Battle of the Bison: Settler-Colonialism versus Indigenous Resurgence as Frameworks for Commemorating COVID-19 in Manitoba

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Commemoration projects for COVID-19 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, will feature different voices: those from the community and those from official positions in government. Monuments traditionally come about after moments of unrest to try to neatly package a big event, in this case, COVID-19 (Renaerts). As the pandemic is still unfolding, this essay will look at how a specific community-based project perceives the pandemic in relation to government messages through current local news and media outlets. In this paper, I argue that Métis artist Kenneth Lavallee's *204 Bison* is an important challenge to the provincial government rhetoric around COVID-19, which re-entrenches settler-colonial memory and ignores the systemic ways in which Indigenous peoples continue to suffer the greatest losses in the face of this public health crisis (Robertson, "Vaccine-Eligibility"). This will be an important topic in the coming months and years as society progresses with vaccinations and immunity; the focus will turn to the commemoration of the many lives lost and impacted by the virus. This article reflects on COVID-19 on a community scale and encourages us to think about different tragedies in Canada and how governments and communities reflect upon them. The article will compare the symbolism of the bison from Indigenous and colonial perspectives and delve into Manitoba's official government response to COVID-19 through government

press releases and look at past settler responses to similar tragedies and how strategic memory is used. The article relies heavily on local news sources, government communiques, and Indigenous scholarship.

The pandemic made waves in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in March 2020 when the first presumptive cases were announced. Once the spread of the virus became rampant, Indigenous, Filipino, African, and South Asian populations in the province were severely impacted with higher rates of contraction and death, accounting for 51% of positive cases, even though they make up only 31% of the province's population (May). This inequality has largely been ignored by the Manitoba government, who have pushed for the reopening of the economy, have not been transparent with data, or have withheld data from its citizens (Robertson, "Withholding Info"). It should come as no surprise that there would then be conflicting expressions of commemoration a year after the pandemic came to Winnipeg. Throughout the last year there have been many personal, handmade commemorative or supportive art projects for healthcare workers, teachers, or lost loved ones, such as paper hearts taped to windows, posters on lawns, and messages written in the snow—messages of endearment often lacking in government discourse (Golby). A new commemoration proposal by Métis artist, Kenneth Lavallee, addresses these differing views between the locals, including the Indigenous community, and the government. In his own words, Lavallee states, "I wanted to make a work in response to our current provincial government's lack of meaningful leadership during this pandemic, honouring not only the hundreds of Manitobans who died but the essential workers…the herd stands defiantly opposing the government building to remind them of their accountability and responsibilities" (Lavallee).

204 Bison

Kenneth Lavallee, a Métis artist living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, announced a new public art proposal in early 2021 to commemorate COVID-19 (Lavallee). In an Instagram video, viewers see 204 life-size bison statues made of metal lining a narrow strip of land: the camera zooms through the herd, under the legs of the animals, and pans alongside them, giving a sense of taking charge or charging towards something. Lavallee's caption explains that the herd is charging towards the Manitoba Legislature via Memorial Boulevard (between York Avenue and Broadway)—the location adding to the significance of the narrative. In the video, the weather is overcast and raining; there are not many people or cars on the street, which creates the setting for what could potentially be the result of the pandemic: the erasure of societal and physical life. The video, which has over 2,400 views to date (April 2021), has received positive commentary from the public, with someone writing, "[i]t's a way of giving a voice to collectively mourning our tragic loss. Your diorama is visually so powerful and represents the whole country…" (@sandrahasenack, Lavallee). The proposal was also shared widely within Winnipeg through social media channels, garnering positive commentary.

The bison is steeped in symbolism, as it is Manitoba's defining animal and is sacred to Indigenous communities. They were the main source of food, shelter, tools, and clothing for Indigenous communities who understood how to hunt them to avoid depleting this life source. However, once European settlers came to Canada, competition grew fierce; the animal was nearly forced to extinction—a tactic used to starve Indigenous peoples. Today, the bison population has rebounded, thus becoming a symbol for Indigenous resurgence (O'Donovan). Lavallee's use of the bison is intentional and twofold; he is both reminding the provincial government that they were not successful before in the (many) attempts to eradicate Indigenous peoples, and he is holding the government accountable

for their (in)actions throughout the pandemic and the effects they have had on Manitobans. This project also addresses what the government is seemingly not committed to: community, empathy, and/or resilience (aside from economic resilience). The number 204 is symbolic as well; it is Manitoba's area code, but the number also suggests community involvement or support. Having 204 bison in the herd as opposed to just one bison shows strength in numbers and accounts for essential workers, seniors, healthcare workers, Indigenous peoples, and all Manitobans who have been victims of the virus, and victims of the governments' "lack of meaningful leadership" (Lavallee). The large herd, which we can suppose accounts for non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples alike, also gestures to the mainstream support and resurgence for Indigenous rights by non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples.

