

Dis/locating Preferential Memory within Settler Colonial Landscapes: A Forward-Looking Backward Glance at Memoriation's Per/formation

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Introduction

This paper introduces “memoriation,” a methodology I have developed over an extended period through my intermedia art practice and interdisciplinary scholarship.¹ The term memoriation is a neologism reflecting the critical *activation* of the personal (*memory*) and the collective impulse to recall (*commemorate*). Memoriation uses strategies that bring relational embodiment into conjunction with place/land in order to perform interventions into aspects of public, national, and personal memory tied to the transmission, substantiation, and dominance of settler whiteness in settler colonial states. In contexts such as the lands now known as Canada, the imperative of masking concomitant colonial and white supremacist ideologies embedded in the nation-building project heightens the stakes of what is remembered and forgotten. As scholar and educator Leigh Patel argues, a settler state “needs a story that can obscure its violently consumptive structure” (2015, para. 4). Sanitized versions of national narratives are commonly propagated through authorized sites of commemoration such as monuments. Among many examples in the Canadian context, this is illustrated by monuments that lionize figures such as Canada’s first prime minister, John A Macdonald, without reference to his regressive policies, including the Gradual Civilization Act (1858), the Indian Act (1876), the Chinese Immigration Act (1885), and Indian Residential Schools (1883–1996),² and Edward Cornwallis, the “founder” of Halifax and governor of Nova Scotia, who was responsible for the genocidal “Scalping Proclamation” (1749) against Mi’kmaq people.³

While monuments, as purveyors of public memory, certainly help shape dominant understandings of nation, the circulation of ascendant national ideations is not contingent upon official modes of recollection. Vernacular sites and commonplace visual and material culture, as often tacit yet powerful agents of commemoration, also contribute to producing and substantiating a nation’s “preferred memory” and the stories that go along with it (Lehrer and Milton 2011, 3). Again, referencing the Canadian context, these preferential national/public memories and narratives can be found in physical sites such as national parks, which enlist the public to perform connections between “Canadian-ness” and wilderness that recall the notion of terra nullius on which this country was “founded,”⁴ and in this way support a story of Canadian sovereignty as “exclusive authority” over Indigenous lands (Bird and Cornthassel 2017, 196). Material culture such as the Hudson Bay point blanket, as an iconic form of “Canadiana,” performs a similar function by perpetuating within mainstream public memory stories of the fur trade and early colonial “contact” as the bedrock of nation-building in ways that are washed clean of the violence of colonial invasion including implications of the blanket’s role in spreading disease in Indigenous communities.⁵

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As curator and scholar Erica Lehrer and historian Cynthia E. Milton suggest, artistic interventions that “activate, re-activate and de-activate” (2011, 8) institutional and other representations of the preferred public memory can highlight new ways of being and thinking. I propose memoration as a methodology for launching this type of intervention into implicit and explicit forms of commemoration with the aim of disturbing dominant Canadian mythologies, narratives and beliefs that are harbingers of stasis and denial and contributing to the potential of structural change generated by decolonial paradigms. In doing so, memoration provides a framework for “remembering otherwise” (Herscher 2011, 152) that activates a reckoning with the intergenerational responsibilities of being-in-relation,⁶ in my case as a white settler, on Indigenous lands that are at the same time occupied and unceded. I suggest that by inciting critical place-responsive embodied forms of re-collection, re-cognition, and re-imagining, memoration interrogates idealized conceptions of the past and subverts their manifestations in the present with a view toward a future of otherwise possibilities.

Understanding my intersectional subject positions(s)—as an Ashkenazi Jewish white settler woman who is privileged to work as an artist and academic—vis-à-vis colonial structures and recognizing how I am implicated within their oppressive systemic operations has been essential to my deliberately unsettling investigations.⁷ Situating the personal as a foundation from which to ethically ground these inquiries and articulations has also been central to this work. As I will discuss, by drawing my personal history and present location(s) into a conscious reckoning with the larger national and global histories and narratives that bear upon them, I cultivate a practice of critical self-reflexive interrogation-in-relation. A recognition of the ways memoration exists *in relation* has been vital to my development of it over the past fifteen years, as well as to the way I deploy it. Consequently, it is carried out in conversation and in parallel with decolonial and antiracist movements and is deeply informed by BIPOC artistic production, scholarship and activism, and by BIPOC colleagues who face a greater risk than I in generating such work. These ongoing commitments to looking critically and carefully both inward and outward—to learning and unlearning while keeping an understanding of my complicities in focus—shape the foundation of memoration as a relational, grounded, situated, and accountable methodology. In what follows, I discuss memoration as a parallel “Critical White Settler Project” (Decter 2018, 15) that aims to contribute to goals of decolonial and antiracist movements through artistic production from a white settler perspective because I have developed and deployed it from that positionality. However, I suggest, as a collection of strategies for remembering, listening, and relating “otherwise,” it can be adapted from a number of perspectives to address a variety of contexts.

I do not claim memoration as an entirely new or unique practice but rather name it as a distinct set of intersecting strategies and theories that comprise a methodological approach. In order to tease out the central features of memoration in this text, I take a forward-looking backward glance at its beginnings, and I also provide a glimpse into its development and ongoing evolution. I begin by considering aspects of memory, history, and commemoration as they relate to the formation of a public memory and a nation’s dominant stories. A discussion of the vernacular as an implicit yet highly effective—and affective—mode of commemoration is followed by a brief examination of the capacity for artistic practices to press upon taken-for-granted narratives, relations, and values through interruptions to forms of public memory. The next section provides insight into the early stages of memoration’s development, focusing on a close reading of the first iteration of my performance/video work *Imprint* (2006–10), which I retrospectively identify as memoration’s inception. In this examination, I call attention to the ways in which remembering and strategic forgetting are enlisted to calcify national narratives, and I highlight how *Imprint* intervenes in

normative ideas about land, place and emplacement, and constructions of national identity and belonging. I move on to elaborate on key aspects of memoration and how they have developed in the intervening years and conclude by introducing a recent video work, *listen* (2020), which indicates some new directions I am pursuing as memoration continues to evolve.

Public Re-collection and the Work of Remembering Otherwise

As authorized repositories of “heritage,” sites of commemoration, such as monuments, work to inculcate and maintain a nation’s dominant values by mediating the landscape of public memory. The degree to which monuments perpetuate deep-seated practices of selective remembering and forgetting by celebrating historical figures tied to colonial and white supremacist narratives has arguably never been more evident than in recent times. In the middle of 2020 and the midst of the global COVID 19 pandemic, the murder by police of Black Americans George Floyd in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, as part of an ongoing pattern of racialized violence, propelled a groundswell of people into the streets around the world. These sustained actions, led by and/or mobilized in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, foregrounded the ubiquity of systemic violence faced by Black people within the US and internationally and highlighted the urgent need for racial justice across a range of contexts.

