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Epilogue: citizenship, memory, and the curious case of Canada

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ABSTRACT

Given its increasingly multiethnic composition Canada does not fit traditional models of collective memory that imply a fixed relationship between what is remembered and the mnemonic community doing the remembering. This essay draws out some of the particularities of Canadian memory culture in order to show how it exemplifies *in vitro* a general principle that is emerging in scholarship; namely, that collective memory is not fixed once and for all, but is continuously emerging through the transfer of models of remembrance across groups and through the multidirectional interplay between narratives as they enter the public arena. From the perspective of this generative model, memory is not an inalienable inheritance, but an active ingredient in renegotiating the cultural boundaries between citizens in local, national, and transnational contexts.

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In November 2017, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau travelled to Labrador and offered a public apology to the Innu, Inuit, and Nunatu Kavut communities for the suffering caused by the forcible removal of children from their homes and their subsequent detention in Residential Schools. This was a singular event, albeit orchestrated and mediatized event.¹ At the same time, it was also a repeat performance in the sense that it was intended to make up for the fact that an earlier apology for Residential Schools, offered by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008, had explicitly excluded these communities (see Henderson and Wakeham 2009). The Labrador apology was also in another sense a repeat performance. Since becoming Prime Minister in 2015, Trudeau has been remarkably active in offering apologies to different victim groups, among them the Sikh community to whom he apologized in May 2016 for the *Komagata Maru* shipping incident of 1914, the turning away of 300 Sikh would-be immigrants. For this too, his predecessor had apologized in 2008 though without providing the closure intended (Somani 2011).

Much could be said about these particular apologies and, more generally, about apology as a structurally flawed instrument of ‘reparative remembrance’ (Dawson 2007) that rarely gives the promised closure (see also Rigney 2015). Despite these flaws, apology has nevertheless emerged across the world as an instrument of reconciliation with the potential power

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to change, not the past, but its meaning (Barkan and Karn 2006). The global proliferation of apologies (Nobles 2008) reflects the fact that post-World War Two memory cultures have become dominated by a 'politics of regret' (Olick 2007) which emerged in the 1970s in Germany and spread outwards from there. Linked to the 'politics of regret' is the dominance of a traumatic paradigm which links public remembrance to victimhood and grievance: history is where it hurts. Accordingly, the question 'will there be an apology?' has come to frame public encounters between historically opposed parties, with apologies regularly proffered by governments to their own citizens who have been victims of state-sponsored injustice. Seen against the background of this global culture of grievance and regret, Canada's 'culture of redress' (Henderson and Wakeham 2009) belongs to a larger transnational trend even as the topics touched upon are specific to the legacy of settler colonialism: the historical dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants and subsequent waves of immigration from inside and outside of Europe. In what follows, I try to tease out the reasons why Canada,² which has until now received little attention in memory studies, may nevertheless turn out to be a key case for understanding the relationship between memory and citizenship in today's world.

It is by now generally accepted that memory actually originated in two 'races memory is constitutive of collective identity in the modern period. As nationalism studies has shown, the belief in having a shared past and the willingness to work together in the future are key features of nation-building (Anderson [1991] 1983). Although ethnic nationalism posits national memory as an inalienable inheritance that is given once and for all, scholarship has emphasized instead that this unitary and unifying past emerges only through a process of negotiation around differences. As Ernest Renan already pointed out in 1882 (Renan 1947–61), both forgetting and remembering are necessary for producing a shared past since historical research will usually show that civil wars and cultural differences actually divided the ancestors of the very people now prepared to show solidarity with each other and to coexist in the same territory. Nation-building is precisely about overcoming differences and subsuming them into a national narrative. Although subject to periodic contestation, this national narrative then becomes a relatively stable framework to which citizens affiliate themselves.

This European-based model of memory and citizenship, however, does not transfer easily to Canada given its history of settler colonialism and more recent immigration. This itself makes Canada all the more interesting at a time when memory studies is trying to move away from ethnic nationalism as the primary model of collective memory and starting to explore through a transnational lens the circulation of memory across media and between groups. The fact that 'Canada' is the starting point of the present discussion of memory and citizenship is a reminder that the national framework continues to be important even as we study memory from a multiscale perspective (De Cesari and Rigney 2014) that is alert to the interplay between local, national, and transnational factors. Within this multiscale dynamic the national remains important, not just because citizenship is linked to statehood, but also because of the power of state actors to orchestrate large-scale public events, such as the recent sesquicentennial celebrations which celebrated the meaning of 'Canada' in particular ways.

