History is edited by the Victors: Rethinking Indigenous Public Art

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The John A. Macdonald statue in Victoria Park, Regina, is an ordinary oddity. Its strangeness is easy to ignore if you identify with the man represented and the people who commissioned, made, and paid for it. To Indigenous folks, the sculpture is a routine provocation. Like the equestrian Queen in front of the Legislative Building, the statue is a proclamation of colonial power to a provincial outpost, a reminder of who was and is in charge. Both are devised to assert the importance of Southern Ontario and the English in the formation and continuance of this place, and designed to overshadow regional heroes, local stories, and non-occupationist narratives.

It seems ironic that the only statue of John A. Macdonald west of Hamilton and east of Victoria is planted in Regina, the place where, with Macdonald's blessing, Louis Riel was hung. Well, not ironic so much as an obvious display of power, a perpetual reminder of defeat and humiliation and of whose history is important. To be fair, there is a trace of Riel nearby. He is pictured on a plaque on a rock near the kiddie play area. But the marker does not memorialize Riel as many assume. The tablet commemorates the trial, not the Resistance or its executed leader. It celebrates the suppression of Indigenous resistance and the imposition of colonial order. History is edited by the victors.

Regina is peculiar in the Prairies, even the rest of Canada, for its relative disinterest in marking the Indigenous through public art and civic naming. Saskatoon has a sculpture of Gabriel Dumont, and not Macdonald. Calgary's main arteries are the Shaganappi, Deerfoot, Crowchild, Stoney, and Blackfoot trails. It is heartening to hear these names recited daily by non-Aboriginal people. Quite a few even know who these folks were and are. Most Canadian cities recognize, even honour, the Indigenous people and sites they replaced through multiple street and place names—Regina, Wascana Park aside, not as much.

Indigenous Acts: Art in Public Spaces was a five-day workshop held at the First Nations Longhouse at the University of British Columbia (August 4-8, 2014) and in many locations throughout Vancouver. Invited participants were primarily First Nations and Métis artists and curators from across North America. Workshop leaders Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) and Candice Hopkins (Carcross/Tagish) gathered us to consider the future of public Indigenous creative presence. *Stronger than Stone: (Re)Inventing the Indigenous Monument* was held just three and a half months later (Nov. 21-22) at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, and at Wanuskewin Heritage Park in Saskatoon (Nov. 23-24). Organized by Jen Bundy, this international symposium was also concerned with issues of public Indigenous art. I was honoured to speak at both.

The fact and size of these remarkable gatherings signals a growing collective consciousness among Indigenous makers, thinkers, teachers, curators, activists, their allies, and funders(!) that it is time for Indigenous artists to reshape our shared environments to reflect the non-colonial aspects of these territories. It is impossible to convey all of what happened at these packed events, but I would like to offer a subjective account of some of what I learned and how it altered my practice.

Axiomatic to the conference and workshop is recognition of the fact that we are on First Nations territories. While British Columbia is mostly unceded, the Plains are shared with Canada under treaty. Second, I think attendees would agree that though colonization continues, there is a growing movement of decolonization; practices which include symbolic recognizing Indigenous presence. Last year, for example, the City of Vancouver official recognized that it is on unceded Coast Salish territory. The street signs on the campuses of both the University of British Columbia, Okanagan campus (Kelowna), and Thompson Rivers University (Kamloops) are bilingual; that is, in English and the local Indigenous language: Nsyilxcen for Kelowna and Secwepemctsin for Kamloops. Symbolic signs of a respectful climate.

At neither the conference nor workshop was there talk about the need for non-Indigenous folks to represent, honour, or otherwise mark First Nations and Métis people and places through their art. It was assumed that Indigenous creators and communities should do this work—with help from allies, if required. The question was 'what should be done and how?' The creation of monuments to great men—especially through larger than life metal effigies—was recognized as a European tradition and not a traditional practice of Plains First Peoples. Should Indigenous public memorialisation imitate 'settler' styles and world-views? What is Indigenous about contemporary Indigenous public art? Should such works echo traditional practice; or should they be impermanent or performative counter-monuments; not celebrating 'great men' but relationships? Should they be developed communally rather than be the expression of a lone genius? These gatherings offered so many interesting questions and opportunities to be creative.