A number of the protests coalesced around or directly encountered monuments, which shone a bright light on the correlation between the systemic implications of white supremacy (including concomitant settler colonial logics) and the capacity for monuments to charge a nation’s public memory by preserving skewed versions of history. In other words, these interactions with official sites of commemoration pointed to the ways monuments insistently torment those for whom the figures represented denote historical and contemporary oppression and violence against their very existence on a day-to-day basis, perpetuate dominant narratives and beliefs, and, in turn, substantiate the systemic inequities that make state violence against BIPOC people and other forms of oppression possible, permissible, and ultimately normalized. This attention also highlighted the imperative of addressing the powerful role monuments play in conditioning the ways lives are lived. Artists and activists responded in arguably unprecedented numbers by registering the archives of their own flesh and blood bodies against the calcified historical accounts embedded within the lionized stone and bronze-cast figures.⁸ They toppled statues, pushed them into rivers, splattered them with paint, covered them with graffiti, gathered around them, projected upon them, and performed into and onto them.⁹ By sharply challenging the narratives embodied in public monuments and refusing to let their presence continue undisturbed, the primacy of preferred national memories and narratives that condition and sanction systemic oppression was summarily rejected.

The critique of monumental influences on dominating national narratives—the archives of remembering and forgetting manifested by the monument that were so soundly tested in 2020—has a significant lineage. Focusing primarily on the post-WWII German context, scholar and curator James E. Young suggests that the monument’s material form provides a simplified and expedient scripting of history that absolves the public of having to perform “memory-work.” Young asserts: “It is as if once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember” (2000, 94). Moreover, if one is to be provoked by the monument to remember at all, albeit in this passive manner, the content of memory is dictated in line with the state’s agenda. Much like the conjoined mythologies and ideologies they substantiate, monuments

deliver a version of historic certainty devoid of the “hidden, stolen and silenced narratives” (Lauzon 2011, 79) that might instil an uncomfortable haunting into self-aggrandizing national remembrance. While allowing for the passivity of relinquishing memory-*work*, the monument simultaneously inculcates dominant stories into public space and the dominant national imaginary. In this sense, monuments help to align public memory in lockstep with privileged social and political logics by directing what is remembered, eclipsed, and erased, while signalling how remembrance is to be discharged and regulated.

Young suggests that while the monument performs a prescriptive role in transmitting the privileged public memory, the counter-monument asks the viewer to undertake a more complex encounter with both the substance and process of memory. The counter-monument seeks to transfer the memory burden from the fixed representation harboured within the traditional monument as an object into the minds and bodies of members of the public themselves. The counter-monument aims to foster a dynamic engagement with the *act* of remembrance in which the viewer takes on the labour of commemoration. Young emphasizes the importance of such an ongoing process, suggesting that the counter-monument should bring the past into the present by actively engaging the viewer in order to provoke an inquisitive stance. As such, the counter-monument points to specific memory-knowledge that is in danger of slipping from the public record while also alluding to the ways in which people either evade or accept the responsibility of remembering. In this sense, Young’s counter-monument appeals for both the recuperation of particular histories and deliberations over the activation of public memory-work itself; for a fulsome enactment of remembering *and* a vigilant posture against forgetting.

Expanding on Young’s characterization of the monument and counter-monument in a discussion of politically grounded artistic interventions in post-Yugoslavia Kosovo, architectural historian Andrew Herscher advocates for a practice of “remembering otherwise.” This, he asserts, is a form of critical memory work that exceeds the binary of remembering and forgetting by incorporating “the many multiple forms that remembrance can take, some of which may appear as forgetting,” and doing so in resistance to representations of “state sponsored memory,” such as that which is commonly found in the monument. In taking up the monument as fodder in this way, artistic incursions can directly and obliquely address the layering of histories *and* erasures endorsed by the monument itself, as well as performing practices of remembering and forgetting that extend outside of the monument’s transmissions.¹⁰ Such interventions can undermine the practice of national remembering with currents of remembering otherwise, re/con/figuring the monument as an important site of intervention and a “medium of political discourse and action” (Herscher 2011, 152).

As I have discussed, there is certainly an urgency for practices of remembering otherwise to be applied to monuments as official forms of remembrance that insinuate themselves into public space as representatives of preferential narratives and beliefs that ultimately impact people’s lives. However, while these official sites undoubtedly shape the dominant imaginary, vernacular forms of commemoration that reside in the informal facets of our everyday lives and spaces are also powerfully influential in the circulation of the nation’s ascendant ideation. Much like the monument, the commonplace is mediated by scripted and skewed interpretations of the past that have been calcified into the present. As scholar and curator Monica Patterson contends, “things and traces, architectures and places, landscapes and spaces all work to constrain and promote particular memories” (2011, 145). In Canada, this re-performance of pernicious everyday aggressions is a current that runs through things, traces, architectures, places, landscapes, and spaces that are often

held dear by mainstream society and, in this way, forms an underpinning of entitlement that elides the reality of complicities and serves the erroneous perception of innocence.

Through that which is represented—and, notably, that which is not—everyday commemorations perform a constant surreptitious reiteration that schools normative thinking into all aspects of society, shaping dominant national identities and stories as naturalized. Familiarity often conceals the correlations between dominating ideologies and the material, visual, spatial, and relational facets of our everyday lives. As a result, the commonplace is frequently experienced with little or no attention to its connection with, for example, settler colonial nation-building and the logics of white supremacy. These seemingly inadvertent acts of repudiation overlook the presence of anything capable of upsetting the comfortable narratives that condition beliefs and relationships. In turn, this pedagogical opacity entrenches narratives, mythologies, and relations that serve dominant culture. The everyday thus functions as a site of actualization for the official remembering (and forgetting) that instills dominant stories and values within the mainstream public memory. Similar to the monument, the ubiquity and potency of informal commemorations offer significant opportunities for artistic interventions that incite a form of “radical defamiliarization” (States 2010, 35). Memoration is largely directed toward defamiliarizing common-place elements of national and personal memory which, while they perform a similar function as their more formal counterparts, often go unnoticed. In this sense, memoration draws strategies of remembering otherwise into the interstitial spaces between the preferred interpretations of personal and national memories that inhabit the day-to-day as de facto “narration[s] of truth” (A. Simpson 2016, 444).

