

## memoration #2: constituent parts

Leah Decter

### Background

*memoration #2: constituent parts* was created as part of a performance series initiated by Métis<sup>1</sup> curator Erin Sutherland in Kingston, Ontario in 2015. In this series five artists undertook individual performance interventions into the year-long bicentenary celebrations of the birth of Canada's first Prime Minister, John A MacDonal. MacDonal is the architect of many of the genocidal<sup>2</sup> co-

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**Leah Decter** is an inter-media artist and scholar based in Winnipeg, Canada—Treaty 1 territory. She holds an MFA in New Media from Transart Institute (Berlin) and is currently a PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies at Queens University (Kingston, ON). Decter has exhibited, presented and screened her work widely in Canada and internationally in the US, UK, Australia, Germany, Malta, the Netherlands and India. Her most recent writing has been published in *The Land We Are: Artists and Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation* (2015) (chapters co-written with Ayumi Goto and Jaimie Isaac respectively). In 2014, her ongoing dialogic art project (*official denial*) *trade value in progress* (co-activated with Jaimie Isaac) was featured in *Studio: Craft and Design in Canada*, and the *Journal of Canadian Art History*.

<sup>1</sup> According to the Metis National Council, "The Métis emerged as a distinct people or nation in the historic Northwest (of North America) during the course of the 18th and 19th centuries. This area is known as the "historic Métis Nation Homeland," which includes the 3 Prairie Provinces and extends into Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and the northern United States. This historic Métis Nation had recognized Aboriginal title, which the Government of Canada attempted to extinguish through the issuance of "scrip" and land grants in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Métis means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation." Since 1982 the Métis nation has been officially recognized by the Canadian government as one of the three groups of Aboriginal peoples (with First Nations and Inuit) indigenous to the lands now known as Canada.

See <http://www.metisnation.ca/index.php/who-are-the-metis/citizenship>.

<sup>2</sup> The 2015 Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada declared Canada's Indian Residential Schools a 'cultural genocide.' According to the definition of genocide detailed in Article II of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (commonly known as the Genocide Convention),

lonial policies that continue to perpetuate Indigenous dispossession and shape the inequitable conditions and relationships that characterize its contemporary forms in Canada. Kingston, the original capital of Canada, was also home to John A MacDonal. It is a small city—just over 120,000—that largely glorifies its colonial roots with a particularly strong and uncritical attachment to the figure of MacDonal. Situated where the St Lawrence River and Lake Ontario meet, contemporary Kingston is both a tourist destination and an institutional town; home to significant prison infrastructure, the Royal Military College of Canada, and Queen’s University; a Canadian ‘Ivy League’ institution.

My contribution to this performance series, *memoration #2: constituent parts* was driven by my research and artistic practices, which focus on social-spatial analyses, interruptions, and re-imaginings, with particular attention to the intersectional facets of settler colonial milieus such as Canada. This work seeks to investigate, expose and disrupt dominant narratives, assumptions, systems, and relationships consequent to the Eurocentric settler colonial logics that extend into contemporary contexts. Situating such ongoing nation-building projects as operating from ideologies of white dominance, it has been crucial for me to undertake this work through a critical analysis of my positionality as a white ‘settler’ within this context<sup>3</sup>. As such I situate myself as both implicated, and acting in resistance. While I locate mainstream white settler society and the settler

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Indian Residential Schools alone, not to mention other significant policies enacted by John A MacDonal, would amount to unqualified genocide. It should be noted that despite this, the characterization of settler colonial processes (in Canada and elsewhere) as genocidal continues to be contested. Currently, Indigenous scholars (and allied non-Indigenous scholars) overwhelmingly situate policies and practices of settler colonial formation/invasion as commensurate with genocide (as defined in the Genocide Convention) while dominant political and cultural institutions (in Canada and elsewhere) continue to eschew the term. See ‘Introduction’ and ‘History’ chapters of the Summary of the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Exec\\_Summary\\_2015\\_06\\_25\\_web\\_o.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Exec_Summary_2015_06_25_web_o.pdf) (accessed July 2015); and “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: Article II,” *Prevent Genocide International*. <http://www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm> (accessed July 2015).

<sup>3</sup> I use the term ‘settler’ to highlight the connection between subject formation and the settler colonial formations of the Canadian nation-state. Using the terms in a contemporary context aims to characterize such formations as ongoing concerns rather than confining them temporally to foundational colonial invasion. At the same time I acknowledge that the term is contested on a number of fronts within current discussions of contemporary decolonization and associated movements. See Snelgrove, Corey, Rita Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel. “Unsettling settler colonialism: The discourse and politics of settlers, and solidarity with Indigenous nations.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3.2 (2014).

state as the subjects of scrutiny in this work, I undertake it in conversation with Indigenous artists, thinkers, and activists working within decolonizing frameworks in various forms.

