

MUSH HOLE PROJECT

Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford, September 16, 17 and 18, 2016

Project Summary

Summary

The *Mush Hole Project* is an immersive, site-specific art and performance installation event taking place at the Woodland Cultural Centre (Brantford) September 16, 17 and 18, 2016. This collaborative project aims to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action and to preserve, query, and reveal the complex personal, political, and public narratives around Canada's residential school system, in general, and the Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School (at the Woodland Cultural Centre).

Objective

The objective of the *Mush Hole Project* is to engage with the site of Canada's first residential school as a space in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and scholars can meet and 1) acknowledge the residential school legacy, 2) challenge the concepts of "truth" and "reconciliation," and 3) practice interdisciplinary art and performative methods of decolonization. Details of the three central objectives are as follows:

1. [Acknowledge Residential School Legacy](#) Blanche Hill-Easton, a survivor from "The Mush Hole" explains "there's pain in remembering, but there's power, too" (Gramble 1). When individuals seek accountability and the perpetrator does not acknowledge the wrongdoing, there is an empty space, a gap, and a shadow that haunts us. Acknowledgement, on the other hand, and the integration of Indigenous epistemologies is the beginning step across the chasm (of unknowing to knowing) in order to cast new light on histories that continue to be ignored. The segregated spatial language and logic of "residential school," in its naturalized homogeneity, separates out and eliminates individual identity, race, class, ethnicity, and gender; the language authorizes states of power (science, church, and nation) unlimited access to private minds and bodies and subsequently to their misrepresentation with no public accountability. The concealed structure of the "residential school" thereby becomes a metaphor for its own history. The site-specific work intends to critique and make visible not only institutionalized violence, but also will attempt to unshroud the negation of life and death by examining the complex separations that took place within and outside the walls of the Mohawk Institute in order to find paths toward decolonization. Healers will be on and off site to support participants and visitors throughout the programming.
2. [Reflect, Question & Challenge: "Truth and Reconciliation"](#) Christine Welsh (1991) explains that differing perspectives between the colonizer and Aboriginal peoples require the "surrendering [of] our pre-conceived notions of the very nature of history – that is linear, progressive, date-and event-oriented– and adapting our thinking to fundamentally different aboriginal world-view which is cyclical and ultimately timeless"

(16). The challenge to decolonize perspectives thus raises a critical question that is central to the project's objective: how can a creative intervention at a historical site generate new knowledges and methods of communication? How will the site activate the willingness to "surrender" pre-conceived notions of education, research, and practice. David Garneau (2016) challenges the normalized terminology of "reconciliation." He explains that the colonizer's discourse reinforces the fallacy of a pre-existing equal relationship between the Crown and Indigenous Nations. Garneau instead suggests the language of "conciliation" which establishes a present tense of an equitable relationship between Nations as one of negotiation, respect, and autonomy (4). In this sense, the site-specific project will make space for expressions and articulations of agency, honouring, and sovereignty.

3. Research-Practice: Artistic and Performative Methods as Decolonization The *Mush Hole Project* intends to unfold as a "cultural lab where artists [and researchers] would struggle creatively with the contemporary world as well as with traditional forms" (Garneau 20). Reflecting on Alex Javier's artwork, Garneau describes his experience as "the combination of visual art, embodied knowledge, and a gathering of engaged participants that made the experience significant, that made it exceed the colonial container" (17). The container, as Garneau concludes, is the systemic structure imposed by the dominant culture. When structures are identified there is potential for openings, shifts, or cracks through which transformation might begin to breathe. Concomitantly, Homi Bhabha (2015) asks the question: What is the opening through which interest operates? Bhabha identifies "the interests" as enmeshed in established systemic structures and while they produce openings for "hegemonic formations under the sway of the state; on the other hand, and at the same time, they create marginal and interstitial spaces that empower counter hegemonic radical movements" (6). When considering both the former and latter observations, still more questions surface: is "excess," or the refusal to be contained, a radical movement? Is the subversion of the colonial container an act of decolonization? Does refusing the dominant culture's ideological or material constraints equate to conciliation? Or is this something else? Does it need to be something else? What happens when "the container" is identified (located) not only externally but also in one's self? These are among the questions the project aims to deliver.

