

Narrating Multiculturalism: Understanding Nationalism through the Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Introduction

Canada identifies as a humble, polite, peacekeeping nation, and there is a set of histories and anecdotes we tell that allows Canada to retain this self-image—these stories are apparent anywhere from sports trivia to war stories. While we find ourselves globally in a post-Holocaust era, Canadian national identity appears to be less directly informed by this event, but we should reconsider the effects of the Holocaust as being insidiously integrated into our everyday iterations of our national identity. This paper reflects on how the Holocaust is informed by and informs the Canadian national narrative. The conversations prompted by the Canadian Museum for Human Rights allow for an examination into how Canadians understand themselves and the nation in light of the Holocaust.

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), not set to open until this coming September, is the first national museum to be built outside of Ottawa. It is located in Winnipeg, at the intersection of the Red and the Assiniboine rivers—popularly referred to as ‘the forks.’ The project began as the privately funded dream of the late Izzy Asper and was later endorsed by the federal government. According to its mandate the museum aims “to enhance the public's understanding of human rights, to promote respect for others, and to encourage reflection and dialogue,” while celebrating “Canadians’ commitment to human rights” (Canadian Museum for Human Rights’ Content Advisory Committee, 3) As a national museum, the CMHR represents institutionally supported national goals and aspirations.

Nationalism as Narrative

Nationality is often an important element of one's identity. As many understand it, there is something important about the context in which one lives. Depending on where we exist we are exposed to different stories, customs, and political atmospheres—all of which contribute to how we move in the world. We praise our nations, we celebrate our nations, and according to Timothy Brennan, we narrate our nations. In “National Longing for Form” Brennan fundamentally refigures the way the nation is conceptualized. The nation, rather than being an innate birthright, is simply a set of shared stories (Brennan, 46). Blood does not in fact link people of the same nationality, and citizenship within a nation is not an essential quality. For Brennan, sets of unifying stories create national identity. A nation, for example, might tell stories of triumph over a shared struggle—be it war, famine or natural disasters. Shared histories and legends create a platform through which people are able to unite.

The Canadian national narrative is particularly interesting; especially when it comes to reflecting on the nation's origin story. According to Metis scholar Dwayne Donald, Canadians refuse to fully acknowledge the colonial means through which this land was acquired.

Concerning the popular national story, Donald writes:

Canadians have given themselves so deeply to this mythic national narrative that the story has come to *own* the ways in which they conceptualize their past and present relationships with Aboriginal peoples. It has also significantly shaped the character of the institutions that have been established, maintained, and conventionalized in Canadian society. (3)

While the nation was founded on an agreement between Indigenous nations and settlers, this partnership is often forgotten. Instead settlers imagine their separateness and difference from Indigenous people, ultimately refusing the idea of a shared past. The colonial national narrative affects the ways in which the nation operates: impacting institutions, curricula, infrastructure, and the continuation of the “mythic national narrative” among other things. We are in a continuous cycle in which both Canadians and Canadian institutions shape and are shaped by colonial narratives in insidious ways.

Forming the Narrative

National narratives inform nationhood and the institutions within the nation. According to Brennan, these narratives circulate primarily through literature, but I would argue that national narratives are also circulated through national expression of mourning and commemoration. Brennan’s notion of nation building can be seen exemplified in other mediums through the work of Sara Ahmed and Judith Butler. In both these texts, the authors use public sites of mourning (Sorry Books and obituary) in order to extrapolate nation and citizens’ values. Through discourse analysis and the sentiments expressed around national institutions national narratives become clearly visible in public forums and function to reconstitute the national story.

Discourses around national pasts function to figure contemporary national identity. In “Shame Before Others,” Ahmed discusses how Australian “Sorry Books” function to iterate national identity. Through national expressions of shame, and regret for past colonial acts, Australian citizens express sentiments of nationalism. The public expression of shame is a form of nation building. Given Canada and Australia’s shared commonwealth identity, and similar colonial pasts, Ahmed’s discourse analysis fits well within this project.

Ahmed explores the way national shame is expressed by both citizens and politicians as a way of constituting and reaffirming a sense of national ideals. Through expressing shame one marks undesirable national characteristics, and also marks admirable national qualities. Most interestingly, the undesirable national characteristics (read: histories of colonialism) are constructed away from the individual citizen and are relegated to the collective (Ahmed, 102). Colonialism is thought of as a collective shame, rather than having anything to do with the actions of an individual person—colonialism is a shameful part of the collective story. This colonial narrative is displaced in another way, according to Ahmed—through a specific temporal marker (103). In terms of colonialism and indigeneity, the wrongdoing was committed, collectively, in the past (by a past collective) and an expression of shame allows the country to return to a proud present. This temporal isolation—of wrongdoings to the past—allows the nation to cloak some of the wrongdoings that are taking place in the present (Ahmed, 103). The displacement of shame, then, works two-fold. Shame is displaced from the individual to the collective, and from the present to the past. The nation should be ashamed of an event that remains embedded in the past in order to embrace the desirable qualities of the contemporary nation.