***Imprint*: Setting the Scene**

The *Imprint* iterations form a foundation for memoration by interrupting national and personal recollections and questioning the “truth” within both the content and construction of the myths they produce. This series of performance and video works is underpinned by explorations of my maternal zaida’s (grandfather’s) experiences of loss and displacement preceding his arrival to Canada, and the ways in which the resulting lacunas filter through generations to be embodied within the present. Interrogating his transit led me to consider the ways translocations to the lands we call Canada—even if perpetuated by dislocation and oppression—fold into the project of colonial dis/possession¹¹ and prompted me to reexamine related familial, cultural, and national narratives. Together, the iterations of *Imprint* speak to the ways migrations such as my zaida’s function as instruments of colonial settlement and how these (and related) factors situate contemporary presences such as mine. These investigations raise questions about the repetition of familiar settler narratives, such as those that situate hardship and hard work as avenues for settler emplacement and entitlement. Moreover, they highlight the capacity for such stories to distance contemporary “settlers” and our/their ancestors from colonial nation-building by erasing correlations with colonial invasion and ongoing occupation. While this was not the first work in which I tackled questions of settler colonial nation-building, contending with these *particular* correlations led me to further interrogate the ways I am implicated in histories and contemporary guises of settler colonial domination. Following this trajectory has led me to a process of reckoning with my intergenerational responsibilities as a white settler committed to forms of co-resistance that co-posit decolonial ways of being and relating.

The first iteration of *Imprint*, a durational performance for the camera that became the substrate for multiple video iterations, is the version on which I will focus here. It took place on the outskirts of

Winnipeg in January 2006 and is set within a quintessentially Canadian winter landscape—an expansive, flat field thickly blanketed with snow. The white-grey ground-plane of the field and the uniformly overcast sky would be almost indistinguishable in this vista if not bisected by a black fringe of leafless trees that form a distant horizon line. A snowstorm insists its presence into this familiar prairie scene with increasing ferocity over the length of the performance, blowing nearly sideways by its conclusion. Within this setting, dressed in an outsized black overcoat, bulky hat, and winter galoshes, I carry out two interconnected actions that are repeated over several hours. They are gestures that trace time, agency, and dis/possession. One echoes the Jewish custom in which visitors place pebbles on a gravestone, and the other embodies settler desires embedded in Western modes of territorial claim. Moving in a straight line away from the camera, I carry a stone roughly the size of a small loaf of bread out into the distance, footprints marking the snowy field. I stop, turn to the left, and with a series of right-hand turns, I pace a large rectangle. I turn again to enter this frame, now delineated by my tracks in the snow, walk to its centre, and place the stone on the snowy ground, and subsequently one atop the other. After pausing to look westward into the distance, I exit the paced enclosure and walk directly toward the camera, returning to retrieve another stone. As the storm intensifies and these actions are repeated, a transitory perimeter is etched and re-etched onto the snow's shifting surface. At its centre, the stones accumulate in an increasingly visible pile, a growing geological bruise that mars the skin of the snowy expanse.



Leah Decter, *Imprint* (performance documentation) (2006). Videographer: Erika MacPherson.

A Tension to Memory and the Agency of Embodied Repertoires

References to the Jewish cultural practice of placing a small stone on a grave to mark one's visit, which I invoke in *Imprint*, are an integral part of my artistic lexicon. Speculations as to the origins of this tradition vary; however, the one I draw upon suggests it derives from the practice of rebuilding deteriorated stone cairns when visiting a burial site. In re-piling the stones, visitors mark both their commitment to maintaining this trace and the grave itself. This action simultaneously summons the

past, present, and future, given that a visitor will be able to find the grave only by virtue of the previous visitor's re-marking. As a measure of care that was once utilitarian, this practice has evolved into a symbolic act of marking that situates memory alongside duty across time. I don't interpret this gesture as nostalgic or even primarily as a reference to the *subject* of remembrance. Instead, in showing that someone has at/tended the burial site, it highlights the intentionality of the visitor and suggests a choice to take responsibility for the *activation* of remembering as a form of deliberate maintenance.

While the evocation of this custom in my work draws upon, situates, and implicates my Ashkenazi Jewish background, I also map its meanings into broader social contexts. It can simultaneously direct the viewer's attention to the activation of accountable forms of remembrance and, conversely, to the ways memory is often instrumentalized for destructive ends. As an intentional act, it can reflect carefully considered forms of memory-work that trigger critical action and change. Yet, as an established custom, it also implies the dogged and unexamined reiteration of well-worn habits and tropes. In its original form, the act of re-piling served a practical purpose of re/identifying the location of the interment. Carried forward into the present and future, it functions as part of a repertoire that has the capacity to, as performance theorist Diana Taylor suggests, "both keep and transform choreographies of meaning" (2003, 20). In this way, the gesture evokes the continuance and the evolution of cultural practice. It also recalls the stubborn re/production of preferred public and personal memory in the service of substantiating normative thinking and, conversely, a critical act of remembering otherwise. Consequently, its performance in *Imprint* signals both the ways I am implicated within projections of dominant public memory and my intentional acts in disturbing their assumptions.



Leah Decter, *Imprint* (performance documentation) (2006). Videographer: Erika MacPherson.

The spectre of a pile of stones in a prairie expanse has many connotations beyond that of a cairn. My reference for this is the familiar sight of heaps of stones often found along the fence lines and in

the corners of cultivated fields. From this perspective, the pile recalls modes of “settlement” and the clearing of land for what was erroneously seen by colonizers as the superior practice of “British husbandry.” This reference to European agrarian practices transposed to the lands we call Canada, as well as other colonially invaded territories, also recalls the notion of “terra nullius,” which was used to justify European dominion over Indigenous lands through expediently fluid definitions that characterized the land first as empty and later, underused or “improperly” used. A pile of stones in a cultivated field may also call to mind the stringent conditions of clearing and cultivating the land imposed on Métis people who received land as a consequence of taking scrip¹² (Cheryl L’Hirondelle, conversation and correspondence with the author, 2014, 2017). A number of people who have seen the *Imprint* videos have also remarked that the pile of stones evokes the “grandfathers” collected for use in sweat lodges in many Indigenous cultures.¹³ If the extended geological temporality suggested by the rigid flesh of the stones themselves is considered, they can be understood as archives of a more-than-human body; as archiv^{ers} or witnesses to the histories, presents, and futures of the places they inhabit. The pile of stones thus takes on a tenor of extended temporalities and geographical specificities. It also evokes the human and more-than-human inter-narratives of a place: stories that, although often existing disjunctively, nonetheless do so in relation. In this way, stones recall the divergent experiences and worldviews that both bind us together and separate us in uneasy tension within this land through powerful points of dis/connection.

