

On the Paradox of the Unrepresentable: The Trauma Narratives in Robert Houle's *Sandy Bay Residential School Series* and Wayne Dunkley's *#whatdoyoufeelwhen*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the artworks *Sandy Bay Residential School Series* (2009) by Robert Houle and *#whatdoyoufeelwhen* (2018) by Wayne Dunkley, respectively, two contemporary Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) visual artists based in Canada who call into question specific historical acts of colonial and racial violence. These works provide a means to reckon with the trauma of two important historical moments that have been omitted from Canada's historical records. I argue that these narratives of trauma can be conveyed and witnessed through visual art. While Houle's paintings illustrate his recollections of his traumatic childhood in the Canadian residential school system, Dunkley's photo-based art project confronts viewers with his digitally altered self-portrait series resembling 17th Century drawings of runaway slaves in Canada. This paper questions how these artworks, as narrations of past traumatic injustices, provoke critical questions about the haunted present. I argue that these two visual artworks afford viewers a means to reckon with different trauma narratives through the paradox of the unrepresentable hauntings that unsettle the viewer in the artists' lived experiences through intersections of memory. The trauma from these historical events can paradoxically, in turn, be alluded to multidirectionally, as conceptualized by Michael Rothberg (2009) across cultures to resonate both with and against each other to echo the importance of learning about multiple injustices as constellations of memory.

Keywords: *memory and trauma, social justice, aesthetics, anti and decolonial theory*

Diana Yoo is a second-generation Korean-Canadian immigrant photo-based research-creation artist and educator. Yoo's research is situated at the intersection of three areas of scholarship—anti and decolonial theory, studies of memory and trauma, and studies of art and social justice. She investigates the implications of witnessing trauma narratives through a pedagogy of aesthetic hauntology. She aims to qualify the pedagogical role of art in bearing witness to racial and colonial trauma by unsettling the settler which thereby renders the Canadian imaginary as spectral and haunted within collective memory.

Introduction

Only as witnesses to injustice can we attest to the crimes that happened in the past. In this paper, I explore the artwork by Robert Houle and Wayne Dunkley, titled *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*¹ (2009) and *#whatdoyoufeelwhen*² (2018), respectively, two narratives about traumatic injustices that implicate the viewer through a paradox of the unrepresentable. While experiences of trauma can never be fully represented, these artworks refer to traumatic pasts that situate the viewer as a witness to an aesthetics that resists representation. These artworks offer a means for “multidirectional” thinking, as conceptualized by Michael Rothberg (2009)—meaning that when trauma narratives of the past haunt us, we must think beyond singular narratives of injustice. Multiple oppressions are operating in Canada’s past. Therefore, I examine these artworks with respect to multidirectional thinking because of their capacity for (a) unsettling the settler to highlight the inhumane acts of colonial and racial oppression in Canada; (b) embedding these tragedies in memory where consciousness can be raised and events are remembered as they are taught to Canadians; and (c) haunting the viewer or witness and reminding us of a past that is deeply tarnished and can never be fully represented. Throughout this paper, I argue that these visual artworks can be considered multidirectionally, that they are interconnected, and unsettle the viewer leaving them haunted by the truths of Canada’s past. Therefore, despite the unrepresentability of the many traumas that have occurred in Canada’s past, I contend that this unsettling through visual art is a necessary step in contesting Canada’s hegemonic historical narratives. Historical trauma inherently evades the efforts to “capture” it for the viewer, audience, and witness. It is through an evasive hauntology that a reckoning with injustices can occur.

Unsettling the Settler

I am particularly interested in how Houle’s and Dunkley’s trauma narratives cultivate feelings of unsettlement within the settler. How does their artwork unsettle the viewer through a hauntology of the

¹ Fig. 1 to 2

² Fig. 3 to 5

colonial and racial injustices of the past? Furthermore, I am interested in how their visual artwork informs viewers as witnesses in pedagogically productive and ethical ways. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (2012) issued a pedagogical call implicating those working in education to deepen their commitment to the work of reconciliation within their pedagogical practice. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) explains that “if it is truly time to talk ‘reconciliation,’ then how we reconcile is critically important” (p. 24). Such a pedagogical call best leans on the arts to activate social justice and equity for First Nation, Metis, and Indigenous peoples of Canada. I respond to this critical call by explicitly referring to the visual artwork of Houle and Dunkley as a means for bearing witness to the traumatic histories omitted and underrepresented in Canada. To reconcile, we must have the means to communicate the injustices and moral wrongs of the past. Both artists navigate the paradoxical relationship of needing to communicate loss despite the ever-present limitations of historical distance and unrepresentable trauma. These artworks allow us to learn from the inhumane colonial and racist acts of violence on Canadian soil. It is an injustice to ignore these pasts, and much work must be done for reconciliation. Houle and Dunkley are significant due to their narratives of trauma that cannot otherwise be represented. While the experience of trauma is unrepresentable, the narrations that aim to articulate the pain are necessary and critical for the journey that brings us closer to equity and justice in Canada.

