

The Life and Death of the Monument in the Era of Social Networks: New Communities of Memory

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“Revised Commemoration” in Public Art: What Future for the Monument?

État des lieux de la « commémoration corrigée » en art public : quel avenir pour le monument ?

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Article abstract

Ce texte de commentaire vise à comprendre la portée et la présence au Canada de nouvelles communautés (virtuelles), qui sont aussi des communautés d'intérêts et de mémoire, à travers l'examen de la « correction » des statues d'Edward Cornwallis, à Halifax, ainsi que de celles de la reine Victoria et de John A. Macdonald, à Montréal. L'autrice met ici en relation la contestation ouverte de certaines statues coloniales en sol canadien avec l'impact des réseaux socio-numériques sur les façons contemporaines de communiquer, de militer, voire de se souvenir. Ces exemples lui permettent, entre autres, d'analyser la formation de nouvelles communautés partageant une mémoire collective du lourd héritage laissé par l'entreprise coloniale. L'auteure explore aussi le rôle joué par les travaux de la Commission canadienne de vérité et réconciliation (2008–15) dans la crise commémorative actuelle au Canada.

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The year 2015 was pivotal in the arena of commemoration: a host of monuments erected to honour controversial historical figures were subjected to repeated interventions in many places around the world. Most of these actions resulted in the monuments' removal, their partial or total destruction, or their temporary or permanent defacement. The actions were aimed at "correcting" the commemoration; the intention was to rectify the representations of the past conveyed by certain monuments.² As I explain, these corrections were virtually all aimed at redressing the colonial violence concealed by national mythologies of settler states.

The recent series of global demonstrations around contested monuments began in earnest in South Africa, in spring 2015, with Rhodes Must Fall, a student protest movement also known by the social media hashtags #RhodesMustFall and #RMF. On April 9, 2015, Marion Walgate's statue of Cecil John Rhodes was removed from the entrance to the University of Cape Town, which it had "guarded" since 1934. Its withdrawal was covered extensively on South African television and on various digital platforms.³ The Rhodes Must Fall movement rapidly expanded to other universities,⁴ and its reverberations spread beyond academic premises to public spaces in other South African cities.⁵ The protests that year were so widespread that the country's Department of Arts and Culture subsequently reviewed its policy of allowing old monuments associated with British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism to remain standing.⁶

The global wave of protest launched with Rhodes Must Fall continued and was consolidated during the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, in summer 2017, associated with the attempt to knock over the statue of Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate army. These incidents had a fatal outcome: one person was killed and nineteen injured during the confrontation between those wanting the statue to remain, including Ku Klux Klan members and neo-Nazis, and counter-protesters, including Black Lives Matter activists and groups associated with the anti-fascist (known as Antifa) movement.⁷ The next day, the statue of Lee was covered with a black tarp.

Adding to the traditional media and social-media coverage of the confrontations in Charlottesville, President Donald Trump, in his tweets and press conferences, blamed both the protesters and the counter-protesters.⁸ His statements were heard around the planet and drew attention both

1. A longer version of this essay, which considers the case studies in United States and South Africa in more detail, will be published in French in Suzanne Paquet and Alexandrine Théorêt (eds.), *Art, publics et cultures numériques: flux d'images et vie des œuvres* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, forthcoming).

2. These actions also include textual and visual contextualization, the creation of new monuments, the production of permanent, temporary, or ephemeral art interventions, exhibitions, and others. See Anays Alvarez Hernandez and Marie-Blanche Fourcade, "Introduction," *RACAR* 46, no. 2, "Revised Commemoration" in *Public Art: What Future for the Monument? | État des lieux de la «commémoration corrigée» en art public: Quel avenir pour le monument?* (2021): pp. 4–20.

3. Wandile Kasibe, "The Last Glimpse of the Fading Empire," Facebook, April 9, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/wandile.kasibe/videos/10156668286505234/>.

4. On March 26, 2015, the statue of King George V at the University of ZwaZulu-Natal was splashed with white paint and "END WHITE PRIVILEGE" was written on it. See Brenda Schmahmann, "The Fall of Rhodes: The Removal of a Sculpture from the University of Cape Town," *Public Art Dialogue* 6, no. 1 (2016): 90–115.

5. The day after the Rhodes statue was removed, a sculpture of Queen Victoria standing in front of the Port Elizabeth Public Library received a "bath" of green paint. See eNCA, "PE's Queen Victoria Statue Painted Green," April 10, 2015, <https://enca.com/south-africa/pes-queen-victoria-statue-painted-green>.