Landing Mythologies and Lineages

Demonstrating the place-responsive nature of memoration, *Imprint* embeds my embodied presence and my interactions with the stones into a land/scape of significance. Not only is the land the literal subject of contestation in the settler state, but *landscape* is a powerful symbolic referent that undergirds colonial invasion and the ongoing Canadian nation-building project of “settlement” as a de facto colonial occupation. The possession and exploitation of land by the settler state and society lie at the heart of colonization, while the assertion and realization of Indigenous sovereignty and corresponding rights to the land—illicitly obtained and dispersed by the state—form the crux of decolonization (see Alfred 2005; Coulthard 2014; Tuck and Yang 2012). *Landscape*, as a politically, socially, and culturally mitigated representation, is often integral to the production of national allegiances and identities. As historian Simon Schama argues, “National identity . . . would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated and enriched as a homeland” (1995, 15). This is certainly the case in the Canadian context, in which conceptions of wilderness landscape propagated by the Group of Seven and still circulated in representations of their paintings, both in museums and through all manner of household products and décor (including coffee mugs, stationery, throw pillows, wall calendars, and placemats), endure as a “quasi-official image of Canadian national identity” (O’Brian and White 2007, 13) that enfolds neatly into colonial logics. Accordingly, enlisted as both land—the very *raison d’être* of colonization—and landscape, a significant undercarriage for the myths that perpetuate colonial ideologies and practices, the setting for *Imprint* plays just as integral a role as my actions.

The stormy frozen landscape of *Imprint’s* setting brings to mind the common Canadian trope of the “great white north,” a descriptor that draws together notions of nature, wilderness, and race to underscore the normative conception of Canada as a white nation, albeit with a “colourful” yet constrained “mosaic” provided by official multiculturalism. Myths of the great white north substantiate the Canadian state and white settler population as innocent, privileged, and superior as a way of legitimizing both the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and nations and the exploitation

and management of BPOC subjects.¹⁴ This notion of the great white north has made appreciable contributions to shaping ideas of Canadian identity by explicitly tying place to race. Indeed, when Group of Seven member Lawren Harris wrote about “the great North and its living whiteness” (Harris 1926, 85) to distinguish a nascent Canadian identity from that of the United States, he not only invoked snowy landscapes, he also clearly characterized Canadian identity as white (see Watson 2007). This was not the reality in Canada or the United States at that time; nor, of course, is it today. Canada was and still is, however, a nation that diligently insists upon *whiteness* as that by which all else is measured. These associations with the great white north, and the racist and colonial desires they betray, continue to be deeply imbricated in contemporary Canadian nation-building. The image of the great white north in *Imprint*, represented by the familiar landscape and the insistent winter storm, speaks to the ways in which such ubiquitous tropes insidiously condition the preferred public memory and white settler imaginary, and thus what is privileged as the Canadian national identity. Inserting my body into this ideologically driven geographical scene both disturbs and implicates me within the dominant national psyche that dictates who counts as a “Canadian-Canadian” (Mackey 2002, 20), or, in the highly offensive words of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who should be accommodated as “old stock Canadians” (2015). I will state here that I consider myself implicated in this way as a white settler subject in the present, even though there are certainly times within Canada’s history in which these categories would not have included my Jewish ancestors.



Leah Decter, *Imprint* (performance documentation) (2006). Videographer: Erika MacPherson.

The rectangle I pace traces my presence and labour and references the colonial process of reworking Indigenous land into property through imperial cartography, the staking of claim, and logics of possession. Scottish anthropologist Tim Ingold characterizes such delineations as “lines of occupation” inscribed by imperial powers “across what appears to be in their eyes . . . a blank surface” (2016, 81). Demarcations onto the land, envisioned as empty through the conceit of *terra nullius*, remain charted with purpose in settler states. These ideologically driven mappings are embedded within the terrain of Western culture as it has been imposed in these lands from the onset

of colonial invasion. The proprietary assertion of Eurocentric concepts of land as a commodity to be owned and capitalized on works to validate the rights of emplacement, occupation, and resource exploitation afforded to settler citizens, corporate interests, and the colonial state. While these entities benefit from what Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg scholar and poet Leanne Betasamosake Simpson refers to as “hyper-extractivism” that “remove[s] all the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning” (2017, 73, 75),¹⁵ Indigenous sovereignty and land rights and conceptions of land embedded in the worldviews of distinct Indigenous nations are continually called into question. In this way, in the context of the settler state, the conception of “settler certainty” (Mackey 2016, 23) is imbricated in the very notion of land itself.



Leah Decter, *Imprint* (performance documentation) (2006). Videographer: Erika MacPherson.

In *Imprint*, the conjuring of colonial cartographies slides into the purview of narrative. My footsteps, inscribed into the snow, recall the imposition of narratives attached to the land and the landed that are foregrounded within Canada’s colonial context. On a still day, my footfalls, through the dozens of re-tracings enacted over the course of the performance, would have compacted the snow into a well-worn path, at least until the next significant snowfall. The storm, however, rendered my footprints decidedly more transitory, transforming them from decisive tracks into a contest between embodied human gesture and the more-than-human agency of the elements. Repeatedly obscured by the falling snow and re-trodden, they became a palimpsest of marking, unmarking, and remarking that evokes both the trials of place-making and the imposition of colonial settlement. In calling both to mind, the struggles of making place anew are mired with the state of occupation, drawing into focus the bonds between “settlement” and the goals of dis/possession that are fundamental to Canada as a settler colonial state. Moreover, this action recalls how dominant narratives are marked and remarked, imprinted into the landscape of the nation so that their inscription is eventually rendered in(di)visible, and they are thus construed as inherent and incontrovertible.

