The year 2015 was pivotal in the arena of commemoration: a host of monuments erected to honour controversial historical figures were subjected to repeated interventions in many places around the world. Most of these actions resulted in the monuments’ removal, their partial or total destruction, or their temporary or permanent defacement. The actions were aimed at “correcting” the commemoration; the intention was to rectify the representations of the past conveyed by certain monuments. As I explain, these corrections were virtually all aimed at redressing the colonial violence concealed by national mythologies of settler states.

The recent series of global demonstrations around contested monuments began in earnest in South Africa, in spring 2015, with Rhodes Must Fall, a student protest movement also known by the social media hashtags #RhodesMustFall and #RMF. On April 9, 2015, Marion Walgate’s statue of Cecil John Rhodes was removed from the entrance to the University of Cape Town, which it had “guarded” since 1934. Its withdrawal was covered extensively on South African television and on various digital platforms. The Rhodes Must Fall movement rapidly expanded to other universities, and its reverberations spread beyond academic premises to public spaces in other South African cities. The protests that year were so widespread that the country’s Department of Arts and Culture subsequently reviewed its policy of allowing old monuments associated with British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism to remain standing.

The global wave of protest launched with Rhodes Must Fall continued and was consolidated during the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, in summer 2017, associated with the attempt to knock over the statue of Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate army. These incidents had a fatal outcome: one person was killed and nineteen injured during the confrontation between those wanting the statue to remain, including Ku Klux Klan members and neo-Nazis, and counter-protesters, including Black Lives Matter activists and groups associated with the anti-fascist (known as Antifa) movement. The next day, the statue of Lee was covered with a black tarp.

Adding to the traditional media and social-media coverage of the confrontations in Charlottesville, President Donald Trump, in his tweets and press conferences, blamed both the protesters and the counter-protesters. His statements were heard around the planet and drew attention both...
to the incidents and to the persistence—and even escalation—of racism in the United States. The Charlottesville events triggered a series of removals of hundreds of statues of politicians and Confederate officers throughout the United States, although the statue of Lee still stood in Market Street Park (former Lee Park) until its recent removal in July 2021. Images of defaced and toppled statues have flooded social-media platforms, where much of the debate on the protest took place, spread, and proliferated.

Since then, actions aimed at correcting official commemorations, triggered by events associated with the aftermath and perpetuation of mechanisms of domination and social classification inherited from the colonial period, have increasingly become part of daily life. In 2019, during the wave of protests and riots demanding major social reforms in Chile, caused by the rise in public transit prices, more than three hundred effigies of colonizers and Chilean military officers were damaged. The murder of African American George Floyd by police on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis relaunched protests against Confederate statues across the United States and against other monuments in other countries, from statues of King Leopold II in Brussels and Sebastián de Belalcázar in Popayán to Edward Colston in Bristol.

In Canada, statues of the country’s first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, are not the only ones targeted by actions that denounce systemic racism. Egerton Ryerson, James McGill, Queen Victoria, and Edward Cornwallis are on a growing list of historical personages whose past actions are being called into question. In this commentary, I argue that the current challenging of commemorative statues on Canadian soil is in part rooted in the dissemination and massive online sharing of information (texts, photographs, videos) on incidents associated with, for example, Confederate monuments and Rhodes Must Fall. I also argue it is the consequence of a “politics of repentance” that acknowledges specific cases of violence and exclusion in Canada linked to its colonial past and its contemporary effects, as well as the transnational and transcultural sharing of a traumatic colonial legacy and the hope (also shared and constantly evolving) of decolonizing societies. In the following, I reflect on the impact of social networks on contemporary forms of communication, activism, and remembering, as well as the creation of new spaces (virtual platforms) for people to make themselves heard; the “shared” heritage of the colonial past; and the role played by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the open contestation of certain monuments in Canada today. Specifically, I examine the presence and influence in Canada of new (virtual) communities, which are also communities of interest, through an examination of the “correction” of statues of Edward Cornwallis in Halifax, and of Queen Victoria and John A. Macdonald in Montreal.

The Transcultural Nature of Memory and the Role of Empathy in its Reception

The new communication media, whether one thinks of mobile technology or, especially, digital social media, have radically changed how, who, and what we remember. To explore the impact of platforms such as Facebook
and Twitter on the shaping of collective memory, I look first at the capacity of collective memory to “travel” and then at the ways in which the media accentuate and amplify its transcultural condition; finally, I explore the role of empathy and solidarity in the dissemination, sharing, and reception of collective memory.

