

Editorial:

Memorial Reckoning and the Fall of Imperial Icons

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This special issue of *Global Media Journal — Canadian Edition* was conceived in the months following the historic toppling of the Queen Victoria statue on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislative Building in Winnipeg on Canada Day, July 1, 2021 (Leyland, 2021). The Queen Victoria statue has stood for over a century as a forceful and imposing symbol of British colonial rule. It was created by the British sculptor George Frampton, known for designing public monuments across the Anglophone world. Commissioned at the cost of \$15,000, it was erected on October 1, 1904 in an official provincial ceremony (Goldsborough, 2022). The Queen Victoria statue is older than the Manitoba Legislative Building itself, the latter officially opened only in 1920. Resting atop a massive concrete base, the statue features Queen Victoria seated on her magisterial throne, holding a sceptre in one hand and an orb in the other. The towering figure looks out into the distance, as if to keep an eternally watchful eye over the empire. Behind the throne, facing the opposite direction, is St. George, patron saint of England, holding a sword, ever ready to defend the British empire.

Because of its blunt colonial symbolism, the Queen Victoria statue has in recent years become the object of fierce anticolonial sentiment among Indigenous activists and settler allies. On June 24, 2020, the head and the body of the statue were daubed with white paint and the mouth smeared in red. This incident elicited conflicting reactions. Manitoba Justice Minister Cliff Cullen expressed outrage over the incident, calling it “complete nonsense” and vowing to prosecute those responsible (Gowriluk, 2020). By contrast, many activists and academics saw it as an opportunity for a long overdue discussion about the painful legacy of colonial monuments in Canada. As Gordon Goldsborough, president of the Manitoba Historical Society noted at the time, the incident was yet another sign that “people want to re-evaluate history. And that's not a bad thing” (Gowriluk, 2020).

Public discussion about the legacy of colonialism and colonial monuments in Canada reached an altogether-different breadth and intensity on July 1, 2021. What has traditionally been a day of national celebration became instead a day of memorial reckoning. Hundreds of demonstrators took part in the Every Child Matters Walk to express their sadness and anger over the recent news reports of mass child graves found on the grounds of former residential schools across Canada (Bernhardt, 2021). The demonstrators called for the federal and provincial governments to identify the deceased children, return their remains to their families, give them a

proper burial, and allow their families the space and support to grieve. The walk culminated on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislative Building. Once again, the Queen Victoria statue became the object of anticolonial ire. The face of the statue was doused in red paint and the base covered in red handprints, the latter symbolizing the 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children who suffered under Canada's residential school system. The event came to a head as demonstrators tied rope around the statue, chanting, "No pride in genocide." They pulled at the statue until it fell from the concrete base, igniting euphoric cheers from the massive crowd. Demonstrators climbed onto the bare base, proudly and defiantly waving Indigenous flags. The statue was then decapitated. A nearby statue of Queen Elizabeth II was also pulled down (Krishnan, 2021).

The toppling of the Queen Victoria statue is one of many such historical moments of memorial reckoning around the world. In the United States, Indigenous communities have for decades called for replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous People's Day. Many states now observe both days, while some have stopped celebrating Columbus Day altogether (Zotigh & Gokey, 2020). Dozens of statues of Christopher Columbus have been either toppled or removed by local officials (Capps, 2021). In 2020, following the horrific murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, some 160 Confederate statues and monuments across the United States were either toppled or officially removed (Vigdor & Victor, 2021). In South Africa, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign called for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, sparking similar calls at Oxford University and Harvard University (Chaudhuri, 2021).

Across Canada, statues and monuments to Queen Victoria, John A. Macdonald, Egerton Ryerson, James Cook, John Deighton, and Alexander Wood—figures responsible for enabling colonial systems including the Indian Residential Schools, transatlantic slavery, and the theft of Indigenous lands—have been defaced, toppled, or removed (Stevenson, 2020; Friesen, 2021; Dickson, 2021; Judd, 2022; Bradley, 2022). Anticolonial demonstrations in India, Colombia, Barbados, Martinique, Namibia, France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand have similarly resulted in the removal of colonial monuments and the renaming of public institutions bearing the appellation of colonial figures (C, 2020; Moloney, 2020; Sandiford, 2020; Sansom, 2021; Melber, 2022; Pronczuk & Zaveri, 2020; Mohdin & Storer, 2021; Anderson, 2020).