6. Kim Miller and Brenda Schmahmann, "Introduction: Engaging with Public Art in South Africa, 1999–2015," in *Public Art in South Africa: Bronze Warriors and Plastic Presidents*, ed. Kim Miller and Brenda Schmahmann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), vii–xxxvii.

7. Roger Persichino, "Histoire et mémoire à Charlottesville," *Le Débat* 198, no. 1 (2018): 37–50.

8. Trump declared that there were "very fine people on both sides." See Michael D. Shear and Maggie Haberman, "Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville: Again Blames 'Both Sides,'" *New York Times*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/>

to the incidents and to the persistence—and even escalation—of racism in the United States.⁹ The Charlottesville events triggered a series of removals of hundreds of statues of politicians and Confederate officers throughout the United States, although the statue of Lee still stood in Market Street Park (former Lee Park) until its recent removal in July 2021.¹⁰ Images of defaced and toppled statues have flooded social-media platforms, where much of the debate on the protest took place, spread, and proliferated.

Since then, actions aimed at correcting official commemorations, triggered by events associated with the aftermath and perpetuation of mechanisms of domination and social classification inherited from the colonial period, have increasingly become part of daily life. In 2019, during the wave of protests and riots demanding major social reforms in Chile, caused by the rise in public transit prices, more than three hundred effigies of colonizers and Chilean military officers were damaged.¹¹ The murder of African American George Floyd by police on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis relaunched protests against Confederate statues across the United States¹² and against other monuments in other countries, from statues of King Leopold II in Brussels and Sebastián de Belalcázar in Popayán to Edward Colston in Bristol.

In Canada, statues of the country's first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, are not the only ones targeted by actions that denounce systemic racism. Egerton Ryerson, James McGill, Queen Victoria, and Edward Cornwallis are on a growing list of historical personages whose past actions are being called into question. In this commentary, I argue that the current challenging of commemorative statues on Canadian soil is in part rooted in the dissemination and massive online sharing of information (texts, photographs, videos) on incidents associated with, for example, Confederate monuments and Rhodes Must Fall. I also argue it is the consequence of a "politics of repentance" that acknowledges specific cases of violence and exclusion in Canada linked to its colonial past and its contemporary effects, as well as the transnational and transcultural sharing of a traumatic colonial legacy and the hope (also shared and constantly evolving) of decolonizing societies. In the following, I reflect on the impact of social networks on contemporary forms of communication, activism, and remembering, as well as the creation of new spaces (virtual platforms) for people to make themselves heard; the "shared" heritage of the colonial past; and the role played by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the open contestation of certain monuments in Canada today. Specifically, I examine the presence and influence in Canada of new (virtual) communities, which are also communities of interest, through an examination of the "correction" of statues of Edward Cornwallis in Halifax, and of Queen Victoria and John A. Macdonald in Montreal.

The Transcultural Nature of Memory and the Role of Empathy in its Reception

The new communication media, whether one thinks of mobile technology or, especially, digital social media, have radically changed how, who, and what we remember.¹³ To explore the impact of platforms such as Facebook

trump-press-conference-charlottesville.html.

9. The authors of an article analyzing the reactions to the events in Charlottesville on social networks explain why Twitter accounts rapidly and efficiently disseminate the news: "The influence of Twitter accounts on shaping content propagation and online discourse depends on many factors, including the number of 'followers' ... community structure and other aspects of network architecture ... tweet activity (and other account characteristics) ... and specific tweet content." Joseph H. Tien et al., "Online Reactions to the 2017 'Unite the Right' Rally in Charlottesville: Measuring Polarization in Twitter Networks Using Media Followership," *Applied Network Science* 5, no. 1 (2020), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41109-019-0223-3>.

10. See Taylor Dafoe, "The Infamous Charlottesville Statue of Robert E. Lee, Where Neo-Nazis Rallied Violently in 2017, Has Been Removed From View," *Artnet News*, July 12, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/charlottesvilles-robert-e-lee-monument-neo-nazis-organized-violent-rally-2017-final-ly-removed-1988237>.

11. Rocío Montes, "Las protestas de Chile cuestionan la historia oficial de las esculturas," *El País*, January 23, 2020, https://elpais.com/cultura/2020/01/23/actualidad/1579806166_111949.html.

12. Ben Davis, "Monuments Across the United States Re-Emerged as Targets of Rage Over a Weekend of Widespread Protest," *Artnet News*, June 1, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/monuments-across-the-united-states-re-emerged-as-targets-of-fury-over-a-weekend-of-wide-spread-protest-1876542>.

13. Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg (eds.), *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); H. Zhao and Jun Liu, "Social Media and Collective Remembrance," *China Perspectives* 1 (2015): 41–48; Jun Liu, "Who Speaks for the Past? Social Media, Social Memory, and the Production of Historical Knowledge in Contemporary China," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 1675–95.

14. James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paul A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96–116.

15. Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 12 (emphasis in original).

and Twitter on the shaping of collective memory, I look first at the capacity of collective memory to "travel" and then at the ways in which the media accentuate and amplify its transcultural condition; finally, I explore the role of empathy and solidarity in the dissemination, sharing, and reception of collective memory.

How, with whom, and by what means does memory travel today? The new forms of communication and circulation certainly accelerate these travels, even as they amplify the range and diversification of its destinations. Astrid Erll developed the notion of "travelling memory," taking inspiration from work by the German art historian Aby Warburg on migrations of images over time and space and from the notion of travelling cultures.¹⁴ Erll posits that movement and travelling are constitutive characteristics of memory, as "all cultural memory must 'travel,' be kept in motion, in order to 'stay alive,' to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations."¹⁵ Warburg's works provide an illustration: memory has travelled since the dawn of time, and its forms and content have acquired new meanings and lives depending on their context of reception.¹⁶ So, memory travels, for example, with the movements of individuals and through images, still or moving, disseminated and shared through traditional media, and more recently through digital social networks. What does the more rapid sharing of images and videos on these networks do to collective memory? What impact does it have on the field of commemoration?

With the term "connective turn," Andrew Hoskins refers to a contemporary era of hyperconnectivity that transforms, among other things, how memory is formed, transmitted and circulated, and received.¹⁷ Today, memory is also produced, maintained, and saved in the networks that are woven between people and machines.¹⁸ Social media, as "memory agents," produce, revive, maintain, and convey different versions of the past¹⁹ and contribute to the formation of "new communities of memory,"²⁰ which are transcultural and transnational.

These new communities, intrinsically associated with the connective turn, seem to challenge the notion of collective memory, at least as theorized by Maurice Halbwach.²¹ For the French sociologist, collective memory is non-transcultural by definition and "rests upon the assumption that every social group develops a memory of its past; a memory that emphasizes its uniqueness and allows it to preserve its self-image and pass it on to future generations."²² Since the advent of nation-states in the nineteenth century, collective memory has thus been constructed within and in relation to the nation, "fixing" and standardizing social groups and their identities or creating imagined communities that share a homogeneous narrative about their past. Yet, as Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider observe, "this container [that of the nation-state] is in the process of being slowly cracked."²³

One consequence of contemporary digital culture is the encouragement of the formation of "communities of memory," some of which become global and cosmopolitan, such as the memory of the Holocaust. In the case of apartheid or colonization, which are intrinsically transcultural and

16. Erll, "Travelling Memory."
 17. Andrew Hoskins, "Media, Memory, Metaphor: Remembering and the Connective Turn," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 19–31.
 18. Hoskins, "Memory, Media, Metaphor."
 19. Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins, and Anna Reading, "Introduction," in *Save as ... Digital Memories*, ed. Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins, and Anna Reading (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–21.
 20. Dagmar Brunow, *Remediating Transcultural Memory: Documentary Filmmaking as Archival Intervention* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015).
 21. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 19[1925]).
 22. Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg, *On Media Memory*, 4.
 23. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 88.
 24. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
 25. Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*.
 26. Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, Tea Sindbæk Andersen, and Astrid Erll, "Introduction: On Transcultural Memory and Reception," in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception*, ed. Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Tea Sindbæk Andersen (Leiden (Boston: Brill, 2017), 14–15.
 27. Törnquist-Plewa, Sindbæk Andersen, and Erll, "Introduction."
 28. Persichino, "Histoire et mémoire," (my translation).
 29. At the same time, a popular petition was circulating on change.org to demand its removal. See <https://www.change.org/p/charlottesville-city-council-change-the-name-of-lee-park-and-remove-the-statue-in-charlottesville-va>.
 30. See, for example, Jennifer Basa, "Kingston, Ont., Protesters Ask City to Remove City Park Sir John A. Macdonald Statue," *Global News*, June 22, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7094482/kingston-ont-protesters-john-a-macdonald-statue/>; CTV Regina, "Sir John A. Macdonald Statue Vandalized," August 21, 2018, <https://regina.ctvnews.ca/sir-john-a-macdonald-statue-vandalized-1.4062101>; Radio Canada, "Une statue de John A. Macdonald

transnational, "communities of memory" reflect the different colonization processes conducted mainly, but not exclusively, by European empires.

