

# The Pop-History Spectacle: Curating Public Memory and Historical Consciousness through the Visual

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## Abstract

Hosted in the nation's capital, the multisensory/digital historical performances displayed on Centre Block at Parliament Hill have had over one million viewers, making the shows a popular summer attraction. Upon closer inspection, however, the historical narratives in both *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* focus on limited, exclusionary, and mythological representations of Canada's beginnings, but perhaps more importantly, the artistic and technological element, "the spectacle," creates something new altogether—which we are calling *pop-history*. Pop-history, a cultural understanding of popular history, is the emphasis of the theatrical over the historical, making history a performance to be consumed, but not critically thought through, or engaged with. Through this, we argue that although technologically striking, the narrowly imagined pop-history spectacle contributes to the shaping of a limited Canadian historical consciousness based on a normalized version of the past.

*Keywords:* historical consciousness, public memory, visual history, historical representation

## Résumé

Les spectacles techno son et lumière présentés l'été sur l'édifice du Centre de la Colline du Parlement dans la capitale nationale sont très populaires; plus d'un million de personnes y ont assisté. Une analyse plus approfondie de *Mosaïka* et de *Lumières du Nord* révèle que les récits sur les débuts du Canada qu'ils exposent sont des représentations mythologiques et limitatives, mais surtout que l'élément techno-artistique de ces « spectacles » crée ce que nous appelons de l'*histoire pop*. L'histoire pop met l'accent sur le théâtral plutôt que sur l'historique, l'histoire-spectacle devenant un objet de consommation passive sans composante critique. Nous pensons que, bien qu'il soit une merveille technologique, le spectacle d'histoire pop contribue, de par sa vision étroite, à façonner une conscience limitée de l'histoire du Canada parce que basée sur une version normalisée du passé.

*Mots-clés :* conscience historique, mémoire publique, représentation historique et histoire pop

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the two anonymous CJE reviewers for their insights, support, and suggestions, allowing us to expand the discussions of public history and collective memory.

## Introduction

The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute.

All it says is: “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.”

—Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

### Finding Your Seat

Dusk is setting in, and quietly, people begin to assemble on the ground in front of the Centre Block buildings on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario. Some bring their families, with chairs, blankets, and snacks, while others, passing by, curiously peer through the iron gates to see what has attracted others to lounge on the grass at sundown. Excited children run around, and people find a seat wherever they can get a decent view—on the back fence or surrounding stairs, craning their necks from the far left and right of the venue, all to witness a showing of the past: carefully curated images that reflect the country’s proudest and most memorable moments and its peoples, with a tribute to the diversity of its magnificent landscape. When the sky is finally dark, and the large crowd has silently succumbed to the opening credits of the approaching performance, a brilliant display of laser-sharp lights and orchestral sounds fill the air, encapsulating the space and spectators who sit in awe of the technological marvel that is about to begin. They are about to partake in a seasonal tradition in Ottawa, the retelling of Canada’s genesis; its proclaimed coming-of-age story.

### Setting the Stage: History Can Be “Sometimes Fun”

Since 1984, spectators have gathered on summer evenings to experience the variously composed iterations of Canada’s past through displays of sound and light at Parliament Hill. Hosted in the nation’s capital, the free nightly feature has changed over the years to highlight various themes of Canadian history, including reflections on the past, narrative storytelling, and communication. However, in 2010, the entire show underwent a dramatic technological facelift, offering a state-of-the-art, high-definition viewing experience through new media and sponsorship partners, spearheaded by the Department of

Canadian Heritage.<sup>1</sup> This new and improved multisensory/digital experience, *Mosaika*, ran from the summer of 2010 until the end of summer in 2014, and with over one million viewers, was the most successful version of the seasonal historical performance to date. Following in its technologically advanced footsteps, *Northern Lights* began in the summer of 2015 and will run until the summer of 2019, and is projected to have a viewership of well over one million, much like its predecessor. While the sizeable numbers flocking to attend the show is promising in terms of interest in public historical engagement, what exactly is it about the performance that is drawing such large crowds? Is the relayed narrative remarkably gripping, refreshingly inclusive, and critically engaging; are the advanced technological and digital features the most enticing elements; or do people simply enjoy being at Parliament Hill in the evening in the warm weather? To put it another way, is it the story, the spectacle, the space, or a combination of all three that makes this technological marvel so attractive to the public?