How, with whom, and by what means does memory travel today? The new forms of communication and circulation certainly accelerate these travels, even as they amplify the range and diversification of its destinations. Astrid Erll developed the notion of “travelling memory,” taking inspiration from work by the German art historian Aby Warburg on migrations of images over time and space and from the notion of travelling cultures. Erll posits that movement and travelling are constitutive characteristics of memory, as “all cultural memory must ‘travel,’ be kept in motion, in order to ‘stay alive,’ to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations.” Erll’s works provide an illustration: memory has travelled since the dawn of time, and its forms and content have acquired new meanings and lives depending on their context of reception. So, memory travels, for example, with the movements of individuals and through images, still or moving, disseminated and shared through traditional media, and more recently through digital social networks. What does the more rapid sharing of images and videos on these networks do to collective memory? What impact does it have on the field of commemoration?

With the term “connective turn,” Andrew Hoskins refers to a contemporary era of hyperconnectivity that transforms, among other things, how memory is formed, transmitted and circulated, and received. Today, memory is also produced, maintained, and saved in the networks that are woven between people and machines. Social media, as “memory agents,” produce, revive, maintain, and convey different versions of the past and contribute to the formation of “new communities of memory,” which are transcultural and transnational.

These new communities, intrinsically associated with the connective turn, seem to challenge the notion of collective memory, at least as theorized by Maurice Halbwachs. For the French sociologist, collective memory is non-transcultural by definition and “rests upon the assumption that every social group develops a memory of its past; a memory that emphasizes its uniqueness and allows it to preserve its self-image and pass it on to future generations.” Since the advent of nation-states in the nineteenth century, collective memory has thus been constructed within and in relation to the nation, “fixing” and standardizing social groups and their identities or creating imagined communities that share a homogeneous narrative about their past. Yet, as Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider observe, “this container [that of the nation-state] is in the process of being slowly cracked.” Since the dawn of time, and its forms and content have acquired new meanings and lives depending on their context of reception. So, memory travels, for example, with the movements of individuals and through images, still or moving, disseminated and shared through traditional media, and more recently through digital social networks. What does the more rapid sharing of images and videos on these networks do to collective memory? What impact does it have on the field of commemoration?

With the term “connective turn,” Andrew Hoskins refers to a contemporary era of hyperconnectivity that transforms, among other things, how memory is formed, transmitted and circulated, and received. Today, memory is also produced, maintained, and saved in the networks that are woven between people and machines. Social media, as “memory agents,” produce, revive, maintain, and convey different versions of the past and contribute to the formation of “new communities of memory,” which are transcultural and transnational.
transnational, “communities of memory” reflect the different colonization processes conducted mainly, but not exclusively, by European empires.

The United States, Canada, and South Africa are among the countries that share the experience of colonization. Yet, in the process of sharing the memory of this experience, we cannot exactly speak of “prosthetic memory.”

Alison Landsberg formulated this notion to describe memories that can be gained and shared by anyone. New technologies and mass culture have made possible the transmission and global dissemination of such memories.

This idea is taken up by Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, Tea Sindbæk Andersen, and Astrid Erl in the introduction to the book the two first edited about the transmission and reception of memories in twentieth-century Europe:

The Internet and modern mass culture have made the distribution and sharing of memory content faster and easier. This also allows people to engage emotionally with memories that are not obviously connected with through personal, familial, ethnic or national ties. People can become part of new memory communities, subcultural, cosmopolitan or activist groups, and to (differently) imagined memory communities, such as European communities or global ones.

Yet, the assimilation of a historical narrative, without a direct—or even indirect—link to those receiving it, does not seem to be what is at work in the memory-related processes concerning the colonial undertaking. Despite its contextual variations, this undertaking has left, among other things, a common legacy of trauma, whether one thinks of the physical and cultural genocide of Indigenous populations throughout the Americas or of the forced removal of African populations that led to the establishment of slavery. For communities that have to cope with the traumas of colonization, for instance, the question of adhering to or appropriating a particular collective memory of this undertaking seems to miss the point: this is a memory that is already theirs, independently of the specific aspects of their respective cultural and historical contexts. Their collective memory of the colonial undertaking is shaped, consolidated and sent out to travel by social media. In performing this role, social media accentuate feelings of solidarity across cultures and nations affected by the experience of colonialism. What I retain from Landsberg’s theoretical framework is the idea that “empathy” is an important criterion for reception of the other’s memory and that solidarity is one of its possible effects, as Törnquist-Plewa and her colleagues note.