In developing my performative response to the John A MacDonald celebrations I pinpoint the policies he initiated in the 1800's, some of which are still in effect, as formative factors influencing institutions, conditions and beliefs entrenched in the present. *memoration #2: constituent parts* deployed situated, embodied, symbolic, and relational acts aiming to confront normalizing and amnesic forces that underpin a continuum of colonial nation-building. Together, the 'materials' enlisted – the sites, objects, engagements, and gestures - issued a performative utterance to re/consider, reveal and disturb the constructions and erasures we encounter and, in different ways, may be complicit in through the course of our daily lives. Counter-storying by means of embodied interventions into icons of settler emplacement and identity, and apparatuses of colonial power, western knowledge and reification, this performance worked to unhinge everyday assertions of settler colonial mindsets. As a volitional meditation—a *memoration*<sup>4</sup>—it aimed to activate a conversational imperative between past and present towards the possibility of non-colonial futures.

### **PART ONE: *9am-4pm***<sup>5</sup>

*seated on a wooden chair.*

a simple, straight-backed oak chair that calls to mind austere institutional formality. already out of place in this place. an artifact of the not-too-distant past that lingers second-hand. harkens back. has outlived its era yet is still decidedly functional.

rescued here and there for its utility, simplicity, fortitude. familiar. just enough there for thigh and calf to rest at right angles, feet to be grounded and back supported. upright. hands in lap. look. straight. ahead. eye contact? body rooted. still? silent.

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<sup>4</sup> 'memoration' is a term I use to denote a performance practice which I have been developing in performance works since 2008. I am currently working on a framework for elaborating on and defining this strategy within the context of performance theory and methodology. In brief, 'memoration' can be understood as an embodied, activated, self-reflexive tactic of critical deliberation focusing on considerations of the influence of the past on the present with the aim of influencing the potential of positively altered futures.

<sup>5</sup> Ed. Note: a time-lapse video of Part One, which took place over seven hours is available on *Liminalities*. See <http://liminalities.net/12-3/memoration.html>

time marked by minutiae. breaths count the passing hours in flesh and bone. stiffening. the mind tallies through the scrutiny of comings and goings. it wanders. and focuses. the arc of the day rendered in the slow progress of shadows cast on the floor, on bodies. punctuated by purposeful footsteps, snippets of overheard conversation, the opening and closing of doors. by the occasional question. un-answered.

*seated on a wooden chair wearing a too small t-shirt.*

a t-shirt from my past. familial geographies entangled with nation. recent and distant histories; life-time and lineage. a souvenir. emblazoned with the collective appeal *'Let's All Go to Kinistino.'* sing-song. too small t-shirt from the kinistino rodeo. the year a torrential prairie downpour began minutes into the opening parade. rendered the grounds unusable.

kinistino. the incorrect spelling of a Saulteaux nation. a Cree word meaning 'they who were the first to arrive'. the evolution of the word from which the name 'Cree' was derived. a First Nation. a tiny prairie town in north-central saskatchewan. farming town in fertile plains. reserve adjacent. properties of the colonization of lands. now known. as north america, canada, saskatchewan, kinistino. where my grandfather settled. one of four to arrive from eastern europe.

*'Let's All Go to Kinistino.'* words surrounding the rendering of a cowboy. balanced atop a bucking bronc. rooted tenuously to the saddle. hand in the air. holding hat. suspended. a too small t-shirt upon which layers of appropriation, dis/possession and settler entitlement reside. on which narratives of identity - imposed, presumed, sustained, nurtured, naturalized - abide. unquestioned. cowboys.

*seated on a wooden chair wearing a too small t-shirt in a canoe.*

the canoe; an enduring icon of (dominant) canadian national narratives. of incursions into the (empty) wilderness. of these lands; already occupied by sovereign Indigenous nations. First. appropriated conveyance. an implement of 'exploration' and the fur trade. resource extraction. exploitation. the economic engine of geographic and political expansion - 'settlement'. colonial desires. permanent occupation.

a recreational contrivance. symbolic. imparts emplacement shaped as canadian-ness. a 'canadian-canadian-ness'<sup>6</sup> presumptively white and of european descent. that locates through consumption. identification. *My paddle's keen and bright, flashing with silver, follows the wild goose flight – dip dip and swing.*<sup>7</sup> lyrics of a children's campfire song. one used to impart the cadence of the paddle's path. rhythm. invoked to settle. the canoe as foundational to the nation's state. through the body.

moves quietly through the water. allows for stealth. i learned to paddle a canoe solo as a child - to capsize and right one alone. am comfortable in a canoe; with a paddle. adept at guiding the craft. quietly through the waters of lakes and rivers. passing through. muscle memory complies.