The United States, Canada, and South Africa are among the countries that share the experience of colonization. Yet, in the process of sharing the memory of this experience, we cannot exactly speak of "prosthetic memory."²⁴ Alison Landsberg formulated this notion to describe memories that can be gained and shared by anyone. New technologies and mass culture have made possible the transmission and global dissemination of such memories.²⁵ This idea is taken up by Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, Tea Sindbæk Andersen, and Astrid Erll in the introduction to the book the two first edited about the transmission and reception of memories in twentieth-century Europe:

The Internet and modern mass culture have made the distribution and sharing of memory content faster and easier. This also allows people to engage emotionally with memories that they are not obviously connected with through personal, familial, ethnical or national ties. People can become part of new memory communities, subcultural, cosmopolitan or activist groups, and to (differently) imagined memory communities, such as European communities or global ones.²⁶

Yet, the assimilation of a historical narrative, without a direct—or even indirect—link to those receiving it, does not seem to be what is at work in the memory-related processes concerning the colonial undertaking. Despite its contextual variations, this undertaking has left, among other things, a common legacy of trauma, whether one thinks of the physical and cultural genocide of Indigenous populations throughout the Americas or of the forced removal of African populations that led to the establishment of slavery. For communities that have to cope with the traumas of colonization, for instance, the question of adhering to or appropriating a particular collective memory of this undertaking seems to miss the point: this is a memory that is already theirs, independently of the specific aspects of their respective cultural and historical contexts. Their collective memory of the colonial undertaking is shaped, consolidated and sent out to travel by social media. In performing this role, social media accentuate feelings of solidarity across cultures and nations affected by the experience of colonialism. What I retain from Landsberg's theoretical framework is the idea that "empathy" is an important criterion for reception of the other's memory and that solidarity is one of its possible effects, as Törnquist-Plewa and her colleagues note.²⁷

The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008–15)

Roger Persichino asked an essential question about the incidents in Charlottesville: "We must wonder why these events, which are remarkable neither for the number of demonstrators—a total of a few thousand—nor for their violence—regrettable, but far from the violence sadly customary in the country in many forms—triggered such a furor. What happened in Charlottesville?"²⁸ Persichino's question is particularly salient because the Charlottesville city council had been studying the possibility of removing the statue of Lee since March 2016.²⁹ It is just as meaningful when the geopolitical context is changed. We could ask, what happened in Cape Town? We do ask, what is happening in Canada?

vandalisée à Charlottetown,” June 19, 2020, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1713474/vandalisme-statue-john-a-macdonald-charlottetown-ile-du-prince-edouard>.

31. Samuel Mercier, “L’impopulaire John A. Macdonald,” *Le Devoir*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/idees/581472/l-impopulaire-john-a-macdonald>.

32. Kelsey R. Wrightson, “The Limits of Recognition: The Spirit Sings, Canadian Museums and the Colonial Politics of Recognition,” *Museum Anthropology* 40, no. 1 (2017): 36–51.

33. Caitlin Gordon-Walker, Analays Alvarez Hernandez, and Susan Ashley, “Recognition and Repentance in Canadian Multicultural Heritage: The Community Historical Recognition Program and Italian Canadian Memorializing,” in “Critical Heritage Studies in Canada: What Does Heritage Do?,” ed. Susan Ashley and Andrea Terry, special issue, *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’études canadiennes* 53, no. 1 (2018): 82–107.

34. Justine Monette-Tremblay, “La Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada: une étude de la sublimation de la violence coloniale Canadienne,” *Revue québécoise de droit international* 31, no. 2 (2018): 103–42.

35. Monette-Tremblay, “La Commission de vérité.”

36. “Coloniality of power” designates a model or power regime engendered by the advent of capitalism and the colonial enterprise, but which survived the latter. Racism and patriarchy are among the manifestations of this regime, resulting from Western modernity having been spread and imposed around the globe. See Aníbal Quijano, “Race’ et colonialité du pouvoir,” *Mouvements* 51, no. 3 (2007): 111–18.

37. Mylène Jaccoud, “La portée réparatrice et réconciliatrice de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada,” *Recherches américanologiques au Québec*, 46, no. 2–3 (2016): 1 (my translation).

38. Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada, Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada: Appels à l’action (Winnipeg: Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada, 2012), http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_French.pdf. Also available in English: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation

The public debate over whether streets or institutions should be renamed or certain monuments removed is not all that new in Canada. Although protests over the likenesses of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald³⁰—known for being one of the instigators of the British North America Act (1867) and denounced for having contributed to the development of the Indian residential school system—have intensified over the last several years, they date back to the late nineteenth century.³¹ That being said, the current wave of protests has taken on an unprecedented scope and pace, and it extends to a host of historical personalities. Most of the latest episodes denounce the ravages of British imperialism and the treatment inflicted notably, but not exclusively, on Indigenous populations.

For about three decades, a duty to remember and a discourse of reconciliation have been manifested in Canada on the institutional level, including through recourse to “politics of repentance,” particularly with regard to the country’s colonial past.³² These politics have been largely limited to the expression of a sense of regret concerning the role played by the government in the establishment and operation of the Indian residential school system, expressed, notably, through the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) between 2008 and 2015.³³

Unlike other truth and reconciliation commissions, Canada’s analyzed a very long period of time: the residential schools were in operation for about 160 years, and the last ones closed between 1995 and 1998.³⁴ In addition, the TRC was not aiming for the establishment or consolidation of a new democratic state;³⁵ it was concerned with how to repair the after-effects of the exercise of “coloniality of power.”³⁶ In an essay about reconciliation and reparation discourses advocated by the commission’s work, Mylène Jaccoud remarks:

It [the commission] is the first to have been envisaged to respond to the after-effects of the colonialism of which the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit were victims. It is also one of the few not to have entered a process of transitional justice. It sought to construct a political response to the injuries inflicted on 150,000 children placed in residential schools over more than a hundred years and on the eighty thousand survivors of this long and sad chapter of history.³⁷

The TRC seems to have changed, among other things, the dialogue on commemoration in the country. It concluded with the adoption of ninety-four calls to action, several of which directly concerned commemoration activities.³⁸ Calls 81 and 82, for example, suggest that national monuments be erected on the subject of the residential schools in Ottawa and all provincial capitals. By 2018, Brenda McDougall was connecting the TRC’s work and calls to action with the debate underway on commemoration: “The current Canadian national debate about names and renaming comes in the wake of the TRC’s 94 calls to action and our need to address the roles of figures like Ryerson, Langevin, and Macdonald in the history of residential schools and, consequently, cultural genocide, and the role of men like Cornwallis and others in actual, physical genocide.”³⁹

With these observations in mind, I now delve more deeply into the actions aimed at rectifying the commemoration conveyed by three

Commission of Canada, 2012), http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

39. Brenda Macdougall, "Naming and Renaming: Confronting Canada's Past," *Shekon Neechie*, August 1, 2018, <https://shekonneechee.ca/2018/08/01/naming-and-renaming-confronting-canadas-past/>.

40. Andrew Pinsent, "Council Votes to Remove Cornwallis Statue Temporarily," *Halifax Today*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.halifaxtoday.ca/local-news/council-votes-to-remove-cornwallis-statue-temporarily-826579>.

41. Pinsent, "Council Votes."

42. CBC Radio, "Who Are the Proud Boys Who Disrupted an Indigenous Event on Canada Day?," July 4, 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-tuesday-edition-1.4189447/who-are-the-proud-boys-who-disrupted-an-indigenous-event-on-canada-day-1.4189450>.

43. Tom Fraser, "Edward Cornwallis, Public Memory, and Canadian Nationalism," *Active History* (blog), March 13, 2018, <https://activehistory.ca/2018/03/edward-cornwallis-public-memory-and-canadian-nationalism/>.

44. Daniel N. Paul, *We Were Not the Savages: Collision between European and Native American Civilizations* (Halifax, Fernwood Publishing, 1993).

45. Oliver Moore, "Halifax Junior High Strips Cornwallis of His Rank," *The Globe and Mail*, June 24, 2011, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/halifax-junior-high-strips-cornwallis-of-his-rank/article584365/>.

46. Jacob Boon, "Panel of Experts to Review Use of Cornwallis Name," *The Coast Halifax*, April 26, 2017, <https://www.thecoast.ca/RealityBites/archives/2017/04/26/panel-of-experts-to-review-use-of-cornwallis-name>.

47. Linda Jones, "Halifax Covers Controversial Cornwallis Statue in Response to Protests," *The Globe and Mail*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/halifax-covers-controversial-cornwallis-statue-in-response-to-protests/article35701179/>.