Even to the casual observer, it will be evident that we are in living the midst of a dramatic historical shift—a movement away from the mere rhetoric of decolonization towards a global and grassroots reckoning with the material, visual, and appellative symbols, inscriptions, sites, and traces of empire. In recent years, the movement for decolonization has further intensified. One of the lasting effects of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, Every Child Matters, and Rhodes Must Fall is that the idea of decolonization has permeated the ether, reshaping our social and political imaginary.

Western societies are being forced to confront the enduring structural and cultural legacies of slavery and colonialism, the deep-rooted vestiges of a past that survive in the public institutions and imaginaries of the present. Arguably, we are living through a critical historical moment marked by a global revolt against the enduring structural and symbolic legacies of European colonial empires and settler colonialism. Not surprisingly, campaigns to dismantle these legacies are encountering resistance in the name of preserving "tradition," "history," "culture," and "heritage." Colonial and Confederate monuments have, in these crosshairs, become sites of cultural conflict and struggle over the narration of history and the meaning of

national identities. Indeed, monuments and memorials in general are being reconsidered in light of such confrontations as well. This special issue on *Memorial Reckoning and the Fall of Imperial Icons* is prompted by the debates sparked by the recent wave of demonstrations that have defined our present historical moment as a time of memorial reckoning.

The late philosopher Michel Serres (2015) described statues (which we extend here to include monuments and memorials) as one of the bedrocks of Western societies. Statues, he held, are repositories of cultural memory, serving as historical anchors to guide human communities through the ravages and upheavals of time. In this view, statues provide a vital social function by consolidating societies and preserving collective identities. Yet, as the present “statue wars” make clear, such markers are never apolitical nor are they always affirming. They can also negate, exclude, distort, and deny. They often speak for some while silencing others. In this way, they are avatars of partiality.

At the same time, statues are polysemous for their capacity to bear multiple meanings. No single interpretation is guaranteed to be forever fixed to their edifice, even if dominant narratives imbue them with fantasies of permanence and symbolic authority. Different and contradictory interpretations of statues can coexist, as made clear by the debates. And herein lies the potential for change: public engagements with statues—whether in the form of gatherings, protests, information pickets, petitions for removal, petitions for amendments, artistic interventions, or so-called acts of “vandalism” and “defacement”—can shift their meaning by making visible the ways in which they are always already political and partial, drawing attention to negations, exclusions, distortions, and denials, *and* raising possibilities for re-presenting history in new and more just ways.

Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert (2000) observe that memorial sites can become spaces of possibility for “an ethical learning that impels us into a confrontation and ‘reckoning’ not only with stories of the past but also with ‘ourselves’ as we ‘are’ (historically, existentially, ethically) in the present ... a reckoning that beckons us to the possibilities of the future, showing the possibilities of our own learning” (8). What they point to here is that these and other sites of public memory have something to teach us if we are open to grappling with how we ourselves might be implicated and/or invested in the symbolism, value systems, and structures of power that they represent. In this way, we are summoned to be concerned not only with establishing the historical record (and how we narrate the story of those who came before us), but also with how we carry the past forward in our own lives and act as though it matters for today and tomorrow.

Through such a lens, the defacing or toppling of colonial statues and icons of empire, for instance, can be seen not merely as destructive acts, but as invitations to this kind of ethical learning and “reckoning.” That is, when activists and communities make such invitations, they create opportunities to build new social solidarities and visions for better, more peaceable futures precisely by confronting the violent legacies that are upheld when the primacy of these icons is taken for granted and/or glorified. Imagining altogether new forms of commemoration that depart from conventions of classical and colonial art is part of the work of memorial reckoning.