As a site where multiple strands of public remembrance hit off each other in a dynamic mix, Canada may actually provide the best model for understanding developments elsewhere – to begin with, in Europe where nation-states are currently struggling with the

double challenge of becoming 'European' and of integrating non-European migrants who are perceived as a threat to local traditions. Where Renan noted that most European nations actually originated in two 'races' (Renan 1947–61), the problem of connecting different groups mnemonically into a single narrative is multiplied and compounded in Canada. To begin with, there is the intractable fault line between indigenous peoples and *se Remembrance as Remaking: Myths tellers* which, as the repeated apologies show, cannot easily be reconciled into a narrative that relegates suffering to the past; arguably such a narrative will never emerge without redress in the present. Secondly, Canadian citizenry is made up at the present time by diasporic communities from across the world that have brought their memories with them. While at first sight these newcomers have no historical responsibility for the colonial dispossession, the very fact of assuming Canadian citizenship means that they have become – whether they like it or not – 'implicated subjects' (Rothberg 2013) in the colonial project. By 'implicated subjects' is meant here the fact of benefiting from the outcome of colonialism even if one's own ancestors never penetrated the Canadian wilderness in canoes. Becoming a naturalized citizen entails 'memory citizenship' (Rothberg and Yildiz 2011). Even migrants who are themselves victims of persecution and dispossession elsewhere have in principle to assume responsibility for indigenous dispossession as part of their new civic identity and of their affiliation with Canada. Acts of affiliation arguably happen all the time in the transfer of memories and identities across generations. But the displacement entailed by migration makes that process more overt and, in some cases, more painful. Whatever the conditions, leaving home involves not just the *loss* of a homeland, but also the *creation* of a new relationality with other groups and new interfaces (Brah 1996; see also Erll 2017). In diaspora, people face a dilemma: how to maintain their connectedness with their old group while imagining a new connectedness to the people with whom they do not share any genealogical connection but with whom they now share citizenship. In this regard, Canada is not just defined by its multiculturalism but above all by the multiplicity of interfaces between mnemonic communities. Hence, the importance of approaching memory in Canada in terms of 'articulation', understood here in the double sense of 'bringing to expression' and 'creating a connection' between hitherto unconnected parties (De Cesari and Rigney 2014).

The importance of articulation is evident in the cases presented here, even if it is not thematized as such. It is striking that most of the essays focus on the memory of a particular ethnic group and how it has fared within the Canadian national context. Katherine Pendakis studies the different generations of Greeks who have settled in Toronto, many of them political exiles, and how they continue to position themselves in relation to politics back home. Duygu Gül Kaya discusses memory activism among Armenian-Canadians, while Dolgoy and Elzanowski's explain the activism that led to the erection of the National Monuments to the Holocaust and to the Victims of Communism in Ottawa. In these cases, memory activists sought recognition on the part of the Canadian state for the suffering they or their ancestors endured at the hands of repressive regimes elsewhere. Interestingly, the public commemorations of the Armenian genocide occasioned demonstrations of solidarity – in speeches and also in the display of flags – with other ethnic groups in Canada on the basis of their common status as victims from overseas (including Ukrainians, Sikhs, Kurds, Tutsis). This emphasis on the recognition of victimhood reflects the global currency of grievance as a marker of identity (Hage 2003) that feeds into the politics of regret mentioned earlier. The memory of their common role as victims of oppression could provides a transversal

connection across different ethnic communities while referencing atrocities that remain disconnected from Canada. Despite this small measure of cross-group identification, the Canadian memoryscape seems largely populated by a multiplicity of distinct ethnic groups each laying claim to a distinct history of victimhood under the over-arching umbrella of Canadian respect for human rights. That yesterday's victims may be today's implicated subjects is (as yet) left out of the picture in this compartmentalized mnemonic landscape.