References to my zaida's translocation that form *Imprint's* underpinning and inhabit its iterations through my attire and my pacing bring the notion of personal memory and history into the work. Invoking my family lineage and our place-making in these lands alongside interrogations of colonial practices, national mythologies, and cultural genealogies summons correlations between Canadian immigration policies and the settler colonial project that are often concealed within dominant historical accounts and the subjective archives of personal memory and family stories. By calling up the transit of my ancestors, I mean to place distinct histories in the context of the colonial dis/possessions within which they are implicated and to highlight the ways immigration policies have been configured in settler states to occupy Indigenous lands and consolidate the settler state (see Mackey 2002). It is not my intention to refute the very real challenges of translocation. Nor am I aligning with the anti-immigrant stance that has come to prominence once again in the age of Trumpism. Rather, I mean to complicate and re-cognize taken-for-granted narratives of arrival and placemaking by alluding to historical realities that are overwritten by deep-seated, doggedly reproduced, and colonially expedient public and personal memory. In doing so, I am working to breach the chasm perpetuated by dominant myths and memories that distances contemporary white settlers from our/their colonial complicity. By drawing my family history into *Imprint* and scrutinizing its ties to colonial formation, I advocate for place-based and positionality-driven intergenerational responsibility that closes these gaps of denial while ensuring that I remain implicated.

Imprints and Echoes: Memoriation's Foundations and Extensions

Imprint demonstrates the foundational features of memoriation as a methodology that reveals, interrogates, and interrupts colonial and white supremacist logics in a number of ways. In challenging totalizing colonial structures and systems, and the tropes, myths, and narratives with which they are entangled, it highlights both the ubiquitous contemporary replication of colonial forms and how these forms can be actively resisted and refused. The placing of stones performs an act of re/collection—a considered re/building that underscores a commitment to accounting for that which risks being hidden or overlooked when affected by the biases of memory. The snowy field forms a stage from which my presence and gestures perform interventions into powerful colonial myths that script land and landscape as sites commemorating white settler certainty and desires for emplacement. The act of marking established by my walking and re-walking implicates me—as an immigrant (descendant) and white settler—within the systems that nurture narratives promoting settler colonial and white supremacist ideals and obscure the stories that do not. This pacing also references the imposition of Western forms of mapping and possession and the process of “settlement” while foregrounding intergenerational responsibilities toward the activation of decolonial re-cognition. Summoning my personal lineage situates my contemporary presence in relation to the transtemporal impacts wrought by a colonial project predicated on the imposition of whiteness and the pretense of illegitimate state sovereignty over Indigenous land and control of Indigenous life. In this way, *Imprint* establishes memoriation as a methodology that draws attention to settler colonial conditions that are rooted in the past, persistent in the present, and bear heavily on what is possible in the future. The strategies of embodiment, sitedness, relationality and activated genealogical accounting—or reckoning—that I have described remain vital facets of memoriation as a methodology that activates critically informed remembering otherwise. My use of them, however, has evolved over the fifteen years since the original *Imprint* performance.

Embodiment

Embodiment has been integral to memoration, including its manifestation through performance practices such as the repetitive gestures enacted in *Imprint*. Embodiment was deployed differently in (*official denial*) *trade value in progress* through physical proximity and the labour of handwork as participants sat side by side sewing responses to former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement "we have no history of colonialism" (see Ljunggren 2009) onto a large-scale composite of Hudson Bay point blankets.¹⁶ It is also captured in *oh-oh canada*¹⁷ through the notion of ingestion as members of the public are invited to eat artist-designed maple sugar candies that convey stories and knowledges overlooked within mainstream Canadian culture. Embodiment, expressed in these varied forms, is key to animating the practice of remembering otherwise because bodies can both hold and transfer knowledge. As Diana Taylor asserts, "beliefs and conventions are passed on through bodily practices and so are all sorts of assumptions and presuppositions" (2016, 32). It follows that if the body can reinforce concretized beliefs in this way, it can also be summoned to call them into question. Just as sites of commemoration can be transmuted into "sites of dissent" (Hill and McCall 2015, 1) in the subversion of the dominant histories they substantiate, the body can be deployed to problematize dominant national ideations harboured therein. Moreover, if the body is "a place where experience echoes, sinking deep into the bones before reverberating back into the world" (Martin and Robinson 2016, 11), it can also function as a conduit through which both the performer *and* the audience/viewer/participant can be provoked to feel, reflect, re-think, and potentially to act.

Harnessing "contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox" within embodied form (Gómez-Peña quoted in Taylor 2016, 3), performance art practices can inculcate vernacular sites of public memory—whether iconic material culture or landscapes, reified monuments, or the body itself—with productive ambivalence. Deployed in this way, the body in performance can provoke a "poetic deviation" (Pavis 1983, 56) that impinges on the normative. In proximity, the body performs both the tensions and synergies of relationality. Through movement, it performs agency, conveying the labour entailed in activating responsibilities toward transformational change. As I have discussed elsewhere, in stasis, the body can act as an impediment, forming an obstacle that causes pause and reflection (Decter 2016, 57). In memoration, such embodied activations scrutinize the complex narratives of regressive settler colonial structures, reductive national mythologies, and distancing personal stories without capitulating to a desire for closure or certainty. This puts the onus on the viewer, offering spaces in which they can engage critically and actively with the structures and conditions in which they are variously implicated and/or by which they are variously impacted.

Siting

"Placing" the body has been a feature of memoration from the beginning, as it further invigorates the capacity of remembering otherwise by disquieting the assumptive measures of spatialized ontologies. Works such as *Imprint* are sited in iconic yet comparatively generic landscapes, while other works focus on specific locations. For example, *Unbecoming*, a weekend-long performance in which I gilded a canoe, addressed Thousand Islands National Park's historical and contemporary implications in relation to the thin veneer of civility that masks Canada's record of colonial dis/possession.¹⁸ Regardless of variations between the generic and the specific, the sites in memoration artworks provide meaningful performance grounds that politically situate the embodied gestures or activities. These spatial-corporeal intersections reiterate the significance of the land when confronting decolonization while subverting generalized conceptions of land/scape and resonances of particular places that coalesce to maintain a worldview of settler whiteness. In addition, the more-

than-human aspects of the settings often assert themselves in ways that are variously amenable and/or productively obstructive to my intentions resulting in humbling environmental interjections that propel body/land and human/more-than-human relationships into high relief.

Over time, the spatial-performative frames of memoration artworks have reached further into everyday public spheres in which the power dynamics of place are often reproduced surreptitiously, and dominant narrations and commemorations are tacitly validated. Curator and writer Jessica Wyman contends that artistic interventions into such spaces can create zones in which “the social”—and, I would argue, the political—“cannot be separated” from “the artistic” (2011, 111). Wyman goes on to suggest, “artists who disrupt the social sphere assert their own subjectivities as members of the amorphous public, extending the possibilities not just of resistance through artistic means but through everyday action in the world” (111).¹⁹ Aligning artistic intervention with acts of resistance “in the world,” my deployments of memoration are intended to insert embodied presence into everyday spaces as a nexus of the personal-public-political that situates me as both complicit within, and disturbing, the dominant settler polity—the amorphous public. At the same time, memoration’s foundational strategies provide openings for audience members and participants to situate *themselves* in ways they find meaningful.