Shame recalls the ideals one values; through an expression of shame one demonstrates an inherent knowledge of how one's self should be. In other words, shame is a conflict between the ego and the ego-ideal (Ahmed, 105). In connection with nationhood, Ahmed declares that national identity is reproduced through expressions of shame in two ways: shame can be brought onto the nation through the existence of un-wanted others, in this case Indigenous peoples—or the nation can express shame onto itself by its negative treatment of others—acts of colonial violence. In both cases, the nation observes elements of identity that it rejects and feels shame for

presenting and, in turn, reifies an image of what the ideal nation is. Demonstrating shame is a demonstration of your commitment to good values, and so, a nation's display of shame is a representation of its transference and restoration of national ideals. In other words, in order for a nation to begin to be able to attain its idealized self it must first recognize those ideas through stating its shame. In expressing what one regrets about the nation's past one is simultaneously expressing desires for the nation's future.

Butler interrogates the politics of mourning and vulnerability—commenting on the two as they interlock with citizenship. People are linked through vulnerability: as Butler says, “we’re undone by each other” (23). Our bodies tie us inevitably to corporeal vulnerability, and the inescapability of vulnerability serves a political agenda (Butler, 26). Not everyone is granted a grievable life, and this is why vulnerability functions politically. Grievable subjects are real, vulnerable subjects: we are vulnerable to their loss, just as they are themselves vulnerable. Subjects who are denied vulnerability and *realness* do not make for grievable subjects. Butler writes, “the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes note-worthy, As a result we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building” (34). Those who fit within the national narrative of vulnerability become grievable and those who fall outside of it are not proper citizens.

Butler demonstrates that the ways in which particular subjects are publicly acknowledged and mourned is an act of nation-building (34). Public memory functions to form the national narrative and affirms the victimization of certain subjects while denying the victimization of others (by leaving them unacknowledged). The narrative is recreated and transformed through its

many different forums of articulation. As made apparent by both Butler and Ahmed, citizenship and nationalism are iterated through different venues—specifically in displays of mourning and shame in relationship to the past. In this regard, national identity is related to memory.

Canada's Multicultural Narrative

One of the reoccurring themes in the Canadian narrative is its effervescent multiculturalism. This is particularly interesting in how it plays out in the different conversations that take place around the Canadian Museum of Human Rights. Multiculturalism is embedded in the museum and through its guiding principles “The Museum aims to deliver an immersive, interactive and memorable experience for visitors of every background, age and level of ability” (CMHR, “about”). According to this principle, the museum must accommodate for all sorts of people and beliefs. The multicultural identity affects both what is said around the museum and how the museum has determined its content.

As a way of maintaining an inclusive museum, the Content Advisory Committee Final Report, released in 2010, was devised through a series of different community consultations. The document boasts: “We managed to hear from a wonderful diversity of people in Canada from coast to coast to coast. ... We were struck by both the similarities and differences between people, and the dynamic mix of identities that are found all across the country” (9). The content advisory attests to the dynamic, cultural mosaic of Canada and used this multiplicity to conduct their research. Furthermore, the variety in people and responses exposes a variety of ‘human rights’ issues. They write, for example, “with this broad category a wonderful variety of themes and issues were represented— the rights of the disabled; women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people; children and youth; poor people; workers; the environment; immigrants

and refugees; and others” (9). The strong sense of multiplicity insists on allowing for a variety of conversations and issues to take place within the museum’s content.

The mandate for multiculturalism prompts an interesting conversation. Through the community consultation process the committee had recommended that the museum should have two permanent installations. Among the many recommendations, it should recognize that “colonialism, both within Canada and beyond, is an historic and present assault on the human rights of Indigenous Peoples” (58). And the most controversial recommendation reads:

The Museum should position the Holocaust as a separate zone at the centre [sic] of the Museum, showing the centrality of the Holocaust to the overall human rights story and in prompting the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its grounding in the idea of common humanity. The story of human rights told in other parts of the Museum should bring home to visitors the core messages of the Holocaust, including the message that learning and acting on the lessons of the Holocaust—that respecting human rights— give hope that nothing like the Holocaust will ever happen again. (62)

Here, the unique nature of the Holocaust is acknowledged, and set up both as a past event that we should commemorate as a past event that we should learn from. The travesty of the Holocaust is, according to this recommendation, foundational to the understanding of universal human rights. The Holocaust is meant to provide a lens through which we can begin to properly engage with other atrocities. This suggestion prompted responses from a number of different groups.