Battle of the Bison

Lavallee's herd of bison opposes the Manitoba Legislature via Memorial Blvd, charging head-on against a statue of Queen Victoria, the Greco-Roman-inspired building, and the Legislative bison sculptures. The two opposing sets of bison are noteworthy to compare, as the bison are symbols for Indigenous peoples and Manitoba's symbolic animal (O'Donovan). The bison at the Legislative building are more stoic looking; they are not in movement, but stand alone, guarding the provincial government, almost acting as gatekeepers. This is an interesting paradox—these symbols of Indigenous culture are now 'fighting' against Lavallee's bison (based on what Lavallee has presented). However, the bison at the Legislative building should be read as a government interpretation, as they were included by a settler architect who likely did not consider Indigenous traditions at the time the Legislature was built in the early 20th century (Mayes). Perhaps the inclusion of bison in the Legislative architecture symbolized the control settlers imposed on the animal, which had severe implications for Indigenous communities, noted above. The comparison of the two

bison monuments is also symbolic of the accounts of COVID-19 between the provincial government and Indigenous communities. The government messages have been succinct and speak of overcoming COVID-19, while comments from the public on Lavallee's Instagram account share messages of concern for the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples in the province and the rest of the community at large (Kusch; Lavallee).

Provincial Account of COVID-19

Provincial government statements throughout the pandemic share similarities to the bison on the legislative grounds—messages have been brief, business oriented, and lacking compassion. Notably missing in the public speeches and statements to the press from the Manitoba Premier are expressions of empathy and community (Kusch). The focus has been on restarting the economy (perhaps too soon) trying to not "hurt [non-Indigenous] Manitobans" while securing extra doses of the vaccine for Indigenous communities. Premier Brian Pallister was quoted saying, "They [the federal government] have to step up and protect our Indigenous communities first…but not punish everyone else who lives in the same jurisdiction as Indigenous folks by short-changing them on their share of vaccines" (Maclean). While this approach and official rhetoric have helped bolster the economy and perhaps minimize worry from the public about the pandemic due to the omission of certain details, the contrast between government speech and Lavallee's project shows starkly different views of Manitoba's COVID-19 experience (Kives). The government response has been future oriented, turning its attention to the economy and repair, whereas Lavallee's project asks us to slow down and reflect, to come together as a community and demand that we as human beings are taken care of first and foremost, rather than placing the economy ahead of the people (Lavallee). The provincial account—often the official account—of many topics and issues shapes the public's perception for years to come.

Settler Colonial Memory and the Pandemic

Throughout the pandemic in Manitoba, Indigenous communities have been affected at disproportionately high rates. According to *Winnipeg Free Press* columnist Dylan Robertson, Indigenous peoples are hospitalized at five times the rate as non-Indigenous peoples in the province, largely due to underlying health concerns, access to health care, and living in shared housing facilities (Robertson, "Vaccine-Eligibility"). Across the world, COVID-19 has highlighted the many disparities across various communities, and Canada is not excluded from that narrative (Goldin). In this context, systemic racism has been to blame for Indigenous communities suffering as much as they have, especially Indigenous women, who face higher rates of lay-offs and fewer childcare options (Alhmidi). The lack of resources for Indigenous people to receive equal assistance and aid against COVID is not surprising when one considers epidemics such as tuberculosis or smallpox and the resistance from settler communities to help. An "us versus them" mentality shows through here, where settlers are unwilling to assist based on perceived differences between these cultures that stem back through generations. In addition to systemic racism playing a role in the volume of COVID-19 cases amongst Indigenous populations is the fact that many Indigenous communities reside in remote areas on reserves and, as mentioned above, often live in shared housing facilities, making the spread of the virus harder to contain and harder to treat. These conditions are the result of colonization and the taking of Indigenous lands (Innes). Furthermore, racist thoughts and beliefs that have been perpetuated for decades divide non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities into this "us versus them" battle, as evidenced in Pallister's statement about Manitoba securing extra vaccinations so that non-Indigenous Manitobans are not "punished" by efforts to vaccinate vulnerable Indigenous groups (Maclean).