Rather than puzzle this out in words alone, I am trying to work through these questions through performance art. I am a painter. I like solitude and concentration, and the pleasure of the craft. Performance terrifies me. Nevertheless, I felt that there were things I needed to explore physically and in a public space with an audience; embodied things that might be revealed in only this way.

I have been disturbed by the presence of the John A. Macdonald statue since I moved to Regina from Calgary in 1999. For the past eight years, I left little nooses at the sculpture's feet most November 16^{ths}, the anniversary of Riel's execution. It was a private act, but of course, I hoped people would see the nooses and divine the act's meanings. In 2013, I decided to make this action more public. I received a SaskArts Board grant; had a costume-maker, Candace Cardoso, create two Riel statue suits; and was invited by curator Blair Fornwald to do the performance for the Dunlop Art Gallery in Regina, and by Erin Sutherland to re-perform in Kingston, On, Macdonald's hometown, on the 200th anniversary of his birth (Jan. 10, 2015).

Dear John; Louis David Riel was first performed on a cold November 16th, 2014. A military drummer and a Métis hand drummer approach Macdonald's statue from opposite directions. Dressed in a bulky grey felt suit reminiscent of the Riel statue in Winnipeg, Chester Brown's comic book Riel, and Joseph Beuys' felt suit, I followed the Métis drummer to the statue. I wore a black hood held in place with a noose. Around my ankle was a rope tied to seven cloth bank bags that I dragged through the snow.

At first, Riel, or his ghost, silently pleads the Métis case through gestures and by showing documents, then by talking to Macdonald through a tin can telephone. John A. remains unmoved. Riel then poses like the Prime Minister (the poses and bodies of the Riel statue in Winnipeg and John A in Regina are nearly identical!). Riel then blindfolds Macdonald with a Métis sash; turns his back on the statue; removes his hood and coat; puts on moccasins; makes a ceremonial tipi; smudges; converts the tipi into a travois for his possessions, and leaves.

The figure begins as Riel, the restless ghost who wants to meet his persecutor. He picks up his old cause only to realize that this strategy has little value. The figure's imitation of Macdonald's pose represents Riel's—and his champions'—desire to see him as a statesman. But the second half of the performance is a rejection of that mode. The figure is no longer Riel, a ghost or animated statue, but just me, or someone like me, a contemporary Métis man trying to figure out how to de-colonize my worldview.

Originally, I simply wanted to dress as a Riel statue and pose as a counter-monument. I wanted to show that a statue of Riel had more meaning here than a Macdonald sculpture. Perhaps the gesture would prompt folks to consider building a metal Riel to counterbalance the metal Macdonald. But *Stronger Than Stone* and *Indigenous Acts* had me wonder if singing and talking to the land (Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Rebecca Belmore); listening to the land (Terrance Houle); occupying the museum and using, singing and dancing its artifacts back to life (Maria Hupfield and Peter Morin); and teasing monuments (Adrian Stimson, Peter Morin), might be a more effective response to monumental culture, to the desperate fixedness of colonial representations. Perhaps more fluid actions could do more to re-call history. In the Riel role, I felt the excitement of being Métis rather than simply representing that energy. Perhaps the repeated use of public space by Indigenous people is the best way to Indigenize it, to have us remember its fuller meanings. For me, Albert St. is no longer just a thorough-fair, and the bridge is not just a bridge, since they were re-inscribed by the Idle No More march and round dance of two years ago. Public ritual invests space with meaning, with presence, more effectively than effigies to fading individuality.

Of course we need to do everything. We need more Indigenous named streets, parks, and neighbourhoods; plaques, and all the other conventional markers. But we should also create alternative forms of remembering that are perpetuated by human use. Indigenous public art is not simply about Indigenous content expressed through dominant culture means; it is also about coaxing Indigenous worldviews into novel forms and acts.