With these invitations and opportunities in mind, our editorial team encouraged the contributors of this special issue to consider the following questions:

- How have monuments/memorials come to matter in recent social justice-seeking movements?
- What does it mean when colonial monuments and icons of empire are challenged from “below” by those who have been historically subjugated, exploited, and excluded from institutional power and privilege as well as from the official narrations of national history and public memory? What “epistemologies of resistance” (Medina, 2012) are behind these challenges or revolts (eg. Black, Indigenous, Latinx, feminist, queer)?
- How do the politics surrounding public monuments play out differently when they are dedicated to colonial figures (e.g. Queen Victoria) versus figures of resistance (e.g. Louis Riel, Frederick Douglass), or to the memory of those who were subject to state-led forms of violence such as the transatlantic slave trade, Indian Residential Schools, or the LGBTQ2+ Purge? Relatedly, what is the significance of the relationship between the sponsor and the subject(s) of the memorial?
- What are the possibilities for reimagining memorial landscapes that have up until now served to enshrine histories of colonial, racist, and gender-based violence?
- What role has digital memorialization come to play as part of public culture and/or political and social justice movements?
- How can alternative forms of public art respond to and/or take the place of toppled statues? What are the possibilities and limits of counter-memorials, counter-monuments or anti-monuments for envisioning more just futures?

These questions (and others) are taken up to greater and lesser degrees in this special issue, approached by authors through different theories and methodological approaches. Indeed, the partial and multiple ways that monuments and memorials can matter opens the possibility of their being analyzed through a range of perspectives.

With these concepts and questions in mind, we have chosen essays that take as their focus a variety of media ranging from statues to building architecture to natural objects. Having this diversity of topics reflects the mandate of *Global Media Journal — Canadian Edition* to “advance research and understanding of communication and media in Canada and around the globe” (About GMJ-CE) by pushing us to think about how these different types of memorials, monuments, and public markers function as communication media. What are they saying, and how are their messages impacted by their original form as well as “re-mediations” by subsequent interlocutors?

The authors, coming from a wide array of disciplines, have made use of practical, theoretical, historical, and aesthetic/artistic approaches. The variety in these approaches demonstrates the pervasive presence of memorials and their wide-reaching impact. Monuments are ubiquitous; they permeate the landscape in which we live our daily lives, almost invisible after their creation as they become commonplace, until the political moment renders them visible—or even hyper-visible—once more. Our own political moment, the toppling of the

Queen Victoria statue in the city where we live and work, acted as the impetus for this special issue as well as provided a starting place for the contributors.

These essays are geographically focused on Canada and the United States, though this was not through any editorial intention at the outset. Rather, reading through the contributions we received in response to our call for papers, we could see many of them coalescing around certain topical concerns prominent in these countries, often approaching them at a local level. This preoccupation with current issues is not surprising. As Erika Doss states in *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (2010), “Contemporary conflicts over public art are typically linked to localized struggles over cultural, social, and economic authority in the public sphere” (34). Political issues that are at the forefront of public consciousness in Canada and the United States—namely racism and colonial violence—dominate the discourse surrounding their respective memorials. In Canada, the historical mistreatment of Indigenous peoples and ongoing efforts toward reconciliation have taken a prominent role, while in the United States, a great deal of attention is focused on America’s history of slavery and civil rights issues. This focus does, of course, preclude giving the same degree of attention to other important issues in the discourse surrounding memorials. As a result, the essays in this collection are not an exhaustive exploration of potential sites for memorial reckoning.

Instead of attempting to be comprehensive, we selected essays with connections to each other that approach related content from different perspectives as well as ones that reflect our own concerns regarding local issues. Particular themes in these essays come to the forefront for us: the significance of community engagement, whether through civic committee and policy work or through personal interactions with monuments; the interplay of colonial violence and anti-colonial resistance in the construction, destruction, toppling, vandalism, and removal of monuments; the strong ties between monuments and national identity and ideologies; and the possibilities that art, architecture, and aesthetics raise with regard to memorials. Ultimately, we bring these essays together in order to interrogate the current state of monuments, memorials, and public markers and look toward their potential futures.