Looking at previous health crises, Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately affected. During the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, the ongoing tuberculosis crisis, and past smallpox epidemics brought over by colonizers, Indigenous communities suffered the most (Innes). According to Indigenous historian Rob Innes, the common thread amongst these various epidemics in Indigenous communities is contact with settlers. When the colonizers came into Canada (and brought disease), 50-90% of Indigenous communities became sick and died, resulting in a significant loss of their population, their land, and their culture, and this loss is still seen today (Innes). Memories of these past health crises in Indigenous communities affect the current situation of COVID-19, as unequal access to health care still exists, a lack of representation and understanding of Indigenous cultures in mainstream health professions remains, and racism towards Indigenous peoples is prevalent. Dr. Winona Wheeler of the University of Saskatchewan observes that "In the national memory, Indigenous peoples are diseased, so they [settlers] become fearful of us [Indigenous peoples] because we experience epidemics at a higher rate than the mainstream do, because of vulnerability" (Innes). National memory then reflects a fear of Indigenous peoples, creating a further divide of "us" and "them," as noted above in Pallister's commentary. A critique of settler colonial memory is needed to help shift the narrative away from this binary and to come to a collective "we" where everyone—community and government—can come to a shared understanding and mutually help each other.

Community versus Government: Critique of Settler Colonial Memory

In comparing Lavallee's *204 Bison* and other community projects (such as the hearts adorning windows on homes and handwritten messages of love to first responders) against government rhetoric, not only is there a difference in how the story of the pandemic is told,

but the idea of permanence or impermanence is also evident. The proposed monument *204 Bison* is not fully realized yet, and other community projects such as handmade signs and crafts on windows or in front lawns lack the staying power of a (potential) future government monument, press release, or bill that is passed in legislation. Temporality is often an issue in Indigenous memorial projects, which is symbolic of their erasure or lack of permanence in comparison to permanent monuments erected by colonists, such as statues of veterans or political figures (Rubertone 25). Looking at the government acknowledgement of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) compared to the women killed in the Montreal Massacre, one can discern a clear distinction between permanent and temporary monuments—one has a permanent monument made of granite (Montreal Massacre), whereas the other has items such as a wooden bench that is susceptible to rot (Dean, 124-25). Often, friends and family of the Indigenous victims erect their own memorials, whereas for the victims of the Montreal Massacre (who were white, middle- and upper-class women), the government commissioned memorials and marked a National Day of Mourning to be observed annually (Dean 123-26). How governments choose to memorialize and remember certain tragedies over others is evident upon reflection of the memorials that do exist. There is not an official memorial recognizing the many hardships Indigenous peoples of Canada have faced at the hands of colonization, yet there are many memorials and museums across the country celebrating settler Canadian “moments” (various war museums and monuments, etc.) (Cooper-Bolam 58; Vosters 7). These examples demonstrate that only certain tragedies or events are deemed “grievable” or seen as worth remembering, shaping the collective memory of Canadians to remember what is cast in stone so to speak, and, by omission, what to forget (Vosters 4). While this is starting to change and more permanent or official attention is being cast on Indigenous histories, such as the permanent *Truth and Reconciliation* exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights, more needs to be done to even begin to balance the inequity of

settler and Indigenous monuments and remembrance (*Truth and Reconciliation*).

If implemented, Lavallee's project would indeed be monumental. *204 Bison* would be a permanent, community-based, hard-to-ignore challenge to the government and their accounts of the pandemic. This project gives voice to Indigenous communities, healthcare professionals, teachers, and other essential workers and minority groups so they can be included in the official discourse of the pandemic. *204 Bison* exists at the intersection of COVID-19 and decolonial memory as the Indigenous community is the community suffering at the hands of settlers and must fight back and fight for their right to exist. The bison are representative of both Indigenous peoples and the critique of settler colonialism. The 204-strong herd is standing defiantly against those trying to erase them; they are a symbol of Indigenous resistance and resurgence (O'Donovan). *204 Bison* challenges the strategic memory that the provincial government is trying to narrate by providing an alternative voice, one that reflects the community voice.