Desmond Morton (2006) suggests that Canadians regularly ingest history in its various popularized forms through television, books, and other mediums, seeing it as being “sometimes fun” (p. 25). Although not a glowing remark, it does offer one important insight: there is a yearning to consume history in ways that are new, exciting, and entertaining for audiences. In a comprehensive nation-wide survey beginning in 2003, culminating in the published findings, *Canadians and Their Pasts [CATP]* (Conrad et al., 2013), the collective of seven researchers provides ground-breaking insights into the role of history in the daily lives of Canadians, offering potential answers to our questions concerning the vast spectatorship on Parliament Hill. The research collective found that public interest in the past was quite high, whether through the collecting and sharing of family artifacts, visiting historic sites, or reading history-related books, with more than half of respondents partaking in one or more of these activities in the past year. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most popular medium for consuming history (outside of family memorabilia) was visual entertainment, including videos, DVDs, movies, and television (Conrad et al., 2013, p. 29). These findings demonstrate that the public is not only extremely interested in the past, but there are preferences in the type of historical content and the mode of its delivery, favouring visual mediums, with 78% of respondents choosing to

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1 “Northern Lights Launches on Parliament,” Government of Canada website: <http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?nid=998259>

watch historical films and television programming (p. 30). More associated with entertainment than reading a book or visiting a historical site, history content through “the visual” becomes an important site for additional investigations into the ways audiences relate to the past when it is presented on-screen. Further, how does this medium contribute to larger, collective notions of history outside of enjoyment alone (Bryant & Clark, 2006)? The *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* visual performances both fulfill this history entertainment niche by offering a highly appealing light spectacle that blends technology, art, and history in innovative ways. However, the extent to which audiences are engaging with the historical content beyond elicited affective responses is a key concern that cannot be casually dismissed.

In a comparable discussion on the use of affect in historical media, Bryant and Clark (2006) critique the popular CBC/Radio-Canada series, *Canada: A People's History*, by delineating two types of empathy invoked from the audience: emotive and historical empathy. The first, emotive empathy, draws the audience in through personal narrative. The audience becomes invested in the characterization of historical actors on an affective plane, however, this is presented with limited evidence and simplistic storylines of heroism, defeat, and conquest in the programming (p. 1044). The second concept, historical empathy, centres on the cognitive domain vis-à-vis historical evidence to garner a nuanced perspective of complex historical contexts. Through this, the authors argue, historical empathy attempts to move beyond emotionally relating with individual actors from the past, to an evidenced understanding of motives, actions, and consequences within a temporal context, precipitating empathy. While analogous to *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*, one crucial difference with *Canada: A People's History* is its intended audience: the former is delivered primarily as entertainment to a public audience in a public space, while the latter was created for a public television audience, and as a pedagogical tool to be integrated into classrooms across the country. With this major difference in mind, *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* can be discussed in a similar, yet different manner since both performances are visual, and use simplistic plot devices that emphasize characterization. However, the spectacle is not meant for classroom use. Therefore, if the purpose is to purely entertain, or to conjure a response of national pride and emotive empathy, as Bryant and Clark propose, should there be higher expectations aside from knee-jerk affective responses akin to “Olympic flag-waving” (Seixas, 2014, p. 15)?

Osborne (2001) suggests that historical performances, such as re-enactments, tours, and displays, need to be better understood for their roles in historical education and shaping collective understandings of the past, despite their informal, entertaining, natures. Like Osborne, the *CATP* research group also note that the way in which the public uses information about the past from such performances to “construct their individual and collective identities” (Conrad et al., 2013, p. 4), especially in instances of conflicting or incomplete historical narratives, is largely still unknown. In order to improve our understanding of the pedagogical and collective identity functions of *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*, we need to “pull back the curtain” of the spectacle and ask the question, how do technological and artistic elements influence and shape possible audience engagement with the historical content? To invoke Marshall McLuhan (1964), does the avant-garde, artistic/technological medium affect the historical message, simply presenting it through a “commodified gloss” to be consumed unconsciously by the audience (Andermann & Arnold-de Simine, 2012, p. 12)? We argue that the historical narratives in both *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* focus on a narrow, exclusionary, and mythological nation-building historical representation of Canada’s beginnings, which Létourneau (2006) has named *canadienneté* (p. 81), but perhaps more importantly, the artistic and technological element, “the spectacle,” creates something new altogether, which we are calling *pop-history*. Pop-history, a cultural understanding of popular history, is the emphasis of the theatrical over the historical, making history a performance to be consumed, but conceivably not critically thought through, or engaged with. Pop-history appeals to affective, nostalgic views of Canada’s past, in the same vein as Bryant and Clark’s (2006) emotive empathy, packaged as a visual celebration for entertainment.

