The Mortal Lives of Statues of Founding Fathers in Re-Indigenizing Cities

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Figure 1. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/john-a-macdonald-statue-victoria-city-hall-lisa-helps-1.4782065

Our course was a first year "lab" class on history and memory, and our source was a 2018 photograph of the removal of a statue of John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, from the front steps of city hall in Victoria, British Columbia. We had introduced the idea that monuments have bodies and mortal lifespans, and discussed some violent reactions against these "bodies," especially ones that represent colonization—the fake blood and mutilated doll parts thrown on Christopher Columbus statues in Denver in 1989, the toppling of a Columbus statue in Caracas, Venezuela in 2004, the amputated foot of the Juan de Oñate statue in Alcalde, New Mexico in 1994, among other examples.[100] Our students are attuned to Indigenous topics, quite aware of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-2015) as well as the removal of monuments as gestures or modes of

[100] On the mortality of monuments, see Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 46. On de Onate, p. 313, and Columbus, p. 324.

reconciliation and decolonization, and they are at a university where professors and university administrators routinely acknowledge at meetings and events that they are on unceded Algonquin territory.[101] Residential schools are especially prominent in their imaginary, almost a metonym for the historical experience of being Indigenous in Canada, which perhaps suggests a broader willingness to take the idea of intergenerational trauma seriously.

Still, most of our students initially had misgivings about the removal of the statue. Some argued that Macdonald, as a state builder, was more than simply a symbol of residential schools. In prior classes on Holocaust memory, we had discussed political uses of the term genocide, and some class members might have thought about residential schools as "just" cultural erasure.[102] When asked about Macdonald's role in the starvation of thousands of Indigenous people and the "reign of terror" between 1870 and 1872 in the Red River colony/Manitoba,[103] their response was to invoke historical context somewhat reflexively to say that Macdonald acted within the standards of his time, and it was unfair to judge him by contemporary norms. When we tried to push the conversation more in the direction of memory and preservation, some were discomfited by the very idea of destroying monuments. In lecture, we had discussed the Allied Forces' 1946 Directive No. 30, "The Liquidation of German Military and Nazi Memorials and Museums," and the idea of whether or not liquidation could become a substitute for a more profound moral and intellectual reckoning with a fascist past, or in this case the past of violent dispossession of Indigenous people. But these concerns did not especially animate them. Instead they seemed to be reacting to a static ideal of what public history and commemoration should be, and tended to be almost reverentially hoarding in orientation, and circumspect about the idea that public art could be used to say how the present is or what the future could be. Some did opt for a compromise position of developing "counter-monuments" as a strategy to reframe the dominant narratives embodied in existing Macdonald statues to highlight missing or exploited elements in national heritage. No one advocated anything as dramatic as fake blood or a depiction of a starving Indigenous person or a prison, but proposed a plaque mentioning residential schools and genocide. We had discussed potential problems of counter monuments as means of inscribing racial oppression only in the past, or becoming a substitute for thinking about ongoing exploitations in the present,[104] but students mainly saw some practical problems, doubting that many people actually read plaques.

It was when we gave the class, in a follow-up discussion, the *American Historical Association*'s Statement on the Confederate Monuments from 2017[105] that their positions became more varied and nuanced. In fact, some students flipped positions altogether, taking aim at the statement that suggested that "founding fathers" had done more for state-building than just being slaveholders, and that there was "no logical equivalence between builders and protectors of a nation—however imperfect—and the men who sought to sunder that nation in the name of slavery,"[106] the very position that many had found fair and historically viable when discussing Canada's first prime minister. Others were more attuned to contradictions in the document than they had been during the Canadian

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[101] On this, see Blair Crawford, "How an Acknowledgement of 'Unceded Algonquin Territory' Became Ubiquitous," *Ottawa Citizen,* Published January 9, 2019. https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/how-an-acknowledgment-of-unceded-algonquin-territory-became-ubiquitous.

[102] Ann Curthoys and John Docker, "Problems in Comparative Genocide Scholarship," *The Historiography of Genocide* in Dan Stone, ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 16. See also Tony Barta, "Australian Historians and Genocide," 296-322 in the same collection, 314.

[103] On John A. Macdonald's views on residential schools, see Andrew Woolford et al, eds., *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 312. On his relationship with First Nations, see Donald B. Smith, "Macdonald's Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples," in *Macdonald at 200: New Reflections and Legacies,* eds., Patrice Dutil and Roger Hall, (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 58—94. On Macdonald and the Métis more specifically, see Walter Hildebrandt, *The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Métis,* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1985), 13. Finally, see James W. Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2014), 79-99.

[104] For a fascinating meditation on these ideas, see Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 296.

[105] "AHA Statement on Confederate Monuments (August 2017)," *American Historical Association*, Published August 28, 2017, https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-on-confederate-monuments.

[106] Ibid.

discussion. One student noted a potential contradiction in the AHA's argument that Confederate monuments needed to be removed, and yet that Donald Trump was right about the need for history and preservation, so the monuments should be placed in museums, and "prior to removal they should be photographed and measured in their original contexts. These documents should accompany the memorials as part of the historical record."[107] The students were aware that many Confederate monuments were put up years after the existence of the actual Confederacy, and sometimes served as a reaction against bourgeoning black civil rights movements. Still, the students noticed that the failure to reflect the actual historical moment of the Confederacy was what the AHA authors appeared to find troubling, as if they would not find the monuments so objectionable had they been built during the "right" historical moment rather than several years later.

In short, in the Canadian discussion, many students were hoarders, but in the American one they had become an array of liquidators and counter-monumenters, and generally were less principally invested in the sanctity of historical context and "the historical record." They also appreciated the AHA's statement that monuments themselves are not history, but commemorate an aspect of history, that there could be a chasm between interpretations embedded in monuments and historical analysis.

One of our broader themes was the relationship of monuments to other cultural forms that can instantiate memory, whether songs or novels, or more introspective sources, or performance art. We wondered whether there might be another way of thinking about preservation, if, instead of counter-monuments, there could be a sedimentary memorialization: we proposed several examples, both official (such as the *Casa del Fascio* in Bolzano, Italy, where the engraved fascist credo "*Credere, obbedire, combattere*" has been overlaid with an illuminated "No one has the right to obey – Hannah Arendt"), and unofficial (as in the case of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia, Bulgaria, a communist postwar monument celebrating the Red Army as liberators, graffitied so that the soldiers were dressed as icons of American popular and mass culture — Superman, Ronald McDonald, Santa Claus, etc. — underlining the fictitiousness of the narrative of the Soviet liberators, and also the post-Soviet invasion by American consumer culture). Such sedimentary memorialization inscribes a monument in layers of time, makes memory less static, and goes beyond the AHA's message that monuments are artifacts that can be both preserved and disarmed by removal from our time and into "history."

But could this sense of layered public history work in North America where the questions of African American and Indigenous exploitation and genocide register so deeply, and are often so steeped in shame and anger? Might layering be perceived as introducing moral ambiguity? And how does the weight of unsettled emotions shape students when they are trying to explore these issues—can they have an analytical relationship to these monuments? Is an ideology of Canadian racial innocence so firmly entrenched that a critical eye only can be cast upon the United States? By pointing out to the students that they were more nuanced when discussing American monuments, we hoped to highlight to them the ways in which they might have reified the past-ness of the past and lionized their national heritage in a way that they deem uniquely American.

[107] Ibid.