Relationality

Practices of placing *in relation* on all accounts are vital to memoration and have significantly broadened since *Imprint*, particularly through the heightened affective context of a live encounter. Memoration artworks incorporate relational strategies to problematize colonial binaries, reject the primacy of the individual, resist the imposition of an all-knowing authorial voice, charge the work with unpredictability, and highlight ethical interaction and the potential of co-resistance. They offer opportunities for experiential animation, reducing the gulf between performer/artist and audience and propelling the viewer beyond the capacity of “mere looking” (Cronin and Robertson 2011, 10) in a variety of ways. For example, in *memoration #2: constituent parts*, a nine-hour performance commissioned for Métis curator Erin Sutherland’s “Talkin’ Back to Johnny Mac,” I invited audience members and pre-arranged accomplices to engage at different points in an otherwise solo performance.²⁰ Other memoration artworks and projects are wholly predicated on relational platforms. For example, *geodetic implications* was an immersive experiential performance in which participants engaged with one another and a geodetic marker in Kingston’s City Park,²¹ while *official denial*, described above, relied on dialogic participation and collaboration for its production.

Each opportunity for participation or collaboration in memoration projects reiterates the imperative of both individual and collective activation, which, as Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard suggests, are both necessary in “subvert[ing] the interplay between structure and subjectivity that sustain colonial relations” (2014, 140). Further, these invitations reflect calls for all those in a settler state to take on the intergenerational responsibilities of acting from their differential subject position(s) (see Byrd 2011). The mobilization of relational engagement in memoration resists the drive toward unity and universalism, instead embracing what the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective refers to as “disjunctive collectivity” that highlights the importance of “(d)issent, difference and contestation” (2015, 55).²² Memoration’s relational invitations are thus devised so that they can be accepted or refused and/or adapted to the individual *by* the individual in order to account for layered histories, a range of subjectivities, and intersectional (and sometimes incommensurable) strata of belonging among audiences viewers and participants.

Reckoning

Traversing national mythologies, personal histories, and notions of place, *Imprint* introduced the pedagogy of reckoning that lies at the heart of memoration. As Aleut scholar Eve Tuck and settler scholar K. Wayne Yang point out, decolonization calls for substantive change with regard to land and sovereignty, as well as forms of reparation and land repatriation that exceed the symbolic (Tuck and Yang 2012). These goals, however, will arguably not be achieved without a monumental transformation in the mindsets and priorities of majority white settler society. This shift requires an ongoing, critical, and unflinching practice of reckoning. In memoration, this unfolds in a reciprocal manner that cultivates an understanding of being situated—spatially, politically, culturally, and socially—in *relation*. For me, this includes reckoning with the ways I exist in relation to settler colonial and race-based structures, to colonial and Indigenous histories, to those with whom I inhabit this land as uninvited “guest,” and to the land itself. In other words, it is a practice that deeply interrogates who I am where I am, not as an exercise in self-indulgence, absolution, or redemption but, rather, as a route to understanding my relational intergenerational responsibilities.

A practice of reckoning *in relation*, such as memoration deploys, is a necessary step in substantially changing colonial values, beliefs, and practices in order to embrace the labour and responsibility of contributing to change in co-resistance. However, any form of self-reflection on the part of white settlers risks simply re-centring whiteness. In this sense, as the feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed suggests in discussing her concept of the double turn, it is vital for the white settler subject to “stay implicated in what they critique” (2004, para. 59). Further, she argues that while it is crucial to turn inward in this way, this must be paired with turning “away from themselves, and towards others” (para. 59). Turning toward others, in turn, must be done in ways that are nonextractivist and that reject the colonial desire for mastery. In looking outward as a white settler, it is also vital to recognize the security with which those who garner unearned benefits inhered within logics of settler whiteness do so and, conversely, the far greater risks that BIPOC people incur in generating self-representation and disturbing dominant structures.

With these crucial factors in mind, memoration mobilizes a series of double turns toward and away from the self that activate reckoning-in-relation through the “extra-rational” (Garneau 2013) potential of relational and performance art practices. I grounded *Imprint* in my own reckonings and did so in consideration of relational factors. I placed my ancestors’ arrivals in relation by recognizing their correlation to the colonial project and the impact of settlement/occupation. I placed myself in relation by recognizing the ways my contemporary presence hinges on these histories and continues to perpetuate dis/possession. I placed myself in relation with the land (and those who inhabit it), recognizing it as both the site of contestation and an archive for incommensurate inter-narratives. As memoration has evolved, I have deepened my practices of reckoning, sharpened my use of relationally, and strengthened my embodied interchanges with specific geographies. My current memoration projects extend inquiries into the socio-spatial-political implications of land-body intersections to dig deeper into encounters with place and draw attention to strategies through which white settlers might explore noncolonial ontologies in nonconsumptive ways within spaces of Indigenous sovereignty.

Projecting Otherwise Possibilities: Memoration Moving Forward

While I understand facets of memoration to be operating in resistance to colonial systems, beliefs, and structures, I recognize the limitations of this focus in a long-term projection of the arguably