48. The Facebook event "Removing Cornwallis" is no longer available. For images of the demonstration, see Dagley Media, "Removing Cornwallis-Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada," YouTube, 0:05:45, July 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7qUXk3l-hc&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR-0P8oqzubbdl3jokwnf71sKsPl->

monuments in Canada. The demonstrations and confrontations at the foot of the statue of Edward Cornwallis in downtown Halifax in summer 2017 resulted in the statue's removal the following year. And the recurrent interventions with paint on the statues of John A. Macdonald and Queen Victoria in Montreal highlight the formation and broadening of new communities of memory around a common colonial past and its persistent and shared effects.

Halifax, 2018: Cornwallis Falls

In January 2018, the Halifax Regional Council decided, by a vote of twelve to four, in favour of removing the statue of Cornwallis, which was sculpted by J. Massey Rhind and inaugurated in 1931 to stand in an eponymous park in Halifax.⁴⁰ The decision was made after a report by the city recommended the statue's withdrawal in the name of public safety.⁴¹ In fact, confrontations at the foot of the statue had been taking place regularly since summer 2017. On July 1, a month and a half before the incidents in Charlottesville, five members of the Proud Boys—a group of right-wing extremists who fashion themselves as guardians of the European heritage in North America—turned up, brandishing the flag of imperial Canada, at a ceremony held by the Mi'kmaq community near the monument to the former governor.⁴² The Proud Boys stood in defence of the statue, in the firm belief that "Halifax is in its essence a British space, and to be Canadian—to celebrate Canada Day—is to celebrate the empire."⁴³ Cornwallis, it should be remembered, is considered the "founder of Halifax." He is also denounced for his role in the genocide of the Mi'kmaq: in October 1849, he issued the "Scalping Proclamation," offering a reward to anyone who killed a Mi'kmaq adult or child.

One of the earliest challenges to commemoration of the figure of Cornwallis occurred thirty years ago. In 1993, the Mi'kmaq elder Daniel N. Paul published *We Were Not the Savages*⁴⁴, in which he wrote about Nova Scotia history from the Mi'kmaq point of view. In 2011, a high school in Halifax decided to remove "Cornwallis" from its name.⁴⁵ Just a few months before the "Halifax incidents" of April 2017, a motion to create an expert committee, including Mi'kmaq representatives, to study the commemoration of Cornwallis was passed by the city council.⁴⁶ | **fig. 1** | On July 15, 2017, two weeks after the confrontation at its feet, the statue was covered with a black cloth by the city's employees⁴⁷ to keep it from being removed by the 150 protesters who had responded to the Facebook invitation sent out by the Mi'kmaq activist Suzanne Patles.⁴⁸

Montreal, 2019–20: Macdonald and Victoria Stay Standing ... for Now

The *Macdonald Monument* has stood in Place du Canada (formerly Dominion Square) in Montreal since 1895. The oversized statue of Sir John Alexander Macdonald, one of the "Fathers of Confederation," is surrounded by twelve Corinthian columns that are part of a sheltering canopy topped with an allegorical figure. The allegorical and decorative elements are intended to reinforce Macdonald's "contribution" to the future of Canada.⁴⁹



Figure 1. “Removing Cornwallis,” Facebook event, July 15, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/events/statue-of-edward-cornwallis/removing-cornwallis/1904629933090599/>. Screenshot, February 22, 2021.



Figure 2. Several interventions on the Monument to John A. Macdonald claimed by the group MacdonaldMustFall. No Borders Media, Twitter post. July 3, 2020, 12:19PM <https://twitter.com/NoBordersMedia/status/1279087402372472833?s=20>.



Figure 3. Statue of Queen Victoria, Montreal. Painting intervention on March 24, 2019, claimed by the Delhi-Dublin Anti-Colonial Solidarity Brigade. No Borders Media, Facebook, March 27, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/NoBordersMediaNetwork/photos/a.419441598463208/525164104557623>.

pO7M7BHwCgYUID8InRNlBoDU-q9aXoFq4Y.

49. Online catalogue of the City of Montreal's public art collection, <https://artpublic.ville.montreal.qc.ca/oeuvre/monument-a-sir-john-a-macdonald/>.

50. In 1992, the statue was decapitated by members of the Front de libération du Québec, on the anniversary of the death by hanging of Louis Riel. See, "Le FLQ décapite la statue de Macdonald," *Le Soleil*, November 17, 1992, A1.

51. This group claimed other interventions on the monument on November 12, 2017; June 27, 2018; August 17, 2018; October 7, 2018; and December 24, 2018. For a video showing the intervention in March 2019, see APTN News, Twitter, 0:01:12, March 21, 2019, <https://twitter.com/i/status/1108865353826865153>.