Using Guy Debord’s (1967/1994) theorization of “the spectacle,” examples of exclusionary historical narratives in *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*, and a discussion of historical consciousness and collective, public memory (Conrad et al., 2013; Létourneau, 2006; Létourneau & Moisan, 2004; Seixas, 2004, 2006), we offer one potential consideration to Osborne’s (2001) quandary, that is to better understand the possible educational content of popularized, public historical performances. Secondly, we question what responsibility the state has for exclusionary historical representations that moonlight as artistic performances, by highlighting recent controversy involving the *Northern Lights* show.

## **The Spectacle: Curating an Artistically Seductive “Monument”**

The idea of “the spectacle” is no stranger to historical literature, as there are critiques of historical spectacles in the way they are presented, signified, consumed, and defined (Mitchell, 2003; Osborne, 2001). Mitchell (2003) describes how nationalist spaces of memory, such as the Statue of Liberty, produce affective responses through architecture, and when accompanied by technological advancements and film, strongly connect to public memories of past heroes, tragedies, and valour. Using Huyssen’s (2003) analysis of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century German nationalist monuments, which he calls “monumental seductions,” aptly named for their ability to engage the masses in reflections on the past, Mitchell argues that memorials, and other monumental architectures, are places of hegemonic memory maintenance. These memory-conjuring monuments are “grand spectacles,” carefully curated to elicit strong affective responses to nationalist historical mythologies (p. 444), such as the myth that brave European explorers discovered and tamed a wild, empty continent (Francis, 2005; Razack, 2002). Although “curation” is often used to describe the way museums or galleries decide on cultural artefacts and pieces of art for their collections, it is used here to depict the way historical spectacles are intentionally constructed through popular notions of history in order to be relatable with large segments of the population. The grand spectacle in this sense is bound up with the use of nationalist geographies and popularized histories to *seduce* audiences through its curation, and to associate with particular places and dominant historical narratives.

Similar to Mitchell (2003), Osborne (2001; see also Osborne & Osborne, 2004) offers an analysis of place and space in the role of national identity formation and historical memory maintenance in the Canadian context. By examining the use of geographies and spaces that are emblematically connected to the nation-state, such as Ottawa’s Parliament Hill, Osborne describes how “the imaginative use of symbols and myths, and of monuments, commemorations, and performances...nurture some form of [national] identity” (p. 3). A national collective identity is constructed through the strategic usage of Parliament Hill, via the placement of particular statues, monuments, and staging performances in the space that is seen as *the* site of the nation. Ottawa is representative of Canada as its capital, and as such becomes a “ceremonial city” (Boyer, 1994, as cited in Osborne, 2001, p. 21) where the symbolic depictions in this space, as well as the Parliament grounds, are representative of the governing power of the state—what Osborne calls

the “capital-capitol” complex. The physical markers such as statues, busts, and memorials, communicate to the public which people are worth commemorating, what is considered historically significant, and which events should remain present in the collective consciousness. Through this spatial configuration of historical artefacts and “orchestrated commemorations,” the public is an audience to a “controlled spectacle” (p. 23), taking place in the home of the nation-state and on the porch of the Parliament, where spectators are more apt to feel a “sense of awe and emotional connection resulting from being ‘right there,’” in a space where history has taken place (Conrad et al., 2013, p. 33).

Differing from Mitchell’s (2003) conception of the spectacle as manifested through monumental architecture, Osborne (2001) considers the aggregate spatial construction of geography, commemorations, architecture, and historical representations as part of the “controlled spectacle” of the nation. These are individually and collectively symbolic of Canada’s official nationalist histories, which Létourneau (2006) deems as “nothing but the central concept supporting and legitimizing Canada’s nation-building process” (p. 81). The controlled spectacle is deliberate and organized, using the emotive forces of “heritage” to capture the attention of spectators (Seixas, 2014), echoing Bryant and Clark’s (2006) research on the historical narratives driven primarily through the elicitation of affect rather than intellect. Such a method uses popularized histories and iconic figureheads to procure collective notions of Canadian belonging, in an effort to informally shape a particular national identity. *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* differ from both Mitchell’s (2003) and Osborne’s (2001) conceptions of the spectacle by adding another layer of intricacy to the already complicated mix of history, geography, heritage, affect, and space, by including technology and art. Because of the added layers, a cultural understanding of the performance is needed to fully grasp the way *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* have been “seductively packaged” for popular consumption.