This special issue begins with an essay by Melissa Funke on the architecture of the Manitoba Legislative Building, the site of the toppling of the Queen Victoria statue that acts as a springboard for our theme of *Memorial Reckoning and the Fall of Imperial Icons*. “Building a Narrative: Uses and Misuses of Antiquity at the Manitoba Legislature” examines in detail the sculptures on the building, reading the colonial messages that they present to viewers. In her conclusion, Funke intriguingly raises the possibilities inherent in more dynamic forms of commemoration, such as the orange flags planted on the Legislature grounds to memorialize the children who died at residential schools.

This essay focuses on the creation of monuments and memorials as repositories of cultural memory, even while those narratives might be subject to change over time. But memorials are not always accommodating to such constructive acts; sometimes they are vulnerable to other, more destructive, processes. Tracy Whalen challenges the human imposition of narratives on memorials in “Arboreal Resistance and Military Memory of Arrow Air 1285.” In this essay, Whalen explores how trees, through the act of dying, resist both stable memory narratives and the promotion of nationalist messages.

Omeasoo Wāhpāsiw also examines the impermanence of a natural monument, but from a different perspective: its intentional removal by the province of Saskatchewan. “mostos-awasis asiniy: Iconoclasm in the Age of Settler Colonialism” deals with the destruction of the sacred rock mostos-awasis asiniy. This essay is a significant contribution to fill the gap that Wāhpāsiw observes: the frequent leaving out of Indigenous monuments when discussions of memorial reckoning take place, since the focus is usually on colonial monuments.

The issue’s culminating essays move from natural monuments to constructed monuments dealing with race-based violence. Alfred Frankowski’s “Monuments of Racial Terror: Spatial Violence, Confederate Monuments, and Lynching Memorials” addresses memorials of race-based violence, both Confederate monuments and lynching memorials, and how their politics and aesthetics intersect in troubling ways. Frankowski interrogates how these memorials function as a constant reminder of racial terror that people live alongside.

Marie Bernard-Brind’Amour and Yasmin Jiwani focus on one memorial in particular in “A Forced Reckoning: The *Vivre Ensemble* Memorial Commemorating the Victims of the Québec Mosque Shooting” in order to examine the impact of an act of terrorism on a local community. They contrast the memorial’s narrative of inclusivity with the reality of Islamophobia that prompted its necessity, revealing both possibilities and limitations of commemorative projects as forms of social recognition.

The book reviews in this special issue also take up the interplay between monuments and racism. Alyson Brickey’s “A Context Long Deserved: A Review of Karen L. Cox’s *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice*” highlights Cox’s two-pronged approach to Confederate monuments, exploring both their existence as racist symbols as well as Black opposition to them, which has taken place from Reconstruction onwards. A historical perspective is also given by Erin Thompson in *Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America’s Public Monuments*, reviewed by Emma De Sousa. De Sousa notes the complexities inherent in the history behind these monuments that are often overlooked but that deserve more attention if we are to find constructive ways of dealing with them.

All of these essays invite us to think deeply about monuments and memorials as forms of communication media. What do monuments and memorials say or mean to the people that they stand among, and how do their messages change under social and political pressures? Through their examination of a diverse array of examples, the authors also call for society to rethink our (mis)use of these public markers and how and what they represent. To whom do we listen when we create memorials and monuments? With whom do we discuss their removal or preservation?

The authors suggest a number of ways in which we might productively shift the focus away from those who have historically set the terms for, and been the subjects of, memorialization. Possibilities include increasing collaboration with historically subjugated communities, identifying the individuals and groups who have often been overlooked or treated unfairly in these processes, and appreciating the temporal and political precarity of monuments—the illusion of their permanence and the possibility and imperative for change over time. These essays present views of the history and the current state of monuments and memorial reckoning as well as prospective futures for how memorials and monuments will continue to evolve.

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