52. No Borders Media, Facebook, March 22, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/NoBordersMediaNetwork/photos/a.419441598463208/52289911450789/>.

53. New Borders Media, Facebook, March 22, 2019.

54. Maxime Deland, "Montréal: la statue de John A. Macdonald

Over the years, this work by the British artist George Edward Wade, who also sculpted a likeness of Macdonald in Hamilton (1893), has been defaced repeatedly at irregular intervals.⁵⁰ On March 17, 2019, the monument suffered yet another attack, this time with red spray paint.⁵¹ The role of empathy and solidarity in the process of reception of memory was evident in the statements made by the group claiming the action, #MacdonaldMustFall. In a press release to various media, distributed in its entirety by the independent media network No Borders Media on its Facebook page, #MacdonaldMustFall explained that it had vandalized the monument in solidarity with and support of global actions and mobilizations against racism and fascism just before the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.⁵² The anonymous group demanded that all statues of Macdonald be withdrawn from the public space. The poster accompanying the press release⁵³ featured a bloodied face of Macdonald and was paired with an appeal to relegate all of his likenesses to museums in Canada.

Actions involving the Macdonald monument in Montreal (and those elsewhere in Canada) returned to the foreground in summer 2020,⁵⁴ during a social and political climate shaped by, among other things, the most recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations.⁵⁵ | **fig. 2** | In early July, a new intervention with paint on the Macdonald statue in Montreal was claimed on

est encore vandalisée,” *Le Journal de Montréal*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2020/06/15/montreal-la-statue-de-john-a-macdonald-encore-vandalisee>.

55. The demonstrations were triggered by media coverage of Floyd’s murder, but also by the murders of Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and all the victims (Black, Indigenous, and of colour) of systemic racism.

56. No Borders Media, Twitter, July 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/NoBordersMedia/status/1279087402372472833/photo/1>.

57. No Borders Media, Facebook, March 22, 2019.

58. See <https://www.change.org/p/montr%C3%Agal-city-council-remove-white-supremacist-john-a-macdonald-s-monument-in-montr%C3%Agal>.

59. I have avoided using the word “vandalism” in this commentary. I agree with the position of Sabine Marschall, who explains that terms such as “intervention” and “modification” of contested monuments bear a connotation that better describes the spirit of the claims. See Sabine Marschall, “Targeting Statues: Monument ‘Vandalism’ as an Expression of Sociopolitical Protest in South Africa,” *African Studies Review* 60, no. 3 (2017): 203–19.

60. In the past, the statues of Queen Victoria in Montreal have been targeted by similar interventions claimed, through social media, by different groups: on December 24, 20 (Les Lutins rebelles du père Noël, www.facebook.com/NoBordersMediaNetwork/videos/1005478032992709); May 18, 20 (Brigade Henri Paul contre la monarchie, <https://sub.media/video/queen-victoria-statues-vandalized-in-montreal/>); and March 17, 20 (Brigade de Solidarité Anticoloniale Delhi-Dublin, <https://vimeo.com/260188932>).

61. The original, in white marble, is placed at the entrance to Kensington Palace in London and was sculpted by Princess Louise, Queen Victoria’s daughter.

62. No Borders Media, Facebook, March 24, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/NoBordersMediaNetwork/photos/a.419441598463208/523818944692139?fbclid=IwAR-3gaPQsmnEjXlzkAlv8kxDzKFVGcErgtG78fCTKBJD7XnRaxMrX1cdds>.

63. Ibid.

64. The statue was finally tore down by protesters in September 2020.

Twitter⁵⁶ and published on Facebook.⁵⁷ The action went hand in hand with a petition for removal that has almost fifty thousand signatures.⁵⁸

Another target of these acts of resistance—and not of vandalism⁵⁹—responding to a gesture of anti-colonial solidarity,⁶⁰ is Queen Victoria, a historical figure who connected different continents through the expansion of the British Empire. Situated in front of McGill University’s Strathcona Music Building, near a statue of James McGill, the statue of Queen Victoria (1900) is a replica of an original work.⁶¹ This statue, as well as the one standing in the eponymous square, have been doused with paint on several occasions. | fig. 3 | One of the most recent actions took place last year and was claimed by the Delhi-Dublin Anti-Colonial Solidarity Brigade. In a press release with images shared on Twitter and Facebook, the group’s members explained, “The presence of statues of Queen Victoria in Montreal is an insult to the struggles for self-determination and resistance of oppressed peoples throughout the world, including the Indigenous nations in North America (Turtle Island) and Oceania, as well as the peoples of Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, and everywhere the British Empire committed its atrocities.”⁶²