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1967/1994) presciently theorized the impact of new media forms decades before the dawn of the digital age, including the impact of television and commercial advertisements on material and cultural consumption patterns. Debord’s “spectacle” strongly critiques forms of media and entertainment as being vehicles for mass consumption, and speculates that audiences unconsciously and uncritically internalize images that are meticulously constructed and packaged as entertainment. The spectacle is comprised of images, sounds, venue, and medium, which are not merely chosen for artistic or entertainment merits, but work on a deeper level of representation, in



its totality creating “a worldview transformed into an objective force” (p. 7). If audiences understand the spectacle to be entertainment, or perhaps a cultural, artistic exploration, they are less apt to understand its construction as being part of a particular worldview, working ideologically, or as Debord suggests, “objectively” functioning as *the* truth. We are reminded by Létourneau and Moisan (2004), however, that people simply do not passively consume historical information, and do not come to such performances with a historical tabula rasa. Indeed, spectators come to the spectacle with a prior historical memory, in various stages of complexity from schooling, family or community stories, personal interests, and media representations (Conrad et al., 2013). Yet the spatial and affective “heritage” packaging of the spectacle cannot be ignored, and while some audience members might remain critical of the historical content, the alluring combination of Parliament Hill, art, music, and light remain important tools in the delivery. With Debord’s spectacle in mind, we return to our original questions: What is the purpose of *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*? Although mainly for entertainment, are there pedagogical implications for presenting these performances on Parliament Hill, and is the historical content lost in the nationalist identity-building spectacle?

Historical fictions presented in visual avenues such as television and movies are examples of popular media designed to be consumed for amusement, and thus can be understood as a type of spectacle. Using popularized historical television series and movies as examples, de Groot (2016) offers a unique analysis of the exponential growth of historical fictions and their patterns of consumption, juxtaposed with “real” historical representations and their inherent restrictions. Historical non-fiction for pedagogical use is expected to follow disciplinary boundaries, including rational and balanced research, however, there are differing expectations for fictional accounts in popular media. While historical fictions have been heavily criticized and deemed to be “excessive, unrealistic, sensationalist, experimental, pulp, cheap, or popular” (de Groot, 2016, p. 2), these representations are offered in novels, movies, video games and television shows, and “run the gamut from ideo-historiographical articulation, from being actively conservative (shutting off types of interpretation), to being actively radical” (p. 152). Movies in particular are “a powerful medium for influencing how we ‘see’ and ‘experience’ history...influencing the future imaginaries of the viewers” (Conrad et al., 2013, p. 16), making both historical fictions and non-fictions important cultural fields to deconstruct for possible pedagogical implications. Across cultural forms, and in a range of media, fictional historical accounts

are consumed and enjoyed as entertainment, as was found in the *CATP* (Conrad et al., 2013) survey results, where one in three respondents have read historical fiction in the past year. However, unlike popular media, which “are not subject to direct public policy deliberations the way curriculum decisions are” (Seixas, 2006, p. 13), disciplinary historical accounts are subject to varying levels of scrutiny, such as peer review processes, except in the case of *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*, which are officially state-sanctioned, state-funded, and publically attended history displays, offered at arguably *the* official site of the nation. Such government-sanctioned displays promote particular kinds of public history and understandings of the nation’s past, further necessitating a deeper look into the representations they offer (Conrad et al., 2013; Dodd, 2009).

*Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* exist in a peculiar location between “official representation,” and “artistic expression” leaving up to interpretation how to categorize and situate the performances, as they are at once entertaining and educating; strikingly curated and ideologically constructed; spectacular and part of “the spectacle.” A significant quote in a CBC News article from Jonathan Vance, the lead (military) historian of *Northern Lights*, best demonstrates the concern with these contesting, multiple dichotomies: “I’m very happy with the show in its finished version—I think it’s a wonderful piece of work with some truly impressive technological flourishes. I think it’s very balanced, given the nature of the art form” (Beeby, 2015). Vance acknowledges that advanced technological and artistic merits are both exceptional and limiting to the historical components, which he claims to be balanced even though it is an entertaining, artistic performance. In the same CBC article, the historian stated that he “was more concerned about the historical accuracy of the content rather than with the overall choice and balance of subjects” (Beeby, 2015). Nonetheless, art in the form of film and other visual media can also be strategically positioned as an “ally to public history” (Urban, 2014), presenting lesser-known excluded narratives centring on complex historical content too often excluded from male-dominated retellings of the past (Bergstrom, 2014; Cooke, 2009). Whereas Vance describes the artistic elements as “limiting” the historical possibilities of the display, others such as Urban (2014) argue that art, and more broadly, the visual, provide a powerful canvas (quite literally) upon which spectators can “embark on their own acts of interpretation” (p. 86). Without including a wider array of historical representations however, the ability for spectators to “embark on their own interpretation” is not only abbreviated, but is unnavigable. This brings us back to the idea of the spectacle, and the

exclusionary historical content of *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*: if the display is primarily for entertainment, and the scope of historical representation is narrow, the narratives might portray a “fun” history, but not necessarily one that is balanced, inclusive, or critically engaging beyond the emotive “heritage-baiting” spectacle.