Roger Persichino asked an essential question about the incidents in Charlottesville: “We must wonder why these events, which are remarkable neither for the number of demonstrators—a total of a few thousand—nor for their violence—regrettable, but far from the violence sadly customary in the country in many forms—triggered such a furor. What happened in Charlottesville?”

Persichino’s question is particularly salient because the Charlottesville city council had been studying the possibility of removing the statue of Lee since March 2016. It is just as meaningful when the geopolitical context is changed. We could ask, what happened in Cape Town? We do ask, what is happening in Canada?
The public debate over whether streets or institutions should be renamed or certain monuments removed is not all that new in Canada. Although protests over the likenesses of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald known for being one of the instigators of the British North America Act (1867) and denounced for having contributed to the development of the Indian residential school system—have intensified over the last several years, they date back to the late nineteenth century. That being said, the current wave of protests has taken on an unprecedented scope and pace, and it extends to a host of historical personalities. Most of the latest episodes denounce the ravages of British imperialism and the treatment inflicted notably, but not exclusively, on Indigenous populations.

For about three decades, a duty to remember and a discourse of reconciliation have been manifested in Canada on the institutional level, including through recourse to “politics of repentance,” particularly with regard to the country’s colonial past. These politics have been largely limited to the expression of a sense of regret concerning the role played by the government in the establishment and operation of the Indian residential school system, expressed, notably, through the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) between 2008 and 2015.

Unlike other truth and reconciliation commissions, Canada’s analyzed a very long period of time: the residential schools were in operation for about 160 years, and the last ones closed between 1995 and 1998. In addition, the TRC was not aiming for the establishment or consolidation of a new democratic state; it was concerned with how to repair the after-effects of the exercise of “coloniality of power.” In an essay about reconciliation and repARATION discourses advocated by the commission’s work, Mylène Jaccoud remarks:

1. The public debate over whether streets or institutions should be renamed or certain monuments removed is not all that new in Canada. Although protests over the likenesses of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald—known for being one of the instigators of the British North America Act (1867) and denounced for having contributed to the development of the Indian residential school system—have intensified over the last several years, they date back to the late nineteenth century. That being said, the current wave of protests has taken on an unprecedented scope and pace, and it extends to a host of historical personalities. Most of the latest episodes denounce the ravages of British imperialism and the treatment inflicted notably, but not exclusively, on Indigenous populations.

For about three decades, a duty to remember and a discourse of reconciliation have been manifested in Canada on the institutional level, including through recourse to “politics of repentance,” particularly with regard to the country’s colonial past. These politics have been largely limited to the expression of a sense of regret concerning the role played by the government in the establishment and operation of the Indian residential school system, expressed, notably, through the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) between 2008 and 2015.

Unlike other truth and reconciliation commissions, Canada’s analyzed a very long period of time: the residential schools were in operation for about 160 years, and the last ones closed between 1995 and 1998. In addition, the TRC was not aiming for the establishment or consolidation of a new democratic state; it was concerned with how to repair the after-effects of the exercise of “coloniality of power.” In an essay about reconciliation and reparation discourses advocated by the commission’s work, Mylène Jaccoud remarks:

It [the commission] is the first to have been envisaged to respond to the after-effects of the colonialism of which the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit were victims. It is also one of the few not to have entered a process of transitional justice. It sought to construct a political response to the injuries inflicted on 150,000 children placed in residential schools over more than a hundred years and on the eighty thousand survivors of this long and sad chapter of history.

The TRC seems to have changed, among other things, the dialogue on commemoration in the country. It concluded with the adoption of ninety-four calls to action, several of which directly concerned commemoration activities. Calls 81 and 82, for example, suggest that national monuments be erected on the subject of the residential schools in Ottawa and all provincial capitals. By 2018, Brenda McDougall was connecting the TRC’s work and calls to action with the debate underway on commemoration: “The current Canadian national debate about names and renaming comes in the wake of the TRC’s 94 calls to action and our need to address the roles of figures like Ryerson, Langevin, and Macdonald in the history of residential schools and, consequently, cultural genocide, and the role of men like Cornwallis and others in actual, physical genocide.”