This statement attests to the existence of communities sharing a collective memory of the onerous legacy left by the British Empire’s colonization processes and the role of empathy and solidarity in these communities’ formation, maintenance, and spread. The press release continued, “Last night’s action is motivated and inspired by movements worldwide that have targeted colonial and racist statues for vandalism and removal: Cornwallis in Halifax, John A. Macdonald in Kingston (Ontario) and Victoria (BC), the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa, the resistance to racist Confederate monuments in the USA, and more.”⁶³

The statue of Queen Victoria has not suffered exactly the same fate, at least for the moment, as the statue of Macdonald, which many wish to see withdrawn from the public space in Canada.⁶⁴ The Delhi-Dublin Anti-Colonial Solidarity Brigade concluded its press release by noting that, although its members were not currently (in 2019) demanding that the statue be removed from its site, they did ask that it keep the physical traces of this act of resistance—a balaclava and splashes of green paint. Their wishes were not fulfilled.

When Will the Monument Protests End?

When transmission of memory, mainly via social networks, is analyzed, there is no way to disregard the sociopolitical context of its reception. Beyond the impact of new communities of memory (or memories) associated with South African apartheid, British imperialism, and the US civil war, in Canada the contestation of the colonial past is also the result of domestic specificities and dynamics that have been at work for decades. Of course, new media amplify the reach of these dynamics, accelerating their spread and raising their visibility. For example, despite the number of actions and petitions over the years targeting the statue of Cornwallis in Halifax, it speaks volumes that its actual withdrawal took place in the wake of the

violent confrontations in Charlottesville, which were extensively covered by the media and took social media by storm.

A further element to consider is that reception is not the final destination of memory;⁶⁵ memory is and will be in constant motion, as it is multidirectional.⁶⁶ The mediatization of events involving “colonial statues” on Canadian soil will therefore affect the occurrence of similar episodes within our geographic borders. It will also foster the consolidation and broadening at a global scale of (imagined) communities of the memory (of the ravages) of colonization and its legacy, which is still very present in daily life.

It is now late summer 2020 and I am finalizing this commentary in a context marked by multiple, overlapping crises: commemorative, environmental, humanitarian, health, and more. Despite the global confinement of populations caused by COVID-19, demonstrators have taken over public spaces in our cities, in the midst of lockdowns, to loudly demand their universal right to breathe.⁶⁷ Given this situation, and the unpredictable outcome of current events, it is legitimate to ask several questions: How many interventions must a monument undergo for the value(s) that it conveys to be definitively “corrected”? Is withdrawing problematic monuments from our physical public spaces, reducing them to their condition of historical artefacts, and exiling them to museums enough to heal old wounds? What will happen after these corrective gestures are performed?

Despite the uncertainties, it is possible to make several observations: the debate over monuments continues to be intense, and its global nature becomes more obvious every day. It has even extended to figures, such as Winston Churchill, up to now considered “untouchable.”⁶⁸ Social networks increasingly offer fertile ground for this debate. Finally, the current protests will surely continue as long as concrete and symbolic actions are not taken to address the real roots of the contestation. In fact, a monument, despite its authoritarian, affirmative, even “repressive” nature,⁶⁹ is only the visible face of more acute societal problems. The removal of the Cornwallis statue was followed, among other things, by a citizen petition to revoke, as a symbolic gesture, a Mi’kmaq scalping order proclaimed in the nineteenth century that is apparently still in force today.⁷⁰ Enough! ¶

65. Törnquist-Plewa, Sindbæk Andersen, and Erl, “Introduction.”

66. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

67. See Achille Mbembe, “Le droit universel à la respiration,” *AOC media*, April 6, 2020, <https://aoc.media/opinion/2020/04/05/le-droit-universel-a-la-respiration/>.

68. See Mattis Meichler, “Londres: une statue de Churchill mise en boîte contre les dégradations,” *CNEWS*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.cnews.fr/monde/2020-06-12/londres-une-statue-de-churchill-mise-en-boite-contre-les-degradations-967175>.

69. Henri Lefebvre, *La révolution urbaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

70. See TVA nouvelles, “Un Micmac veut abolir une loi permettant de scalper les Autochtones,” February 3, 2018, <https://www.tvanouvelles.ca/2018/02/03/un-micmac-veut-abolir-une-loi-permettant-de-scalper-les-autochtones>.