

Editor's provocation
On history, fantasia, and sacred commemorations

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Philosophers as diverse as Plato, Rousseau, and Carl Schmidt have wrestled with the question of what role the sacred and theology plays in forming a functioning polity. The question concerns what kind of civic theology might become embodied as a sacred covenant in which individuals may be free through being bound together as a people; a people who assent to the 'just' rule of the executive branch of a government. Under this condition of political life, the people legislate and the executive carries out its wishes. In Simon Critchley's (2014) reading, Rousseau, for example, railed against theatre for its simulacrum of human action and called for civic rituals, not by actors, but by people who, in shared performances, enact itself, ex nihilo, into being as 'the people'. Theatre survived and today thrives on TV, tablet, and on the big screen. But we also see on these screens the struggles over commemoration over who 'we' as a people might become. But even for observers, the question of the sacred is a serious one. To what extent do our representational forms of both republican and parliamentary democracy require that we, too, believe in the transmogrification of the people's will into a singular representative person or body (be it an MP, MLA, or Senator or the parliaments themselves)? For me, this raises the fundamental question around the extent to which we exist together sacredly or in fantasia?

Rather than the sacred, I think today we have a strong strain of fantasia in our historical culture. For example, many Canadians who 'come from away' prefer not to speak about the historic role disease, theft, and a trail of broken promises play as the basis for our house's 'freeholder' property status; but rather narratives are told of British and French Empires settling unused land. Here in Edmonton on Treaty 6 land, golfers can learn from a plaque at the city's Victoria Golf Course that the land they play on was gifted to the city by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). And, from whom did this private corporation get the land? Those in the HBC claimed ownership to this land on the basis of the Royal Charter issued by the British sovereign. And, who is that? That is the Father and Mother of the people, British Heads of the Anglican Church, and Protectors of the Faith. Such a fantasia of legitimacy requires an aporia of stunning bluff and grandeur, and, simultaneously an ugly shunting and shunning of those whose claims to the land rest on more logical grounds.

I suspect that the backlash on offer by many of our current public commentators against public debates over commemoration has something to do with reminders of the role played by fantasia in the ways they identify as Canadian. Here is Conrad Black (2017), Lord Black of Crossharbour, speaking for tradition of historical continuity with our founding myths who asserts that "[t]he effort to discredit [John A Macdonald]

officially is an effort to marginalize all of us morally; *if the founder of the country was illegitimate, we all are*. Every stage of this sequence of anti-historical upheavals of fact is nonsense” (para. 4).¹ For once, I agree with a line this man has written, but only if put into proper question form: If the statuesque simplicity of this founding father is more fraught and complicated, then might ‘we’ be as well? If this founding father is not a legitimate figure of commemoration, are we all who came from away, therefore, illegitimate? And is not the very act of public action in contesting public meaning as to what and whom we may belong a necessary creative enactment of ‘the people’? If so, should we not really start to ‘gather together’ anew as a basis of becoming legitimate?

Ill-legitimacy implies a crime against sacred covenants. Can (some) Canadians bear to know more? If our fathers cannot be honoured, what about us? Can we who occupy the center of this country’s political, economic, and educational institutions face the task presented to us by struggles over what, who, and why we recognize and commemorate? In a resonant debate, some of my self-identifying straight friends ask about the recognition of non-binary gender identities and sexualities in movements of LGBTQIA: “surely we can’t accommodate all demands, where does it end?” My response, “I suppose when we get all the letters in to reflect the realities people live.” We hold hard onto learned fictions of just and sacred binaries (gay/straight, un/civilized, them/us, progress/decline, and so on). *Where does it end?* implies our only options are order or chaos. We have had and do have, however, more complex choices to work for “a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is” (Lear, 2006, p. 103).

The fictive elements of historical narratives can be useful to imagining historical realities outside the confines of our smaller lives as we learn to wrestle with the difficult circumstances and choices faced by others (den Heyer & Fidyk, 2007). We must attend, however, to the ways in which powerful fictions contribute to what I have noted as the fantasia in Canada’s official historical culture. More specifically related to the issue we address here, a fiction, like a myth, is not necessarily a lie but a half-truth containing a particular group’s ideals about itself (Francis, 1992). Myths therefore also convey fears that maybe we have never, nor do we currently, approximate those ideals as a public. I suspect that when sacred totems are questioned, the powerful fear fears equal at least to their trust in cosmetic ideals, “*where does it end?*” As noted by several authors in this collection, much is publically invested in street names, statues, and school curricula in keeping up appearances by avoiding the question: If our fathers are not ours, who claims us?

¹ Lord Black quickly avoids any implication in questions around which representation of who is who and who is not by repeating the shell game claims employed by the socially privileged, “And the natives were not sufficiently numerous or attached to durable places of residence to be said to occupy the territory of what is now Canada [...] The non-native people in this country have not exploited and misgoverned the native people remotely as thoroughly as have some of their own leaders” (para. 4). Such is the type with our friends, family, and public commentators in the United States who argue that the important question is about ‘Black on Black violence’ and not about state violence against forcibly impoverished, imprisoned, and excluded groups of citizens.

Historical agency (den Heyer, 2003, 2013) names the struggle by groups over the images, ideals, and stories available for and through which contemporary and future communities and individuals imagine their sense of agency and identity. What might or should we learn from the educative affects when we question our historical-individual investments of who we imagine we are and are to become?

Current debates over historical agency evident in struggles over who and what to commemorate are inadequately understood as a misunderstanding due to a lack of information (e.g., if only they knew?). Rather, I suspect that we are dealing with ontological anxieties over the totems of our fantasias as struggles of historical agency complicate formerly easily granted inheritances. What really is at stake are differing and emotionally loaded responses to a question, *Who do we hope to become through what we commemorate and our study together?* In this regard, the debates over removing, renaming (again), and so forth invoke—but often avoid—the future question; i.e., not *what happened*, but rather, *what about what happened do we wish to honour and therefore become?* Amongst others, this question is a central thematic that runs throughout the articles generously contributed by authors to this special issue of *Canadian Social Studies*. Perhaps, it is long past time for us to enact ourselves by imagining the past differently as we try to re-member our future (Namier, 1942). To overcome a human tendency to seek only private benefit through engagement with public life, such a remembering will require a civic theology animated by a future goodness towards which we gather together but which always lies just beyond our present abilities to articulate.

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