However, public commemoration is performative. Not just in the sense that it often takes the form of public assemblies, but above all, because bringing a memory into circulation and into public visibility gives it the power to change how people look at themselves and others. Once a story is 'out there' it invites others to reproduce it, contest it, or make multi-directional connections to more familiar cases. It is in this sense that remembrance can be described as 'generative' and not just reproductive (De Cesari and Rigney 2014; Rigney 2018). Historical research has an important role to play in generating new narratives by bringing information out of 'storage memory' into 'working memory' (Assmann 2012). This process is exemplified here by Lily Cho's analysis of the Chinese 'head tax certificates' which graphically highlights everyday practices of discrimination in the early twentieth century. She shows how the Chinese ancestors of present-day Canadians were considered ineligible for full citizenship and given a second-class status. Although Cho's analysis is focused only on Chinese immigrants as a distinct category, the archival material she has brought into 'working memory' can potentially be picked up and connected to other cases of discrimination, such as the above-mentioned *Komagata Maru* affair. Similarly, the commemoration of the Armenian genocide produced as its by-product new research showing that Canada was implicated in the story of Armenian suffering and not just a benevolent power. Behind the scenes, as Gül Kaya points out, historical research has shown how the mistreatment of Armenian refugees in Canada fell short of its current ideals of hospitality. Finally, as is shown in Dolgoy and Elzanowski essay on the national Holocaust monument in Ottawa, historical research has yielded new information about anti-Semitism in Canada and the reluctance of the government to admit refugees in 1939, which ended up being inscribed on the monument itself. It thus provided some nuance to the overarching narrative of the national Holocaust monument as being about anti-Semitism 'over there' in Europe to which Canada is now bearing witness. Daniel Libeskind, architect of the Holocaust monument in Ottawa and of many similar monuments elsewhere, noted publicly with reference to Canada that 'nothing like this ever happened here'. Such a public statement invited a multidirectional comparison with injustices that took place 'here' although, as Dolgoy and Elzanowski note, discussion never went beyond the issue of anti-Semitism to address the uncomfortable fact, with more fundamental implications for Canadian identity, that the monument was actually standing on unceded indigenous land.

Comparisons between forms of injustice are fraught with ethical and cognitive pitfalls, as Michael Rothberg has shown (2011). However, it is only through people seeking out connections – establishing similarities and divergences – that different narratives are brought into critical conversation with each other. The case of Canada shows how multi-sited and multidirectional the elaboration of a shared memory is in conditions of ethnic differences and of a relatively short period of co-habitation. It also shows how diasporic, national, and transnational practices play into each other in such a way as to create synergies, but also to plaster over cracks with the help of screen memories. In a condition of 'colonial aphasia' (Stoler 2011), some histories are as yet unarticulated: not yet brought to public expression

and not yet connected to the bigger picture. There is no guarantee that this will ever happen in the future, but there is good reason to believe that the dynamics outlined above will continue as Canada evolves in the next 150 years.

Will this ever yield a unitary Canadian story? The essays collected here, and especially Failler's essay on the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, shows an emerging narrative of national benevolence in which Canada plays the role of protector of human rights who bears witness to human rights violations that took place elsewhere. This can best be described as a form of civic nationalism (Brubaker 1992) in which identity is vested in the commitment to certain common values rather than being based, as in ethnic nationalism, on the sense of a shared past. The sesquicentennial provided an important occasion for converting these civic values into a commemorative narrative in which Canada's track record was displayed and celebrated. While some attention was paid to the downside of Canadian prosperity and the apologies for the Residential Schools, this track record was above all related to the country's (undisputed) role in offering a 'Tower of Hope' and a new homeland to those from elsewhere. This tradition of civic virtue seems to be becoming the kernel of a future unitary national narrative in which Canadians have a history of international peacekeeping and 'doing good.' The credibility of that narrative, and hence its success as a future framework for all citizens, will depend on its ability to overcome the colonial aphasia surrounding the historical dispossession of indigenous peoples that continues into their current exclusion from Canadian prosperity, in which all citizens, including newcomers, are implicated.

This celebration of 'Canada the Good' tends to elide failures to safeguard human rights closer to home in the treatment of Canada's 'inconvenient Indians', to echo Thomas King (King 2018). Following the generative logic mentioned earlier, however, this celebratory exhibition of national pride at the CMHR leads Failler into a comparison with an alternative exhibition. This was held at the Shoal Lake First Nation Museum of Canadian Human Rights Violations in Manitoba and it un-settled the self-congratulatory narrative of Canada the Good by calling attention not just to historical dispossession, but to the ongoing exclusion of the Anishinaabe from access to water and to land.

In this case, it was an academic who 'articulated' the two exhibitions and, in connecting them, extended the frame of reference of both museums. While memory studies has hitherto focused on acts of remembrance on the part of actors in civil society, the present special issue brings to the fore the importance of academics. It highlights their role in retrieving new information from the archive and using it to make connections between hitherto seemingly unrelated histories. If picked up by civil society it has the potential to cut across familiar fault lines. Without the potential for critical reflection that is characteristic both of scholarship and of the arts, cultural memory would become an echo chamber for grievances rather than a cultural force that can help in 'articulating' a multiethnic society.

Notes

1. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/justin-trudeau-labrador-residential-schools-apology-1.4417443>.
2. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/komagata-maru-live-apology-1.3587827>.

Disclosure statement

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