With these observations in mind, I now delve more deeply into the actions aimed at rectifying the commemoration conveyed by three
monuments in Canada. The demonstrations and confrontations at the foot of the statue of Edward Cornwallis in downtown Halifax in summer 2017 resulted in the statue’s removal the following year. And the recurrent interventions with paint on the statues of John A. Macdonald and Queen Victoria in Montreal highlight the formation and broadening of new communities of memory around a common colonial past and its persistent and shared effects.

Halifax, 2018: Cornwallis Falls

In January 2018, the Halifax Regional Council decided, by a vote of twelve to four, in favour of removing the statue of Cornwallis, which was sculpted by J. Massey Rhind and inaugurated in 1931 to stand in an eponymous park in Halifax.40 The decision was made after a report by the city recommended the statue’s withdrawal in the name of public safety.41 In fact, confrontations at the foot of the statue had been taking place regularly since summer 2017. On July 1, a month and a half before the incidents in Charlottesville, five members of the Proud Boys—a group of right-wing extremists who fashion themselves as guardians of the European heritage in North America—turned up, brandishing the flag of imperial Canada, at a ceremony held by the Mi’kmaq community near the monument to the former governor.42 The Proud Boys stood in defence of the statue, in the firm belief that “Halifax is in its essence a British space, and to be Canadian—to celebrate Canada Day—is to celebrate the empire.”43 Cornwallis, it should be remembered, is considered the “founder of Halifax.” He is also denounced for his role in the genocide of the Mi’kmaq: in October 1849, he issued the “Scalping Proclamation,” offering a reward to anyone who killed a Mi’kmaq adult or child.

One of the earliest challenges to commemoration of the figure of Cornwallis occurred thirty years ago. In 1993, the Mi’kmaq elder Daniel N. Paul published We Were Not the Savages44, in which he wrote about Nova Scotia history from the Mi’kmaq point of view. In 2011, a high school in Halifax decided to remove “Cornwallis” from its name.45 Just a few months before the “Halifax incidents” of April 2017, a motion to create an expert committee, including Mi’kmaq representatives, to study the commemoration of Cornwallis was passed by the city council.46 | fig. 1 | On July 15, 2017, two weeks after the confrontation at its feet, the statue was covered with a black cloth by the city’s employees47 to keep it from being removed by the 150 protesters who had responded to the Facebook invitation sent out by the Mi’kmaq activist Suzanne Patles.48

Montreal, 1999–20: Macdonald and Victoria Stay Standing … for Now

The Macdonald Monument has stood in Place du Canada (formerly Dominion Square) in Montreal since 1895. The oversized statue of Sir John Alexander Macdonald, one of the “Fathers of Confederation,” is surrounded by twelve Corinthian columns that are part of a sheltering canopy topped with an allegorical figure. The allegorical and decorative elements are intended to reinforce Macdonald’s “contribution” to the future of Canada.49

Figure 2. Several interventions on the Monument to John A. Macdonald claimed by the group MacdonaldMustFall. No Borders Media, Twitter post. July 3, 2020, 12:19PM https://twitter.com/NoBordersMedia/status/1279087402372472833?s=20.
Over the years, this work by the British artist George Edward Wade, who also sculpted a likeness of Macdonald in Hamilton (1893), has been defaced repeatedly at irregular intervals. On March 17, 2019, the monument suffered yet another attack, this time with red spray paint. The role of empathy and solidarity in the process of reception of memory was evident in the statements made by the group claiming the action, #MacdonaldMustFall. In a press release to various media, distributed in its entirety by the independent media network No Borders Media on its Facebook page, #MacdonaldMustFall explained that it had vandalized the monument in solidarity with and support of global actions and mobilizations against racism and fascism just before the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. The anonymous group demanded that all statues of Macdonald be withdrawn from the public space. The poster accompanying the press release featured a bloodied face of Macdonald and was paired with an appeal to relegate all of his likenesses to museums in Canada.