Holocaust Controversy

Upholding the Holocaust as the standard of atrocity provoked groups who strongly advocated for a thorough acknowledgement of the ‘Holodomor’. The Ukrainian Canadian Congress began a petition to have this recommendation re-evaluated and insisted that the Ukrainian genocide be featured just as prominently as the Holocaust (Adams). Karyn Ball and Per Anders Rudling observe how this debate spurs “ethno-nationalist groups identifying themselves as victims of human rights abuses ... in order to stake a particular claim on Canadian public recognition and compassion” (3). This debate, as Ball and Rudling suggest, is premised on what Michael Rothberg calls “competitive memory”. That is, the conflict functions on the idea that memory can be claimed and operates like physical material wherein some people are memorialized and others are not (Rothberg, 5).

Memory is always already slippery. Rothberg’s multidirectional memory theorizes that memorialization enables a proliferation of memory and meaning. Discourse around memory is productive: it creates. Most poignantly, Rothberg argues, “the Holocaust has enabled the articulation of other histories of victimization” (6). The arguments propositioned by the Ukrainian Canadian Congress and other Ukrainian nationalist groups, directly illustrate Rothberg’s argument. There is the birth of an entirely new discourse around what Canadians need to recognize as human rights violations. According to Ball and Rudling the history of ‘Holodomor’ memorialization is almost entirely in response to Holocaust memorialization (albeit with anti-Semitic motivations) (27). The majority of Holodomor discourse, then, is enabled by the Holocaust—inspired by what Ball and Rudling provocatively call “Holocaust Envy”. Even as it emerges as a notion of counter-memorialization, advocating against the sole commemoration of the Holocaust, competitive memory proliferates discourses around the Holodomor.

Interestingly, it is the multicultural Canadian context that enables this conversation. Without the existence and acceptance of these Ukrainian groups, this conversation is unlikely to have taken place. For Ball and Rudling, it is the passivity of the multicultural Canadian state “where ultranationalist sympathizers with Holocaust perpetrators are granted forums ... and even provided with government funds for the purpose of honoring mass murderers” that allows for the existence of this controversy (42). Furthermore, the sheer existence of this Holodomor controversy allows for the further proliferation of the Canadian multicultural narrative. The popular commentary on the debate itself does not take sides, but instead minimizes the debate—at times, reducing the debate to a “urinating match of competing victimhoods” (Steyn). Commentary is un-invested in the content of the Ukrainian opposition and instead reiterates ideas that emphasize ‘sameness’ and equality. For example, on the topic of the controversy, the CEO of the museum, Stuart Murray, has said “People are passionate about who they are, people are passionate about their culture, and we respect that” (Hamilton, “Canada’s Human Right). Those involved in the museum are ultimately concerned with avoiding the debate, rather than engaging with the potentially anti-Semitic content of the controversy¹.

Indigeneity in the Canadian Narrative

Whilst this conversation has been taking place—with the extreme attentiveness to properly acknowledging human rights through a lens of multiculturalism—there is another less audible conversation taking place. That is the commemoration of Canadian colonialism. Under the recommendations of the advisory committee, “Aboriginal Peoples must be fully included” (13). Yet, this inclusion is obeyed only to the extent that it fits within the Canadian national narrative: colonialism happened in the past. The Museum for Human Rights does not realize the magnitude of colonialism’s impact in contemporary times, despite trying to accommodate for it.

Within the museum's recommendation they aspire to "recognize that colonialism, both within Canada and beyond, is an historic and **present** assault on the human rights of Indigenous Peoples" (61 my emphasis). However, ironically, the museum may be understood directly as an example of such "present assault on the human rights of Indigenous Peoples" because its physical location is understood by some Indigenous peoples as a violation of their rights.

The museum fails to recognize that the land they occupy belongs to Indigenous peoples. Emphasis here, should be put on present tense *belongs*, not belonged in the past tense. It is not simply a matter of occupying land that was formally important to Indigenous people. The issue at hand is the occupation of land that is of importance to Indigenous people in the contemporary period—and failing to realize this importance. While some Indigenous peoples have consented and advised the museum committees, not all Indigenous people have consented: the museum occupies this land without the consent of all those who have rights to it.