*seated on a wooden chair wearing a too small t-shirt in a Sportspal canoe.*

skin a single sheet of aluminum. stylized birch bark creeps across the exterior. scarring. an epidermal layer of ersatz authenticity. mocking the technology of buoyant bark. surfacing trope. deflection. evidence. processed substrate.

bow embellished. logo text anchors the image of an 'Indian' man in profile. Plains headdress. a conflated version. spurious. cigar store. sports mascot. hipster masquerade. high fashion. branding. a colonially expedient character. commonly used to denote. effacing the heterogeneity of Indigenous peoples. and sovereign nations. a stereotype lodged firmly into contemporary culture. naturalized. memorized by rote.

a story told and retold. re-stated. fused to the simulated surface. adorning the front. showing the way. present tense colonial figurehead. suspension of time and geography. temporally fixed with skin to bark. out of place. flattened. smoothed over. now mobilized at will. at leisures. where and whenever. and Indians.

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<sup>6</sup> Mackey, Eva. *The house of difference: Cultural politics and national identity in Canada*. Vol. 23. University of Toronto Press, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Lyrics from *My Paddle*. There are multiple attributions of the song *My Paddle* and its companion song *Land of the Silver Birch*. *Land of the Silver Birch*, whose lyrics often but not always include the *My Paddle's* phrasing, is variously discussed as having lyrics written by settler Margaret Embers McGee in 1918, as a 'traditional Canadian folk song, and as having been derived from a poem by Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake) (1861-1913).

*seated on a wooden chair wearing a too small t-shirt in a Sportspal canoe in the loggia of the stauffer library building.*

constructed in the last decade of the last century. a bridge between the static printed page and the connectivity of the digital age. ushering past into present. transmitting the primacy of imperial knowledge. into the future. 21<sup>st</sup> century.

the loggia holds the corner of the building. symbolic reference to the architectural feature after which it is named. to a liminal space. inside and out. in-between. a meeting place. benches line towering windows. interrupted by three large sets of doors. fourth side opens to the entrance of the library. the art gallery. culture and knowledge. brackets. measures.

stationed at the center of this space. canoe's axis at the intersection of an x that quarters a square. stone motif set into the floor. demarcated in grey tones. a crown etched into each corner. repeated mid-way along each of four sides. eight crowns in all. each returning a rough texture to the highly polished stone. crowns for queen's university. incorporated by an imperial royal charter in 1841. named for victoria. legacies of imperialism. sustained. crowns for past and future monarchs. for and of the state.<sup>8</sup>

chair, in turn, positioned at the center of the canoe. facing the bow. witness to the skin's interior. ribs that hold form. in front of me a sheaf of foot square paper. pages of a book. as yet unencumbered. charcoal at my feet. compressed carbon; the basis of all life forms. outside the canoe a bucket of stones and water. sourced from the confluence of local waters. instruments of today's undertakings. provisions.

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<sup>8</sup> The 'crown' is a term with significant connotation within the lexicon of the Canadian state. In Canada 'crown lands' are those 'owned' and controlled by the provincial and federal governments. According to the Canadian Encyclopedia (2013), crown lands make up 89 % of Canadian territory. The 'crown' is signatory to the numbered and other foundational treaties through which Aboriginal peoples were dispossessed of their land. Many aspects of these treaties continue to be contested. Within Canadian legal system, 'the crown,' as the prosecution counsel is the legal representative for the state. See: the Crown Lands Act; chapter 114, Revised Statutes, 1989. Accessed July 2015 <http://nslegislature.ca/legc/statutes/crownlan.htm>  
The Canadian Encyclopedia. Accessed July 2015 <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/crown-land/>  
Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada: Accessed July 2015 <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100032291/1100100032292>

*seated on a wooden chair wearing a too small t-shirt in a Sportspal canoe in the loggia of the stauffer library building. it is a saturday.*

a saturday towards the end of final exams. twenty four hour access. round the clock. students stream in. over three hundred enter in the first two hours. almost one thousand over the course of the day. the canoe and i a slight catch in the flow. diverting differently throughout the day. as we rotate. from crown to crown. a pebble in the stream.

still and moving in this space. a reflection. dis/quiet contemplation rippling out into surrounding waters. into these stone floors. the crowns etched therein. the cherry wood walls and benches. the bodies that pass through with everyday disregard bred in the bone. with forgetting in service to the nation.

a breach in the current. of bodies and architectures and ever-present systems. of institutions and the customary. of dis/regard. of the tasks at hand. a marker. a temporal statue. interruption. transient monument to the present-future. memory. memorial. memoration.