Actions involving the Macdonald monument in Montreal (and those elsewhere in Canada) returned to the foreground in summer 2020, during a social and political climate shaped by, among other things, the most recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations. In early July, a new intervention with paint on the Macdonald statue in Montreal was claimed on social media.
Twitter\textsuperscript{56} and published on Facebook.\textsuperscript{57} The action went hand in hand with a petition for removal that has almost fifty thousand signatures.\textsuperscript{58}

Another target of these acts of resistance—and not of vandalism—responding to a gesture of anti-colonial solidarity,\textsuperscript{60} is Queen Victoria, a historical figure who connected different continents through the expansion of the British Empire. Situated in front of McGill University’s Strathcona Music Building, near a statue of James McGill, the statue of Queen Victoria (1900) is a replica of an original work.\textsuperscript{61} This statue, as well as the one standing in the eponymous square, have been doused with paint on several occasions.| fig. 3 |

One of the most recent actions took place last year and was claimed by the Delhi-Dublin Anti-Colonial Solidarity Brigade. In a press release with images shared on Twitter and Facebook, the group’s members explained, “The presence of statues of Queen Victoria in Montreal is an insult to the struggles for self-determination and resistance of oppressed peoples throughout the world, including the Indigenous nations in North America (Turtle Island) and Oceania, as well as the peoples of Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, and everywhere the British Empire committed its atrocities.”\textsuperscript{62}

This statement attests to the existence of communities sharing a collective memory of the onerous legacy left by the British Empire’s colonization processes and the role of empathy and solidarity in these communities’ formation, maintenance, and spread. The press release continued, “Last night’s action is motivated and inspired by movements worldwide that have targeted colonial and racist statues for vandalism and removal: Cornwallis in Halifax, John A. Macdonald in Kingston (Ontario) and Victoria (BC), the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa, the resistance to racist Confederate monuments in the USA, and more.”\textsuperscript{63}

The statue of Queen Victoria has not suffered exactly the same fate, at least for the moment, as the statue of Macdonald, which many wish to see withdrawn from the public space in Canada.\textsuperscript{64} The Delhi-Dublin Anti-Colonial Solidarity Brigade concluded its press release by noting that, although its members were not currently (in 2019) demanding that the statue be removed from its site, they did ask that it keep the physical traces of this act of resistance—a balaclava and splashes of green paint. Their wishes were not fulfilled.

\textbf{When Will the Monument Protests End?}

When transmission of memory, mainly via social networks, is analyzed, there is no way to disregard the sociopolitical context of its reception. Beyond the impact of new communities of memory (or memories) associated with South African apartheid, British imperialism, and the US civil war, in Canada the contestation of the colonial past is also the result of domestic specificities and dynamics that have been at work for decades. Of course, new media amplify the reach of these dynamics, accelerating their spread and raising their visibility. For example, despite the number of actions and petitions over years targeting the statue of Cornwallis in Halifax, it speaks volumes that its actual withdrawal took place in the wake of the
violent confrontations in Charlottesville, which were extensively covered by the media and took social media by storm.

A further element to consider is that reception is not the final destination of memory; memory is and will be in constant motion, as it is multidirectional. The mediatization of events involving “colonial statues” on Canadian soil will therefore affect the occurrence of similar episodes within our geographic borders. It will also foster the consolidation and broadening at a global scale of (imagined) communities of the memory (of the ravages) of colonization and its legacy, which is still very present in daily life.

It is now late summer 2020 and I am finalizing this commentary in a context marked by multiple, overlapping crises: commemorative, environmental, humanitarian, health, and more. Despite the global confinement of populations caused by COVID-19, demonstrators have taken over public spaces in our cities, in the midst of lockdowns, to loudly demand their universal right to breathe. Given this situation, and the unpredictable outcome of current events, it is legitimate to ask several questions: How many interventions must a monument undergo for the value(s) that it conveys to be definitively “corrected”? Is withdrawing problematic monuments from our physical public spaces, reducing them to their condition of historical artefacts, and exiling them to museums enough to heal old wounds? What will happen after these corrective gestures are performed?

Despite the uncertainties, it is possible to make several observations: the debate over monuments continues to be intense, and its global nature becomes more obvious every day. It has even extended to figures, such as Winston Churchill, up to now considered “untouchable.” Social networks increasingly offer fertile ground for this debate. Finally, the current protests will surely continue as long as concrete and symbolic actions are not taken to address the real roots of the contestation. In fact, a monument, despite its authoritarian, affirmative, even “repressive” nature, is only the visible face of more acute societal problems. The removal of the Cornwallis statue was followed, among other things, by a citizen petition to revoke, as a symbolic gesture, a Mi’kmaq scalping order proclaimed in the nineteenth century that is apparently still in force today. Enough! ¶