Critical Narratives on Trauma

My rationale for selecting these specific artworks is because they are important critical trauma narratives that speak to the colonial dilemma we now find ourselves in. They are a testament to the truth about Canada’s history that can no longer be denied. Moreover, through a close reading of these artworks with Avery Gordon (1997) and Michael Rothberg, (2009) I will share how these artworks can speak to each other multidirectionally and interrupt Canadian history by confronting us with narratives about trauma through hauntology. I question: how can we reckon with the ghost that haunts us through the disappearances or what is absent that these artworks point to? How do the invisible ghosts that confront

us in Robert Houle and Wayne Dunkley's artworks leave us unsettled due to the implied deaths associated with these incidents of injustice? I am concerned with the multiple incidents of injustice that artists such as Houle and Dunkley leave us with which we cannot deny. Often, questions about colonialism and racial violence are separated. However, when we can form allyship across differences, there is greater solidarity because multiple hauntings can elide together. As narratives of trauma, these artworks necessitate the importance of going against the grain of the colonial Canadian tradition that is in dire need of reimagining, both structurally and institutionally. The importance of making past injustices visible through the paradox of the unrepresentable is to find a way to make space for these stories. I argue the importance of these artworks, that convey otherwise unrepresentable traumas, so that viewers can perhaps witness the traumatic injustices before their own eyes.

Memory as Multidirectional

Houle's and Dunkley's trauma narratives haunt the individual and the collective in different ways, and these narratives can speak to each other. Rothberg (2009) indicates,

[...] that both individual and collective memory are always in some sense 'multidirectional.' In 'making the past present,' recollections and representations of personal or political history inevitably mix multiple moments in time and multiple sites of remembrance; making the past present opens the doors of memory to intersecting pasts and undefined futures (p. 35).

I draw on his notion of historical "memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (p. 3). The notion of multidirectional memory provides a means for distinct histories of violence rooted in imperialism, colonialism, slavery, genocide, and war, to intersect through a logic of interconnectivity that interrupts one-sided, linear colonial and racist histories. With multidirectional memory, the trauma narratives of Houle and Dunkley give rise to a constellation of queries within memory politics while simultaneously haunting the witness. I explore the works of Houle and Dunkley through their aesthetic narratives of traumatic incidents that occurred in the past.

In the paintings by Robert Houle, titled *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, (2009) he illustrates past dreams about his experiences at a residential school. When the viewer looks at these images, the images may elicit feelings of fear and terror, specifically as they refer to the 150,000 Indigenous children who have gone missing and whose remains are only now being uncovered.³ These gouache paintings allow us to not only think about and bear witness to the subjective narratives that Houle presents, but they also affect the viewer as a witness through visual language. The faint interior spaces of the Residential School bedroom depicted in his paintings illustrate a frightening past. The surreal contrast between the soft edges and the distinct dark mouse hole with the red door in the background signifies a possible escape from this place of memory. The bed frame at the far corner of the room shows a place stained or tainted with negative experiences. The symbolic resonances of fear and the depiction of the interior of the residential school implicate the viewer, eliciting the same questions haunting the nation: where are the missing Indigenous school children? How did the children feel when separated from their parents? For what purpose were Indigenous children placed in residential schools? Houle's paintings eerily depict haunted memory spaces, placing the viewer as a witness and evoking emotions of unsettlement that remain unresolved in Canadian history.

Figure 1 and 2

#whatdoyoufeelwhen (2018)



³ This figure of 2,800 comes from the *Globe and Mail* article titled, "The list of children who died in Canada's residential school system" published on September 30, 2019. However, the number may vary depending on which names were recorded in the residential schools.

