The Centennial Play* of 1967" is a case study of an abject theatrical failure, a play commissioned to celebrate the centennial, written by a team led by Robertson Davies, and intended to be performed by amateur theatre groups across the country. Filewod argues the racial and political hubris of the cultural elite damned the project from the start. Sorouja Moll also returns to examine an artifact of 1967, Mavor Moore and Harvey Somers's opera *Louis Riel,* by considering its 2017 revival by Peter Hinton and the Canadian Opera Company at the National Arts Centre. Moll examines the spectre of the Métis leader in the Canadian colonial imaginary and comments on efforts to update the opera through casting, the use of the Michif language, consultation with Nisga'a community members, and the addition of a silent, Indigenous "Land Assembly" chorus bearing witness to the performance. And finally, it is almost impossible to consider Canadian theatre history and the year 1967 without taking into account the effects of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Rita Shelton Deverell's "Homage to Joy Coghill" does this—but with a focus on the efficacy of the

"work" the play both did or didn't do. In commemorating the remarkable life and activism of Joy Coghill, who passed away in January 2017, Deverell also emphasizes her role as the Artistic Director at the Vancouver Playhouse who enabled the staging of *Rita Joe*, and thereby highlights the importance of diverse representation in artistic leadership as a key to enduring social justice.

This issue's script, Gwaandak Theatre's *Map of the Land, Map of the Stars,* brings all of these concerns together: the embodiment of knowledges, in response to a specific site, in both the development of the work and its performance. In "Braids of a River: Memory and Performance in the North," Michelle Olson, a member of the production team, reflects on the rehearsal process and the storyweaving methodology of creation that connected the play's creators to the land and its hidden stories. The process, Olson explains, is the thread that connects Indigenous theatre to the reclamation of worldviews, openly acknowledging cultural inheritances, and allowing the creators of *Map of the Land* to draw out stories and memories that run counter to sanctioned Canadian identity. The script of the play follows Olson's article and uses a nonlinear dramaturgical structure to depict events of colonization, the Klondike Gold Rush, and the construction of the Alaska Highway against enduring stories of love and the performers' search for a good trail forward together, under the continued guidance of a sky-being, made up of the stars.

Establishing respectful and responsible relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people requires ongoing engagement with public commemoration and with the historic monuments at which cultural memory aggregates. Looking for the struggle embedded in commemorative performances is key to making meaning from the unjust pain of Canada's past: through such performances, we might consider how public commemoration generated historical

narratives that determined particular futures—our present moment—and we might look to ways that performances of cultural memory might open possibilities for new futurities today.

Notes

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[1] The national conversation in this post-TRC era and the concept of reconciliation are fraught with concerns over the nation of Canada wishing to close the book on a past chapter of the attempted cultural genocide that the Indian Residential Schools System represents without expanding a critical awareness of the colonial abuses and Indigenous militancy and resistance that both pre-date and continue outside of the current national discussion of reconciliation (Coulthard, Simpson, and Nichols; Garneau; Robinson).

In addition to this, however, we (settlers) also must seriously contend with the truth that Survivors and their descendants have shared—and demonstrate respect for this by taking up the 94 Calls to Action. As Anishinaabe/Ashkenazi theatre artist and scholar, Jill Carter has stated: "The TRC has issued a powerful (and just) call to Canada and its institutions to act in very concrete and specific ways upon its performance of sympathy … It remains to be seen just how many of these calls to action will be answered" and what further hurt those who shared their pain may undergo if actions are not taken up in a timely way (428–429; 415).

The TRC's 94 Calls to Action can be found online here: www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf . If you have not yet done so, we encourage you to read them and consider how you might take action.

Note End

[2] UNDRIP was adopted by the UN General Assembly 13 September 2007: 144 in favour, 11 abstentions and 4 against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US). Canada's main problem was stated to be about Article 19, which requires government to seek consent from Indigenous peoples for policy, and Articles 26 and 28, which involve land rights and restitution. In May 2016, Canada officially removed its objector status to UNDRIP.

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[3] UNDRIP Article 11:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.

2. States shall provide redress through effective mechanisms, which may include restitution, developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples, with respect to their cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.

Note End

[4] For a reflection on the development of the first iteration of the work, see Ric Knowles's rehearsal diary "Indigenous Declarations: ARTICLE 11 at the National Arts Centre" in *CTR* 166 Views and Reviews section, 2016, pp. 101–105.

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