This is pop-history—the show attracts a larger audience, can be circulated and consumed more widely, and easily enjoyed without eliciting deeper thought or engagement with the historical content. The focus on entertainment through light, sound, and colour instead of the historical representations raises the question of whether *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* should be considered a variation of historical fiction, used for ideological, nation-building purposes. More importantly, perhaps we should be paying closer attention to, and asking deeper questions about, the historical narrative that is being shown to these large audiences: What/whom is being represented in which ways, what/whom is absent, and what possible effects could this viewing have on the audience? In the following section, we provide an analysis of *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* that pushes aside the curtain of the spectacle to critically review the too-familiar grand narratives in the performances, in other words, to “make the familiar strange” (Simon, 2004, p. 197).

### **Exclusionary Narratives: The Word on Stone**

In Mitchell’s (2003) analysis of monumental architecture and memory, she describes physical monuments, architectural grandiosity, and chiseled inscriptions as being “the word in stone” (p. 443), having literal and symbolic meanings: written words are literally inscribed and included in such spaces, and since the locations are authorized places of remembrance, they too act symbolically, as *the* historical word. These sites are official, and thus the historical meanings attached are legitimized through the presence of the physical monuments (Osborne & Osborne, 2004). What is historically signified through these spaces of exploration, empire, and enlightenment is regularly connected to normalized (Eurocentric), grand narratives of history, often told and represented in official capacities. However, for those not included in these spaces and narratives, do their histories not carry any importance? These questions permeate literature on historical representation (Francis, 2005; Paul, 2006; Montgomery, 2014; Stanley, 2006, 2011), yet grand and metanarratives continue to exist in public historical retellings of our collective histories, including in the performances of *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*. Although not inscribed in

stone or poured into an artistic formation of sorts, the historical narratives are projected onto the Centre Block buildings, making the narratives the word *on* stone; the literal and figurative historical “truth” to be watched by the masses. The difference between the two performances is small, as both continue to represent Canada as a cold, uninhabited land, nevertheless vast historical exclusions remain, particularly in the lack of representation of women, African Canadians, and in a continued depiction of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples as belonging to the past.<sup>2</sup>

In 2015, a controversy surfaced in the CBC article “Not Enough Women: Bureaucrats Critique Parliament Hill Light Show” (Beeby, 2015). In its report on Northern Lights, undisclosed public servants claimed to have had their earlier critiques and concerns about the large amount of military history, and lack of representation of women, deleted from official meeting minutes. Quoted in the article is Canadian historian Merna Forster, who asks simply “Where are the women?” While women are the most obviously missing group from the script of military might, discovery, and valour, we add that the ways in which certain groups are either blatantly missing or artistically signified is of equal concern. One such artistic variation in the representation of important figureheads is the hierarchical usage of opacity, “silhouetting,” voiceover, and size to depict the relative importance of historical characters. The most significant characters are large, are depicted with artistic detail and colour, and have a narrative accompanying their visuals, while seemingly “secondary” historical actors are either missing visually, represented visually but without a narrative, signified as a shadow without a narrative, or as a combination of these techniques.

## Silhouetting

In *Mosaika*, the show begins with aerial views of the land from coast to coast to coast, slowly morphing into a tribal drum beat, depictions of diverse cultural artefacts from Indigenous groups across Canada, and silhouettes of peoples in the wilderness. When the European “explorers” enter the show almost eight minutes into the performance, the music lightens, the scenes become colourful, and Europeans are drawn as fully realized,

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2 Much more could be written about the historical exclusions in and the audience responses to *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*. While an in-depth analysis of the two performances and social media responses from the spectators is warranted, in this article we highlight aspects that best articulate with the larger spectacle argument.

highly defined portraits of human beings. At this point in the performance the European tall ships arrive, entering into the historical narrative with trumpets and period-themed music, as seen first-person through the eyes of an unknown Indigenous person's hands as they part the trees. This extremely problematic beginning is changed in *Northern Lights*, where Indigenous peoples are revealed with full bodies, colour, and facial expressions at the start of the performance, yet continue to be excluded as historical actors in the more recent past. The use of silhouettes in *Mosaika* also exists in its brief description of Laura Secord, who is seen for four seconds running across the screen as a silent black figure on a red background during the War of 1812, however no explanation is given to why she is important, why she is running, nor to where she is running. A portrait of her face, with her name underneath appears above the running figure, but unlike Brock and Tecumseh, who appeared moments before her, she was not given an accompanying narrative. In *Northern Lights*, Laura Secord's name is mentioned in a list of important figures of the War of 1812, except in this rendition there is no corresponding physical depiction. Such a visibly invisible representation mirrors Knibb's (1994) analysis of women's history in museums, which she describes as "present but not visible." It is assumed that the audience will know who Laura Secord is, however without this knowledge, or seeing the associated Canadian Heritage Minute, her importance is lost, like the First Peoples of this land, remaining invisible without any included context.