According to the Heritage Resources Act, before there is any new infrastructure built in 'the forks,' the area must be thoroughly investigated for human or cultural artifacts. If there is proof of human remains, the infrastructure must be delayed (Morin 32). The forks has long been held as a meeting ground for Indigenous peoples, but whether or not it is a burial ground is controversial (Morin 23). The rights to the land, then, hinges on its past existence as a meeting ground as opposed to a burial ground. The Red River Half-Breeds have proposed an injunction to stop further building at the forks, and have lost their court case because there is insufficient evidence that the forks was a burial ground (Morin 27). Whether or not the land served as a burial site is still controversial, but according to some archeological teams the site has not been thoroughly investigated (CBC News). Archaeologist E. Leigh Syms goes so far as to say that, regardless of Indigenous land claims, this site is particularly interesting from a purely

archaeological standpoint; it contains traces of plants not thought to have existed in Manitoba, and shows evidence of being occupied 600 years earlier than initially hypothesized (CBC News). Yet, this testament from physical scientists—that the land has been occupied for over 6,000 years—is not enough to properly attest to the Red River Half-Breeds’ right to the land.

Regardless of the facticity of the burial ground, the Red River Half-Breed Association argues that, according to section 31 of the Manitoba Act, there are outstanding land entitlements, totaling 1200,000 acres, owed to “half breeds” (Morin 7). The area of the forks specifically following this document belongs to the half-breeds. The province is indebted to this Metis group, yet fails to properly settle the debt: the province of Manitoba is infringing on the rights of Indigenous peoples, even preceding the CMHR. In a 2003 letter to the Premier of Manitoba, Morin writes:

I was taught that you cannot build on burial ground. Yet, Mr. Asper wants to build his Human Rights Museum there, build it, but not on sacred Halfblood burial grounds. ... When it comes to burial and sacred grounds they did not consult with us. Under Section 31 of the Manitoba Act, our Half Breed Reserve which encompasses [sic] the forks, one million four hundred thousand acres in all. We have sacred burial grounds of our people and they are also buried at the forks. (32)

Here Morin summarizes the half-breed opposition to the CMHR. The land is sacred and the proprietors of the land were not consulted in the building of the museum. This is a clearly articulated opposition, but it goes unrecognized in the discourse that the museum itself presents about its own projects, goals and approach to dealing with the viewpoints of Indigenous peoples. The CMHR does not account for a variety of Indigenous attitudes towards the museum. Instead,

Indigeneity is only tolerated so far as it fits within the scope of the museum. The museum claims to “develop an appreciation of the variety of Indigenous identities and experiences before and after contact, and the distinctive world views of Indigenous Peoples” (61), but does not appreciate the “distinctive” view that opposes the museum.

Most poignantly on the topic, Morin articulates, “they [settlers] don’t have rights here as they are led to believe” (8). Perhaps, as Morin suggests, commemorating human rights on settler-occupied land is not acceptable: the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is a human rights violation. However, this rights violation is not compatible within our national narrative, and the violation is overlooked—reduced to a conflict based in the past. Acknowledging colonialism within the contemporary context and the unwanted presence of the museum is not compatible within the multicultural national story.

There is a distinction here between colonialism that we can acknowledge, and colonialism that we cannot acknowledge, in that the colonial violations that we can properly *reconcile* and fit into a multicultural narrative are acceptable, but ongoing violations do not properly fit into this narrative. Similarly to Ahmed’s observations about national shame in Australia, the act of remembering colonialism in the CMHR serves to distort the present traces of colonialism. Despite attempts to reconcile and acknowledge colonialism, the CMHR never completely decolonizes its practice because it does not admit to being an unwanted, settler presence.

Conclusion

Canadian multiculturalism is dependent on and consistently recreated through memorialization. The presence of the Holocaust, despite being a historical past, serves to proliferate different forms of memorialization. On the one hand, Canadian multiculturalism accommodates for different voices and opinions, and on the other hand it restructures certain

narratives to fit within it—we are left with a story wherein anti-Semitic remarks are tolerated, and indigeneity is forced into reconciliation. Returning to Dwayne Donald’s observations on the “mythic national narrative,” we, as ‘Canadians,’ should begin to reflect on the ways in which our national narratives are institutionalized. And most importantly, how does colonialism inform these narratives?

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¹ For information on the Holomodor as anti-Semitic read work by Pers Anders Ruling