*seated on a wooden chair wearing a too small t-shirt in a Sportspal canoe in the loggia of the stauffer library building. it is a saturday. each hour, on the hour, a colleague arrives.*

an accomplice. rubs charcoal over paper. over etched stone. emblem. the crown in tactile translation. repeated. an imperfect mirror. taken in hand. wiped over shirt. heart. smudged. image and image effaced. the pages of a book. made and unmade.

turns the canoe. from one crown to the next. the bow and i face each crown in turn. spatial rotation; south, south west, west, north west, north, north east, east, south east. attesting to time; hour by hour. the inherence of residues. geographical and temporal slippages. simultaneous. encompassing. passing through futures.

## **PART TWO: 4:00-4:30 pm<sup>9</sup>**

*seated on a wooden chair wearing a too small t-shirt in a Sportspal canoe in the loggia of the stauffer library building. it is a saturday. each hour, on the hour, a colleague arrives. we walk from the university to city park.*

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<sup>9</sup> Ed. Note: a video of Part Two is available on *Liminalities*. See <http://liminalities.net/12-3/memoration.html>

gather to witness. to parade. to drag and carry. a loose arrangement. a collective crease drawn with footfalls and wheels. with scraping keel. a faint line etched into sidewalk. marring grass. connecting the corporeal and geographical. the temporal.

city park. site of memorials. formal and intimate. personal and institutional. expressions of remembrance. marking loved ones passed. community members. soldiers. icons. trees and benches in the name of. monuments. attending to the losses of war. assign places of reflection. inhabit space with memory. gain ground.

dominated by the towering statue of john a macdonald. a site of persistent assertions. claims. of nation. state. supremacy. of counter-claims in turn. protest and performance. red paint, song and lard, a noose, the uttering and excision of words.<sup>10</sup> intermittent fissures into everyday entitlement. fleeting interruptions that nonetheless alter.

### **PART THREE: 4:30- 5:30 pm<sup>11</sup>**

*seated on a wooden chair wearing a too small t-shirt in a SportsPal canoe in the loggia of the stauffer library building. it is a saturday. each hour, on the hour, a colleague arrives. we walk from the university to city park. the canoe is positioned behind the statue.*

the formidable drapery of its cloak. looms. crashes silently towards earth. a textile-bronze waterfall. suspended. the chair is placed in front. standing in my stead while i work behind his back. chair sheathed by my too small t-shirt. charcoal smudged. face to face. staring down. looking through. in a line that penetrates monument. rides the spine of the canoe to stones and tobacco and words jointly offered. left in acknowledgement of those not rendered in bronze. in stone. in texts.

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<sup>10</sup> Referencing artist's interventions into the John A MacDonald statue in Kingston including: Rebecca Belmore's 'Quote, Misquote, Fact', 2003; Peter Morin's 'Salt. Washing. Beuys. Fat. Royalty. Copper. Canadian Club. John. Locked. Bear. Drum. Circle,' 2015; David Garneau's 'Dear John; Louis Riel,' 2015, as well as the 'defacement' of the statue by unknown protesters on the eve of MacDonald's birthday in 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Ed. Note: a video of Part Three is available on *Liminalities*. See <http://liminalities.net/12-3/memoration.html>



all that has occurred to this point today is preparation. a meditation. in increments. steps. in stillness and ritual. alliance and recognition. in disturbance. preparation for the task at hand. skinning. filleting. remove the head and tail. for further examination. dissect to comprehend its language. calculate worth. under the surface. flatten away the shape of the body. scrape off facsimile. imprint with the surface traveled. realign. for other uses. transform.

what now transpires aligns with collaborative travels. without which this would not take place. these parts performed. enactments. the work done. to be done. to negotiate durations. attend to. transcend its apparatus. its geographies and temporalities. its sharp edges. and the blood they render. shed in an out of privilege. a contemplation. activated. memoration.

*to be continued...*



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