The most disturbing uses of "silhouetting" occur in *Northern Lights*, where the Rideau Canal is presented as being built by nondescript black silhouettes, without mention of the numerous Irish and French Canadian labourers who dug the land by hand, or the fact that approximately 1,000 of these labourers died during the construction from disease and work-related injuries (Passfield, 2013). This is similar to the depiction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, shown only as a track extending across the country, with no Chinese labourers mentioned or even shown as silhouettes. In this instance, the Chinese labourers, working in treacherous conditions to construct the connective tissue of the country, are completely missing from the nation-building narrative (Roy, 1984; Stanley, 2000). The last, and possibly worst, example of silhouetting in *Northern Lights* involves the history of Black men who fought and pledged their loyalty to the British Crown in the American Revolutionary War, who in exchange were freed from enslavement in the United States. In this depiction, seven minutes into the performance, a narrator reads, "Loyalty and a yearning for freedom fed powerful urges. Those who swore to the British Crown

fled north and found a new home.” It took two viewings of *Northern Lights* to understand which group of people were being described, lasting six seconds with only “loyalty” and “freedom” as descriptors, and the signifying word “Black” not used until the scene changes, leaving the audience to quickly put together the vague storyline of the Black Loyalists. There is a corresponding visual of several darkened silhouettes hoeing the ground in a field on a white-gold backdrop, but the figures do not have faces nor other defining features, making it difficult for the audience to associate the appropriate historical content with the quick-changing visual. Also, the statement about “finding a new home” is largely misrepresented: Black Loyalists were promised land, shelter, and adequate living arrangements in Nova Scotia, which few received (Pachai, 2007; Walker, 1992). Life was terribly difficult for many of the new inhabitants, living in harsh weather conditions on non-arable land far removed from town centres, so much so that nine years later, 1,200 Black Loyalists left Nova Scotia for a better life in Sierra Leone (Pachai, 2007, p. 53).

The figurative use of silhouettes, coupled with deficient historical contexts, narrative, or visuals, leaves groups of people who literally built the nation through labour, sacrifice, and bravery, out of the picture. While historians are apt to shy away from placing presentist judgement on gloomier aspects of the past such as colonization, forced assimilation, and the use of racialized immigrants in dangerous labour practices, historian Keith Barton (2006) calls this type of thinking “nonsense,” adding that “we all reach judgements about history, all the time...surely all of us have made judgements about whether these contributed to or detracted from the common good” (p. 66). Barton also notes that students are most interested in learning about social justice topics in history, including women’s roles and restrictions in the past; however, the topics need to be presented in order for students’ and spectators’ interests to be piqued. As one note of caution, such additions should be incorporated in ways that are not piecemeal, but as integral parts to a complex historical picture, not solely for the purpose of amusement.

### **Where Are the Women?**

Similar to the use of “silhouetting” to signify important or historically significant people, narration, voice, and size of the representations are used throughout the two performances to depict (and exclude) women. In *Mosaika*, as mentioned above, Laura Secord appears as a silhouette nine minutes into the 30-minute performance, and another woman does

not appear visually until after 11 minutes of military history, in the form of a silhouette and a narration from Queen Elizabeth II. In *Northern Lights*, the Queen only exists as a voiceover through narration 28 minutes into the 32-minute show, lasting 12 seconds. The use of voiceover without a corresponding visual for women in *Northern Lights* includes a string of consecutive quotes from Emily Carr, the Queen, and Nellie McClung, with the first two discussing the importance of Canada as a young nation made up of people with strong values who work together. This section is at the tail end of the performance, seemingly bringing an end to the nationalist *Bildungsroman*; Canada has gone through its growing pains, and is now a mature entity in its own right.