Note. Wayne Dunkley's *Parkdale* 2018 (left), *Corktown* 2018 (right)

In Wayne Dunkley's *#whatdoyoufeelwhen* (2018), digitally altered portraits made to resemble 17th Century drawings of runaway slaves⁴ engage the viewer in questions of historical memory, self, and the racialized other. For Dunkley, the issue is not to illustrate a place of haunting but rather to implicate the viewer in depictions of runaway slaves from the past that, in turn, haunt the present. Through this body of work, Dunkley's artwork confronts the viewer with Canada's history of slavery. To see these reproductions posted in public spaces might elicit viewers to look twice at them due to their uncanny resemblance to runaway slave drawings from the past. The text "what do you feel when [you look at me]" in these portraits is a confrontation with the viewer's feigned "innocence." When you see these reproductions, the simulated portrait of Dunkley elicits a questioning of the dominant Western gaze in relation to the African-Canadian male subject. While Canada's need is to reckon with such incidents that have been suppressed in dominant historical narratives, Dunkley's work represents the absent past that needs to be resituated through public or collective memory by employing the materiality of art. Dunkley's decision to display the portraits in public spaces throughout cityscapes across Canada is an indexical reminder that slavery existed and disappeared from the national imaginary. The images elicit a wide range of public responses, from violent marks of graffiti to tearing down the posters. By appearing in these public spaces across Canada, Dunkley interrupts the historical imaginary of national innocence that ignores the historical fact of slavery in Canada's national project. Given the ongoing legacy of racial violence perpetuated by present-day policing and schooling, Canada must confront these feelings of unsettlement and respond to the pedagogical call for reform that challenges our benevolent and polite society. Dunkley's artwork attests to this problematic history and evokes the need for a reckoning with racial injustices. His work allows us to reconcile in a way that inspires and suggests that such a movement toward learning and reflecting on difficult knowledge would elicit polarizing responses. Thus, the

⁴ Wayne Dunkley gave an Artist Talk titled *Social Practice and Cultural Mediation* at Ryerson's Documentary Media Centre on Wednesday, September 16, 2020. He claimed these reference drawings were originally published in the Montreal Gazette.

learning that these artworks support is difficult and requires moving against the grain of what we have been taught during our colonial history. The work addresses a public audience, including those who would seek to reinscribe the dominant imaginary of a benevolent Canada. Dunkley's work confronts and unsettles the settler through the act of witnessing. While his artwork has been shown in art galleries, it can be further helpful if included in visual arts curricula within the education system.

Figure 3

#whatdoyoufeelwhen, 2018



Note. Courtesy of the Artist, Wayne Dunkley, *#whatdoyoufeelwhen*. Posters in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal.

Hauntings of a Tarnished Past

Both narratives call the inhumane acts of colonial and racial oppression in Canada through unsettling into question, raise consciousness through witnessing and memory and, simultaneously, haunt the viewer with past injustices that have taken place in the Indigenous territories of Canada. Houle's and Dunkley's artwork hold the possibility to leave the viewer haunted due to a confrontation with the denied injustices of the past. According to Avery Gordon (1997), this haunting "raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future" (p. xvi). With her words in mind, I question how the way we remember the past has become multilayered. How does art call upon us to reckon with violent histories and traumatic narratives? Art on trauma offers a means to take the time to think about the past and leave the viewer unsettled. There is no easy answer

to either the historical or contemporary institutionalization of systemic violence. However, the work of hauntology fills a gap when there is no way to attest to subjective traumatic experiences, other than to present the traumatic testimonies of the survivors through artistic forms. The more we become attuned to the narratives of trauma experienced by subjects of racism and colonialism, the more social awareness and responsibility can manifest through witnessing. While there are dangers of these narratives being (violently) rejected, creating a kind of “numbness” in their audience, or potentially creating consumers of art without developing meaningful practices to promote agency in the way we educate ourselves, and that there are still those who are willing to witness and learn. For such people, this type of visual artwork helps to inscribe a way to recall tainted histories of the past in the viewer. One that returns and can become embedded as a truth that deserves remembrance. The paradox of the unrepresentable colonial and racial trauma allows us to question our violent history or perhaps be haunted by the ghosts of our “real” history. Houle’s and Dunkley’s artworks refer to and connect us to the tragedies that still need to be conveyed and made sense of through emotive and collective registers. It is a cultural issue that necessitates a creative process. The role of observation when witnessing these injustices offers a means for reflection and critical thought by interrupting the delusion of national innocence. The ethical call to think about tragic events can be unpacked through these counternarratives by re-visualizing the past and remapping public memory. It is through memory that the past returns and provokes agency within the subject. The subject can now become conscious of what tragedies existed and continue to be perpetuated to the present day. Therefore, from our memories of injustice, we can seek justice in our acts of agency through educating ourselves and each other about these counternarratives.