Strategic Memory

The notion of strategic memory is at play in the dialogue as framed by the Manitoba provincial government. The government's focus has been on the economic recovery of the province with their "Restart Manitoba" campaign in the spring of 2020 and on efforts to protect and vaccinate the vulnerable, with an emphasis on seniors ("Support Programs"; "Province Outlines Initial COVID-19 Vaccination Plans"). Another deflection of the provincial government has been to blame the federal government for the distribution of vaccines rather than addressing the inefficiencies of the vaccination roll-out in Manitoba (Brodbeck). The provincial government deflects attention from other issues, too, such as the high rates of contraction amongst the Indigenous population and what they are doing—if anything—to counteract that. Their accounts reinforce the fact that remembrance

is political, as are “attempts to prompt and engage people in the development of particular forms of historical consciousness” (Simon et al. 2). The government is trying to steer the conversation of their response to COVID-19 in positive directions, rather than meaningfully engaging in issues that are arising. Enter Lavallee’s commemoration proposal, which refuses to let the government forget or dismiss these other issues. *204 Bison* acts as a counter-monument to government rhetoric and combats the dominant narrative (Failler, “Practices of Remembrance”).

Commemorating Ongoing Loss & Remembrance as a Difficult Return

While vaccination efforts are being made, the threat of COVID-19 is an ongoing battle. Significant milestones have been marked with the invention of several vaccines and the one-year anniversary of the pandemic in March 2021, commemorated by flags around the world flying at half-mast to honour the victims. The anniversary of COVID-19 sparked conversations around commemoration projects and how to account for the significant number of lives the virus has taken and is still taking (Bogost). Commemoration projects could take many shapes and be guided by different purposes: honouring health care heroes, essential workers, or the scientists behind the vaccines; symbolizing the collective loss of lives forever changed by the pandemic; or future-oriented, emphasizing the idea of “global community” emerging from this dark time. However, as these commemoration projects take shape, it is important to reflect upon lessons learned so that if/when something like this happens in the future, we can understand better how people work through unforeseen losses and how such losses affect different publics.

This is where lessons of remembrance as a difficult return are essential. Remembrance as a difficult return is learning to live with loss, keeping lessons of the past with us in the present moment, and

not denying these moments as having happened (Failler). Lavallee's *204 Bison* would fit in this construct as he is opposing government messages that focus on "getting over" loss and reminding us that the government is projecting only one of the many stories being told around COVID-19. Lavallee is speaking on behalf of the essential workers and minority voices dealing with personal loss and grappling with the virus on a day-to-day basis. He is not trying to distract citizens or change the narrative to one of economic recovery the way the provincial government is trying to.

Conclusion

With the ongoing planning of commemoration projects around the world, space should be left for the ending of this story and leave room for interpretation. Much like traditional colonial statues of the past, time changes how monuments are perceived; they represent more than history—they are about the present moment (Renaerts). However, as we have seen with COVID-19 and as Lavallee's proposal implies, COVID-19 is ever evolving and cannot be neatly packaged with the multiple perspectives that need consulting. Jennifer Scott brings up the debate between permanent and ephemeral works, asking if monuments should be created with room for change and allowing edits later on, should history need to be revised (Failler and Scott). In the instance of COVID-19 events still unfolding, this seems like the best solution. If Lavallee's project goes ahead, his project in conversation with the Legislative building and its significance takes a more citizen-informed approach to COVID-19 in Manitoba than whatever official rhetoric or future monument from the government tells on its own. In the future, there could be another memorial to speak to a different perspective or an addition to Lavallee's *204 Bison*.

Community-based commemoration projects provide crucial opposition or alternative narratives to official government accounts of COVID-19, challenging settler-colonial memory and its

implications today. While COVID-19 is said not to discriminate whom it infects, in fact racial disparities are evident, stemming from decades and centuries of systemic racism (Robertson). Because many colonial institutions and parties would rather ignore the prevalence of the settler narrative, challenging projects such as *204 Bison* become even more important in this telling of history.

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