Carr begins the trio of quotes from women: “Canada—she is something we are born into, the great rugged power we are tied to,” followed by Queen Elizabeth II, speaking of Canada’s maturity as a full-grown nation that “has remained true to its history”; indeed, it is the commonwealth hinterland that could. Curiously, the next quote by McClung is not in line with the former, as she is speaking about the role of women in Canada: “I am a believer of women, in their influence and power. Women set standards for the world, and it’s for women in Canada to set the standards high.” This quote is an example of what Battiste (1984, 2008; see also Lorenz, 2014) describes as the “add on” or “add and stir” model of inclusion, where marginalized perspectives are dropped into the dominant narrative without being properly situated or contextualized, leaving the larger narrative feeling disjointed and incomplete. It is worth noting that the quotes from these significant Canadian women appear in the last minutes, and are the only representations of historically significant women in Canadian, or pre-Confederation, history, resonating with Harvey’s (1994) work on representations of women in museums: Have we really come a long way? Although this question was asked primarily about museum content over two decades ago, the lack of material pertaining to women’s histories in official spaces, as seen through the spectacles, proves that it remains a relevant question and an essential area to be revisited.

Contrasting the use of voiceover and lack of visuals for Canadian women, the use of size and texture also figure prominently in both *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*, where the most notable historical people (European/White men) are realized in visuals that scale the height of Parliament’s Centre Block: Sir John A. Macdonald and Georges-Étienne Cartier are among the male figureheads displayed in stunningly created, full-colour visuals styled as oil portraits. This section features a narrated conversation between

Macdonald and Cartier, which lasts 84 seconds, making it easy for the audience to associate place, time, and face, not unlike Bryant and Clark's (2006) analysis of aesthetic and technical choices apparent in *Canada: A People's History* to signify the importance of historical characters. In other words, the audio, visual, and stylistic packaging shapes the way an audience understands Canada's history, through the most significant people, places, and events, which build public memory through historical education and offer a particular rendition of Canadian citizenship—what Seixas (2004) defines as *historical consciousness*.

### **Public Memory and the Spectacle**

Public memory has been a nation-building activity in education since the start of public schooling over two centuries ago (Seixas, 2006). Used politically to construct positive identifications with the nation of Canada through narratives of war, exploration, and discovery, schools have been the primary site for public memory building, and along with other public, daily reminders through the use of “statues, commemorations, place names, symbols, and films” (Seixas, 2006, p. 13), public memory has needed to be continually cultivated and supported in order to exist. Without physical manifestations and other reminders of the past, as Osborne (2001) and Mitchell (2003) have also argued, historically significant people, places, and events seep back into the mundane past, disappearing from the collective consciousness. Such remembrances are vital for building a national identity around a unified vision of collective history, including those who are exalted as heroes, forever remembered in monuments, textbooks, and street names, or as enemies and tragic events that evoke collective mourning or fervour.

Collective remembering is a complex process however, a bricolage built from “a set of references, including, among others, teleological schemes, clichés, stereotypes, ideas, representations of all sorts, reified characters” (Létourneau, 2009, p. 80), with variations between geographic and cultural contexts, as was found in the CATP (Conrad et al., 2013) research results. Public events, heritage celebrations, and performances like *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* feed into the background cultivation of public, collective ideas about the past. In communities where normalized Anglo-European histories are largely distrusted by the public (Acadians in New Brunswick, Aboriginal groups in Saskatchewan, Québécois in Quebec), Conrad and colleagues (2013) have shown that



collective memory is based on preserving, reviving, or otherwise building one's own memory apart from a simplified mythology of the nation. While this complicates the discussion of public memory and collective remembrance, it offers insight into the ways cultural, ethnic, and other groups with shared identities resist exclusionary, hegemonic depictions of history, in order to shape and retain one's own stories of the past. In the varied ways public memory is crafted, whether through historical education, nation-building activities through national membership, or as a resistance to a larger narrative, a particular "consciousness" emerges. Based on Seixas's (2006) definition of historical consciousness, as "the intersection among public memory, citizenship and history education" (p. 15), *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* are "brought to life" examples of a *type* of historical consciousness, which sits in the middle of this intersection, providing an exclusionary grand narrative, evoking collective public memories of the past, in order to preserve a particular brand of Canadian citizenship—one that is proud of its past involvements in European exploration, discovery, and military might. McKay and Swift (2012) have critiqued the increase of private and public funds into heritage industries as an ideologically driven rebranding of Canada as a "warrior nation" through the promotion of its military and peacekeeping successes. However, what brand of historical consciousness does the spectacle support?

In his later work, Seixas (2014) argues that historical consciousness "paradoxically...liberates its subjects from tradition, at the same that it demonstrates to them that they are not free at all" (p. 15). Historical consciousness, then, is only fully realized through an emancipatory framework, one that has the capacity to view the past as something we can never replicate in the present, no matter how many statues are built, or how much effort is put into public memory constructing initiatives such as *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*. An uncritical historical consciousness slips into tradition and heritage, where public memory constructions focus on upholding the glorified past no matter what changes are needed in the present, and citizenship narrowly defines who is friend or foe. Seixas (2014) describes this version of historical consciousness as not actually being conscious at all, despite falling into the above definition. In fact, this lower version of historical consciousness is the unconscious struggle for stabilizing heritage in an uncertain era, using powerfully affective, ideological methods instead of critical historical engagement for problem solving.