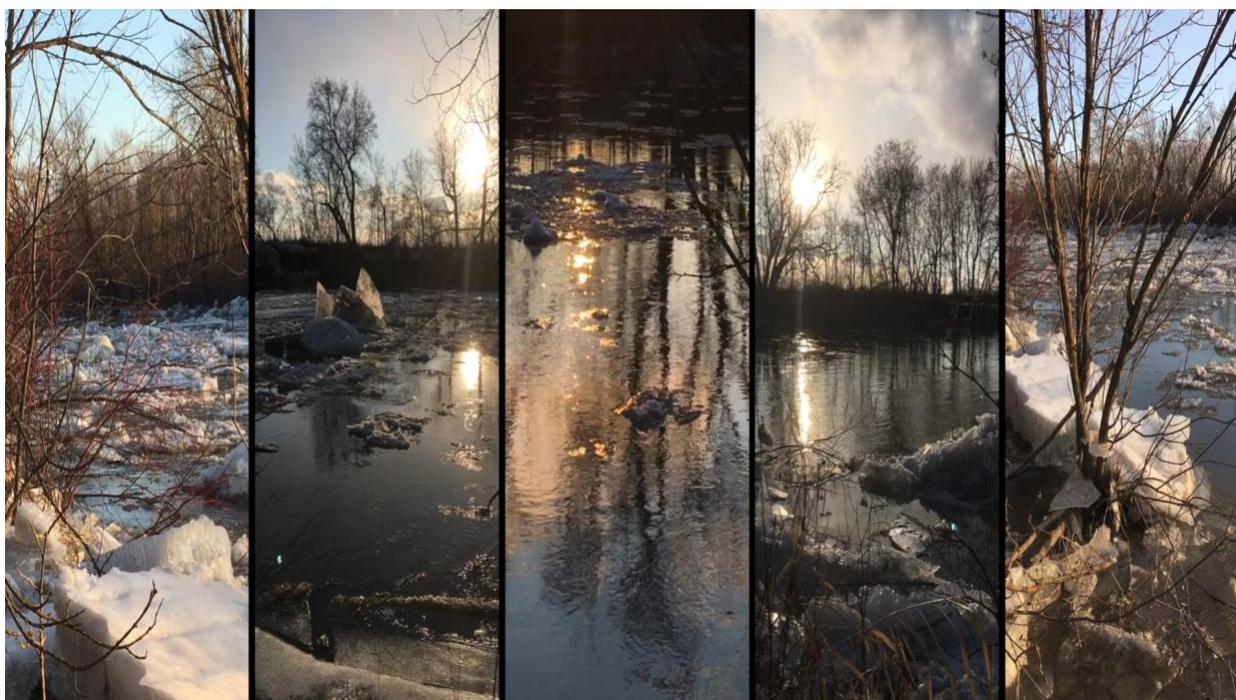
radical change entailed in living decolonial lives. A methodology that constructs itself only in opposition inherently invokes dominant orders, foregrounding them on some level even as it subverts them. However, as Leigh Patel argues, incisive attention to “genealogical knowledge” is a vital undergirding for the expansive re-imaginings necessary when “dreaming and building on wholly different terms” toward just futures (2015, para. 10). Patel’s assertion foregrounds the urgency of undertaking committed, deliberate ongoing un/learning when striving to re-shape beliefs and actions to eclipse the colonial frame. In other words, the past must be reckoned with in the present in order to envision and change what is possible. Yet, although summoning the reified narratives of nation can be fruitful in revealing and disturbing colonial systems—much like enlisting the monument in the formation of counter-commemoration or remembering otherwise—it does not constitute a fully robust strategy on its own. With this in mind, I suggest that while memoration responds to calls for white settler activation by disturbing the colonial, it is also focused on propositions that exist outside of colonial vision. In this way, it is at the same time an activation of dissent and resistance that is intended to undo and a relational incitement of “change by particles” (Garneau 2015, 76) that is disconnected from the colonial mindset. In re-collecting what has been done in the past and interrogating the ways it impacts the present, memoration mobilizes relational, embodied, site-responsive reckoning as an appeal for the critical re-cognition of who we are and where we are while generating activated re-imaginings toward the otherwise possibilities of transformed futures.

Beginning with *Imprint* and following through the work I have undertaken using memoration as a methodology in the intervening years, I have placed my body in performance and in relation within specific locations. These works largely foreground my actions, with the land/scape or site acting as a meaningful and immersive scenographic frame and more-than-human elements sometimes serving as a foil or collaborator. My recent video, *listen*, inverts this aspect of memoration, privileging the land itself as the agent performer. *listen* can be seen as a mirror to *Imprint* through its contemplative bearing. It differs, however, in that the more-than-human takes the stage with me acting as a supporting performer or secondary collaborator. I created this video in the spring of 2020 as my contribution to the Canadian Association for Theatre Research (CATR) working group Moving Together to Reclaim and Resist (MTRR). MTRR evolved from the CATR’s Walking Our Way Here seminars, which mobilized critically informed place-responsive walking practices that explored Indigenous histories, knowledges, and presences in relation to the territories in which each year’s CATR conference took place and offered opportunities for participants to create performances in those contexts. With attention to the complexities surrounding the performance of land acknowledgments as a practice that is variously critiqued, embraced, resisted, and rejected in Canada and elsewhere, the conveners of the working group prompted members to create embodied land acknowledgments in the form of audio pieces that could be shared as a podcast as the conference moved online due to COVID 19.

My impulse was to acknowledge the land through an act of stillness instead of the embodied movement associated with our usual practice of walking. Rather than foregrounding my voice as is done in conventional acknowledgments, I wanted to privilege the voice of the land—or the more-than-human—by listening. Moreover, I wanted to convey listening in a fully embodied way, which brought me to work with video instead of audio. I had decided to listen to the land in some manner when I was fortunate to come upon the fleeting moments of a river’s spring break-up in Treaty 1 territory close to the border of Treaty 3,²³ which I captured using my phone, a provisional tool that has arguably, at this point, become an extension of the body. *listen* is made up of five side-by-side vertical screen panels depicting different views of the river as the sun sets over the horizon of the opposite riverbank. Shifting with my breath and the movements of my body as I try to remain still,

the shots undulate slightly so that the horizon lines of each section match up only sporadically. As the sun sets, chunks of ice flow downstream, sloshing, groaning, and scraping along the shore, backlit in the waning light. Overhanging branches rattle against the ice as it passes. Every now and then, a bird calls out. This video offers a brief interlude of listening unencumbered by verbal declaration, an extended moment in which the land speaks first and speaks back, in which the land speaks what is to be acknowledged. While I strive for stillness, the river is endlessly in motion evoking a continuum of temporal and territorial inter-connectedness that binds us together in ways that are often fundamentally discordant.

In part, this video is an activation of embodied listening through what Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson refers to as a “critical listening positionality” (2020, 52), which takes into account the implications of my presence as a white settler in occupied Indigenous lands. It is perhaps no more or less a land acknowledgment than any other work created through strategies of memoration. That said, on some level, the otherwise rememberings of memoration frequently gesture toward a form of “actioned” (Robinson 2019, 20) land acknowledgment, if such a thing aspired to think and feel the land as a network of distinct and interconnected agencies, to recognize and subvert ongoing violences and impositions of settler whiteness, to align with lineages and movements of Indigenous resistance, to respect a continuum of Indigenous sovereignty and presence; if it were grounded in the work of intergenerational responsibilities and accountabilities, and in nonextractivist approaches to listening and being-in-relation. As a gesture toward—an implicated act of visual, aural, and embodied attention, a listening to this river’s agency within the contours of lands that are both invaded and unceded—this video signals some of memoration’s current and future trajectories.



