

Topic: Co-opting “National Identity” through Terry Fox

In broaching this conversation today—[the defacement of Terry Fox memorial](#) in Ottawa, I must note at the outset a few key points: 1) I am coincidentally teaching a graduate seminar this term on Monuments and Memorials, within which we discussed these events, so I must thank that wonderful group of people for helping me think through these ideas, and 2) although I am a white cisgender hetero male, I am an immigrant to Canada. Therefore, my discussion is informed by my American and immigrant identities as I develop my own understandings of Canadian nationalism, racism, and politics. With these points in mind let us begin.

Although monuments and memorials have a long history in Western culture, which have resulted in their usages to commemorate [conquests](#), [genocides](#), [wars](#), and other cultural ideologies, since the [Unite the Right Rally](#) in Charlottesville, Virginia, from August 11-12, 2017 significant cultural and academic attention has been devoted to monuments and their meanings. Subsequently, throughout the world, particularly in North America and Europe, monuments have been removed, vandalized, and destroyed. In North America, the changing cultural sentiments to monuments has been initiated by marginalized peoples and groups that have gained agency in lieu of the divisive rhetoric and dog whistling that has been fomented by right-leaning [politicians](#), [organizations](#), and [media outlets](#). Although what are considered to be right-leaning practices are not new, the convergence of several societal changing events has fostered marginalized peoples’ agencies. Ranging from the large-scale recognition of [institutionalized white supremacy](#), to the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), events have occurred that have attracted millions of participants been fueled by the movements of [#METOO](#), [Black Lives Matters](#), and [Every Child Matters](#) and their counter movements like the Unite the Right Rally, the [January 6 terrorist attacks on the US Capitol](#), and the [Trucker Convoy’s](#) occupation of Ottawa and Canadian border

crossings this past winter. In each of these instances, monuments have become sites of contention and protest. The inanimate objects, burdened by the trappings of institutional apparatuses, are easy prey within the public spaces of North America. Whether targeted as symbols of oppression, like the monuments of the [English monarchs](#), or [Confederate generals](#) being taken down, or objects deemed suitable to perpetuate racists intimidation practices, such as a [residential school memorial](#) being vandalized just hours after the press release discussing the discovery of more [graves of residential school victims](#), these forms of destruction and targeting have become common place throughout North America.

As such it should not come as a surprise that monuments throughout Ottawa quickly became targets for transgression by members of the Freedom Convoy and [local vandals](#). Throughout the evening of January 28th through the day of 29th, the city's numerous monuments were targeted: whether through acts of desecration, such as [urinating on a Canadian war memorial](#) to [dancing on the tomb](#) of the unknown soldier to adorning one of Canada's national heroes, [Terry Fox](#), with [a cape](#) made from a [Canadian flag](#) and with various signs imprinted with the [convoy's slogans](#). Fox's statue ultimately had a flagpole with an upside-down Canadian flag wedged between its arms and body; an upside-down flag is a universal symbol for [distress](#) or being in danger. Given this, an art historical reading of the Fox statue suggests the flag and imagery were affixed to effigy as a call for help by individuals who felt their freedoms were [under attack](#). Thus, the protesters' actions against the various monuments in Ottawa coincide with other North American protests during which times monuments are defaced, vandalized, and/or appropriated by participants. How then are we to interpret the role these monuments played in the protests in Ottawa?

It is important to note that Fox's statue was [minimally defaced](#). Unlike other monuments both in Ottawa and throughout North America, the sculpture was not urinated upon, spray painted, permanently vandalized, or toppled. Rather the object was simply draped with a cloth, a hat, and a flagpole; adornments that could quickly be removed without damage to the statute. Nevertheless, many Canadians were appalled; the condemnation of those who defaced Fox's statue was quick and furious, as millions of Canadians, including [politicians](#), took to social media and the airways to express their anger and disgust. They tweeted, among other things, "[Some lines you don't cross](#)" and "[Leave Terry Fox out of this.](#)" The public backlash and outcry by far eclipsed any such rhetoric about monument defacement in recent Canadian memory, including those that were irreparably damaged. The criticism of the convoy's members was [harsh, angry, and confrontational](#), thus, quickly leading to a complete undermining of the Freedom Convoy's large social agenda; simply put, the members' lack of judgement weakened the movement's appeal to many Canadians.

To grasp Canadians responses in support of the Fox statue, [Grace McNutt](#) recently wrote about the event for the online academic-journalist platform [The Conversation](#). For McNutt, the acts carried out against the Fox statue and the public outcry that ensued was connected to the monument removal craze in which "the public still finds value in heritage and [the public] sought to protect a memorial which continues to represent their values." McNutt is correct as these values are expounded upon in the [Canadian citizenship test](#), which promotes diversity and inclusion of all races and creeds. Fox plays a key role in this narrative as he epitomizes the neoliberal ideals of "pick yourself up by your bootstraps" despite being dealt a bad hand in life. Despite his cancer diagnosis and leg amputation in 1977, he persevered for four more years during which time he started the [Marathon of Hope](#) to raise money for cancer research and

awareness. Indeed, [Terry Fox Runs](#) are commonplace and part of the Canadian identity as I'm reminded each year by elementary school events.

However, there is more nuance here as the embracing of his activism is likely connected to a certain truth: peoples of all races and religions across the country have been directly affected by the traumas of [cancer](#). Fox's plight is continually felt by millions who suffer from cancer or those who survive or those of us who continue to mourn family members and friends who have died from the disease. Simply put, Fox is universally seen as a Canadian hero among disparate social, economic, and political groups thereby offering an apparatus through which to craft a universal Canadian identity that is reinforced annually through our country's public education system.

Despite the [astounding irony](#) that an individual who valued and supported scientific research to those who seemingly oppose hard science in lieu of personal choice and action, it should not come as a surprise that Fox's legacy and imagery was appropriated by members of the freedom convoy. First, from an early age Canadians are indoctrinated into the Fox ideology. School and community events occur annually wherein individuals are rally around the image of a Canadian hero during a call to social action. These events lead to individuals engaging in action through physical activity and patriotism, as walk and run participants adorn Canadian themed clothing and carry signage with various slogans. Indeed, there is a certain spectacle to these events, which correspond with elements of the Convoy's mandate of patriotism and nationalism that eerily linked to annual Terry Fox runs.

Recognizing these parallels brings me to my final point. The random actions of the Convoy's members to the Fox statue has fostered the supposition that they politicized an individual who was considered to be politically neutral by many Canadians. However, I close by

suggesting that the protesters' actions in reality illustrated that Fox's identity was already politicized. Shortly after he was eulogized by [Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau](#) following his death in 1981 and the federal government established the [Terry Fox Humanitarian Award](#) in 1981, Fox's identity became politicized and connected to Canada's national identity. Fox can be seen as an icon of the neoliberal state's effort that manifest in a national campaign of indoctrination that occurs annually, and has for the past 32 years, which has reinforced his position as a Canadian icon. Through the protester's actions, Fox's narrative has been changed, even if temporarily. Indeed, the likely unintentionally ironic act that resulted in the dressing of the Terry Fox statue in Ottawa has laid bare the fragility of Canadian nationalism, politics, and cultural discourse.