By taking time to observe Houle’s and Dunkley’s artwork, we can begin to think beyond singular narratives of injustice. Transforming the past's fraught tensions in the present is continual, accumulative work. I concur with Gordon’s (1997) view that “If you let it, the ghost can lead you toward what has been missing, which is sometimes everything” (p. 58). Allowing the ghost to reveal what has been omitted from the collective past requires remapping these traumatic pasts through feelings of

unsettlement that can then become ingrained in memory. Through this continual experience of remembering an unsettling past, the viewer can seek to remember and interrupt the imagined past through multidirectional memory—through a pedagogy of a haunted past. As Gordon (1997) explicitly states, “The ghost makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling a reality we come to experience as recognition.... the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing” (p. 63). This missing history, I argue, is about the omitted past that we must seek to remember within the constellations of a tainted memory. While one cannot possibly hold every piece of the past in memory, there are still fragments and pieces that should be made central to the history of Canada. As a result, we must listen to these fragments of traumatic memory that call upon us and unsettle our assurances and claims of innocence.

In the case of Houle’s work, the renderings of empty spaces leave the viewer as a witness. One might ask where all the dead Indigenous children from the residential schools were buried. In 2022, thousands of bodies of Indigenous children attending residential schools were discovered in unmarked graves.⁵ As a survivor of such trauma, Houle, through his artwork, attests to this colonial genocide from which he escaped. The dark mouse hole therefore refers to the plight he faced during the genocide. What we are missing can also be a case of disappearances. In the case of Dunkley’s runaway slaves, the posters are not only about the disappearance of subjectivity. Instead, he is critiquing the omitted history of slavery of African-Canadians. Gordon (1997) claims, “Disappearance is an exemplary instance in which the boundaries of rational and irrational, fact and fiction, subjectivity and objectivity, person and system, force and effect, conscious and unconscious, knowing and not knowing are constitutively unstable” (p. 97). This instability of knowing and not knowing what has disappeared from Canada’s history is what causes this profound disturbance. This deep unsettlement persists when the witness encounters Houle’s and Dunkley’s artworks.

⁵ Heidenreich, P. (2021). “*The story was hidden: How residential school graves shocked and shaped Canada*.” Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8458351/canada-residential-schools-unmarked-graves-indigenous-impact/>

Conclusion

Through these trauma narratives, there is a multidirectional trajectory vacillating between past and present memories, referring to colonial and racial injustices of the past through a multi-oppressive history. These artworks were selected based on their narratives which tell Houle's and Dunkley's individual stories about injustices within Indigenous and Black histories in Canada that are often overlooked and omitted. They both disrupt our notion of the Canadian imaginary and unsettle the viewer as their narratives reveal truthful testimonies of Canada's colonial and racist history from firsthand experiences. In turn, the viewer cannot deny the truths of these narratives of trauma. It is important that these artworks can be compared and can speak to each other multidirectionally to interrupt settler relationships with divergent traumas in colonial and racist pasts that haunt us. As counternarratives of colonialism and racial violence both Houle's and Dunkley's artworks alter the colonial gaze so that we can find ways to undo the wrongdoings of the past. At stake is the importance of the invisible affect of multiple hauntings and the pressing feeling of unsettlement that calls the witness through these interruptions. Although the psychological experience of trauma is unrepresentable, these hauntings, if we listen to them, can unlock more equitable possibilities for the future. This possibility comes from the paradox of the unrepresentable. Hauntings are crucial, as Gordon (1997) claims, "To be haunted is to make choices within those spiralling determinations that make the present waver. To be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects" (p.190). I engaged with Houle's and Dunkley's artwork through a hauntology of observation as they inform us about our society's capacity for critical thought and reflection. I am interested in how engaging multidirectionally in time about Canada's haunted past has the power to press upon the witness through constellations of memory collectively and together. Thus, it is critical to ask these imperative questions about how we know Canadian history and how we grasp history in schools and beyond. Through the work of Houle's and Dunkley's art, we are confronted by our haunted pasts that allow us to consider and move forward in multidirectional ways.

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