Leah Decter, *listen* (video still) (2020).

As memoration is an evolving methodology, my deployment of it is necessarily fluid, and my analysis of it is responsive to its unfolding. While I endeavoured here to trace some of its salient features reflecting on its beginnings and trajectories, this is by no means an exhaustive or definitive

exposition of memoration. Moreover, my interest here is not to suggest memoration as a prescriptive model that will ensure ethical efficacy. Rather, my aim is to illustrate the strategies I have employed and developed over time, from my positionality as a white settler, in order to exercise my intergenerational responsibility to remember otherwise, to contribute to decolonial dreaming and informed relational activation.

Notes

1. I first used the term memoration as the title of the 2010 work “memoration #1: one hour of snow angels,” which was performed on the frozen Red River in Winnipeg. The term reappeared as the title of the work “memoration #2: constituent parts,” which was performed in Kingston, Ontario, in 2015. Through the development and analysis of this second work, I came to think of memoration as a methodology that applies not only to these two works that bear its name but to the majority of my works that engage with colonial critique and decolonial re-visioning.
2. While there are numerous monuments to John A. Macdonald throughout Canada, in late March 2021, it was announced that the city of Regina would be removing its Macdonald monument pending a new location. See Atter (2021).
3. In 2018, the Cornwallis statue in Halifax was removed, in part due to concerns about vandalism. As of April 2021, a decision on its fate is still pending. See Patil and Williams (2018) and Campbell (2020).
4. Terra nullius is a quasi-legal concept on which North America was “founded” and which deems the land unoccupied or not being used in a “civilized” manner. See *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba* (1999).
5. The use of trade blankets as a means of spreading disease in Indigenous communities is contested; however, its *implication* as such is not uncommon in public and scholarly discourse. See <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/hudson-s-bay-point-blanket>.
6. Dylan Robinson (2016) discusses intergenerational responsibility as a productive alternative to the prevalence of intergenerational *ir*responsibility in mainstream Canadians’ responses to ongoing colonization.
7. I draw here on scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2004), Jodi Byrd (2011), Aileen Morten Robinson, Fiona Nicoll (2004), Clare Land (2015), and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2008), who variously discuss the importance of dominant subjects engaging in and contributing to decolonial, anticolonial, and antiracist paradigm shifts, doing so from the specifics of their positionalities, and ensuring to remain implicated.
8. Nagam discusses the capacity for embodied “living Indigenous archives” to intervene in “authoritative documents” of “traditional archives” that construct “particular stories of the world” (2017, 117).
9. On Richmond, Virginia’s Monument Avenue, monuments to Confederate leaders, like many such monuments across the US and the world, were splashed with paint and marked with texts highlighting the racist ideologies and practices the figures represent. Demonstrators gathered around the massive Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond for over forty days while artists projected images of Black American historical figures and Black Americans killed by police on it. Figures on a Confederate memorial in Portsmouth, Virginia, were beheaded, as was the Columbus monument in Boston and the John A. MacDonald monument in Montreal, which was toppled to the ground. Drawing connections between the violence of white supremacy and colonization in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, protesters stood atop the vacant pedestal of a Columbus statue in St Paul, Minnesota, holding upside-down American flags bearing the names of Native American and Canadian Indigenous people killed by police. In Detroit, four Native American jingle dress dancers occupied a vacant Columbus statue pedestal long enough for photographer Rosa María Zamarrón to take a photo that subsequently went viral. In Europe and the UK, monuments to slave traders, monarchs, and politicians were targeted in similar ways, with a statue of Edward Colston being tipped into the Bristol Harbour and surreptitiously replaced with a sculpture of a BLM protestor. These represent only a fraction of

the monumental interventions that took place at this time in relation to BLM activism. See Bland (2020), Aguilar (2020), Stewart (2020), Emba (2020), and Hickey (2020).

10. Examples in the Canadian context include Peter Morin's "Salt. Washing. Beuys. Fat. Royalty. Copper. Canadian Club. John. Locked. Bear. Drum. Circle" (2015), Rebecca Belmore's "Quote, Misquote, Fact" (2003), Jeff Thomas's "Champlain Series" (2000–11), and Life of a Craphead's "King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don River" (2017).

11. I use the term dis/possession to connote the process that characterizes settler colonial forms: the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands concomitant with colonial acts of possession on the part of settler state and polity.

12. Métis scrip was a certificate issued by the federal government in Canada largely in what is now Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan in exchange for land rights following the 1870 Manitoba Act, which provided for land to be transferred to Métis peoples. While scrip was supposed to be redeemable for land (or money) in a timely fashion, the process lagged with distribution systems only beginning to be formalized in 1885. Redeeming scrip was difficult and complicated, with many barriers that ultimately led to most Métis families receiving neither land nor payment. See Robinson (2019) and Muzyka (2019).

13. In many Indigenous cultures of what is now called North America, the stones used to provide heat in sweat lodges are referred to as "grandfathers." See Iseke (2013).

14. See Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayashi (2011). See also Mackey (2002) and Thobani (2007) for discussions of the ways Canada's official policies of multiculturalism cast Indigenous peoples within the purview of the Canadian mosaic while placing limits on "belonging" for BPOC people.

15. In her 2017 book *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson characterizes extractivism as extending well beyond what are generally understood as resources. She states: "My land is seen as a resource. My relatives in the plant and animal worlds are seen as resources. My culture and knowledge is a resource. My body is a resource and my children are a resource because they are the potential to grow, maintain and uphold the extraction-assimilation system." (75)

16. See <https://leahdecter.com/official-denial-trade-value-in-progress>. I initiated and designed this project and co-activated it in collaboration with Jaimie Isaac.

17. See <https://leahdecter.com/oh-oh-Canada>. This project includes candy designs by Adrian Stimson, Cecily Nicholson, Michael Farnan, David Garneau, Peter Morin, Lisa Myers, and Cheryl L'Hirondelle.

18. See <https://leahdecter.com/unbecoming>.

19. I will note that, although not all subjects may be situated or see themselves as "members of the amorphous public," it can be argued that artists of various subjectivities who intervene in public space are nonetheless asserting their subjectivities into that space and, in doing so, often intentionally question, subvert, and/or infiltrate "the amorphous public" as "outsiders."

20. See <https://leahdecter.com/memoration-2-constituent-parts>.

21. See <https://leahdecter.com/geodedite-implications>.

22. This collective is made up of Tania Willard, Gabrielle Hill, and Peter Morin.

23. This is the unceded territory of the Anishinabewaki, Dakota, and Métis Nations.

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