With this in mind, *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights*, with their reliance on narrowly defined Canadian military histories, memorializing past war efforts, and over-the-top

nationalist branding mechanisms leading into the nation's 150th birthday celebration, can be understood as an assemblage of public memory building through heritage and spectacle. In this, the spectacle becomes utilitarian, as a mechanism for uncritical, affective engagement in Canada's mythological genesis through the great political and military achievements of a few European men, on a wild land that "needed to be tamed" (Francis, 2005; Razack, 2002; Stanley, 2006). This not a critical history; it is the same clichéd historical narrative that has been reproduced time and again in middle school textbooks, but brought to life in digital-Technicolor with artistic flourishes. Whether the audience expects to be entertained, intellectually stimulated, or inspired, the performances hold carefully curated imagery and exclusionary significations that lead away from emancipatory historical consciousness, and into heritage-baiting, where the audience is reassured of Canada's innocence by downplaying its complicity in colonization by erasing or "minimizing those constellations of racism and colonialism inherent to the formation of the Canadian nation state" (Montgomery, 2014, p. 169).

### **Everything That Appears Is Good; Whatever Is Good Will Appear**

By "pulling back the curtain" of the performances, we have attempted to illustrate how the quasi-historical performances of *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* have a role in shaping collective understandings of the past through a spectacularized version of history. Returning to Osborne's (2001) call to better understand historical performances, we add that, like Conrad and colleagues' (2013) and de Groot's (2009, 2016) analyses of historical fictions and cultural patterns of consumption in history genres, visual and other official representations need to be dissected for their role in historical education. Pedagogically speaking, pop-history—the shallow, uncritical historical representation made for entertainment and mass consumption—while evoking pride and nationalistic belonging, does not necessarily contribute to intellectual engagement with the messages in the performance, or allow for a deeper historical dialogue of where Canada has been as a nation, or help to decide the best directions for the future. Instead, audiences are thrilled to enjoy a narrative that allows them to emotionally connect to their imagined (national) community through the emotive empathy function of narrative (Anderson, 2006; Bryant &

Clark, 2006), and to representations of the past they may or may not relate to. Adding to the argument that audiences uncritically consume the spectacle, there have been only two complaints about *Northern Lights* for the sound level and lack of seating (Beeby, 2015). This is not to say that other criticisms do not exist, for example on digital social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Trip Advisor, however these objections are the only officially recorded versions.<sup>3</sup>

Pop-history, via the spectacle, has the dangerous, ideological potential to be used as a mechanism for public memory and historical (*un*)consciousness building, which naively upholds exclusionary grand narratives in order to commemorate the nation's mythological creation. In presenting Canada's glorified past without its nuanced internal disputes, the officially sanctioned spectacle is a performance that does not lend to expanding understandings "beyond stories of imperialism and conquest" (Barton, 2006, p. 62). An alternative version is possible, but to quote Létourneau (2006): "To unbuild a historical system of representation... is not a simple task. In these matters, patience is of prime importance. That doesn't mean we should not initiate remedies" (p. 83). One such remedy is to continually point out areas of historical exclusion, to pull back the curtain of the spectacle and expose its operations underneath (Grant & Stanley, 2014). A second remedy is to further investigate forms of historical spectacles to understand their workings through and with official (ideological) state priorities in various political and social locations. Lastly, we could rename this beautifully curated artistic visual experience more accurately as "Canada's military history," in order to decentre, disrupt, and demystify its alleged neutrality, and to truthfully depict what the spectacle is: a monolithic narrative of male (mostly Anglo) Eurocentric political and military characters, told in a historically significant, but contested, space upon which the nation has been built. In so doing, a renaming not only has the potential to make room for public dialogue about our pasts, but can help us further disentangle our collective identities as "Canadians" and engage with forms of critical public memory, historical empathy, and historical consciousness as complexly disputed works in progress. A narrator at the start of *Northern Lights* reads, "If we would know something of the future we would only have to look at the past." This

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3 A full exploration could be made into "real-time" responses on social media, offering insight into audience reactions to *Northern Lights*, and giving a possible route for further extension and exploration, however, this lies outside of the purview of this article.

future, however, is dependent upon which version(s) of the past are sought and shared. In essence, *Mosaika* and *Northern Lights* could be better comprehended as but *one* telling of Canada's past, offering one imaginable pathway into our collective futures.

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