Context

The assumed benevolence of the national policies, which instituted residential schools in Canada, has been revealed, through the work of social activism, political actions, artists, and storytellers, to be anything but benign. Residential schools were government sponsored religious institutions established to assimilate Aboriginal children into Euro-Canadian culture. In 1828, the Mohawk Institute opened its doors. It was one of over a hundred facilities operational across Canada. The survivors and their children, however, continue to call the institute "The Mush Hole" because of the school's poor food quality, which was part of the humiliation, abuse, malnutrition, torture, and medical experiments that were endured by over 150,000 Aboriginal children and youth across Canada. How does this language of malnutrition

become a communicative norm that remains unaccounted for? What does it mean to be starved by a sovereign force whose intent was to “kill the Indian in the child?” What does it mean to be starved not only physically, but of one’s history, culture, intellect, dignity, ritual, cosmology, emotion, body, land, community, kin, and identity? The consequences of these institutionalized horrors and their ubiquity across this nation are still very much present. In 1970, the Mohawk Institute was closed and in 1972 became the Woodland Cultural Centre. Over the years, the Centre has worked steadfastly to represent Aboriginal artists in its collections, exhibitions, and events. For this project, the site-specific performances will demand a great deal from the spectator. Spectators become witnesses to history in the sense that they are present, not merely as observers, but also as participants who play an active role in understanding the environment, jurisdictions, histories, and present day implications. Working in consultation and collaboration with the Woodland Cultural Centre, Six Nations of the Grand, intergenerational survivors, and the Waterloo Aboriginal Education Centre, among many other individual, institutional, and community partners, the project is process-centred and focused on developing and sustaining fluid practices of relationship building that hinges on critical self-evaluation, understanding of historical contexts, and developing collaborative methods to address contemporary societal issues.

Method and Approach

The *Mush Hole Project* seeks responses from artists that question the following: Apartheid, Assimilation, Decolonization, Education, Genocide, Intergenerational Trauma, Mohawk Institute, Nourishment, Reconciliation, and Truth. Artists may propose interior and/or exterior works or creative interventions and should identify a site on the grounds of the Woodland Cultural Centre for the installation or performance of their work (for example, the driveway, apple orchard, library, kitchen, etc). Artists are encouraged to consider the residential school system through the dichotomy of both historical and contemporary knowledges and creative practices. With this in mind, the site-specific and interactive process of the audience will be as the witness to piece together the found and the fabricated. As each person navigates a route through the site, the participant will embody different meanings of the event based upon how they have “read” the map. This reading is not only seen but felt, as the sensorium includes *proxemic* (spatial) dimensions, an audience’s physical proximity to the sweat, the dust and the stains of the performance’s elements; it includes a *haptic* (touch) experience in so far as witnesses are welcome to get a feel for where they are in the site through physical contact with the work’s elements; finally, it includes the *kinesthetic* (movement) dimension of walking/moving, the act of physically working out the most appropriate route through histories. In the way site-specific performance allows a felt knowledge of the past, it may be seen as a significant reconsideration of the idea of an archive, as well as the state of *being* and *affect* in the present. Rebecca Schneider reminds us that the Greek root of the word “archive” refers to the “house” of Archon; by extension, “the architecture of a social memory which demands visible or materially traceable remains is the architecture of a particular social power over memory” (102). She questions the role of performance in relation to the archive as a “site” of the past, and wonders if the logic of the archive demands that performance disappear in favour of discrete remains. Schneider proposes a performative relationship to the archival “house” and the objects found there in the same way that we are proposing a performative relationship to

the Mohawk Institute and what has been found here. Schneider emphasizes the value of re-enactment as a way of keeping memory alive and making sure that this embodied, performative sense of history does not disappear. The space is comprised of three components: the *physical attributes* of the environment, the *activities* that occur or occurred there, and the *sense* that the individual makes of these. Like story, “place” and “space” can be described as a way of understanding the world, containing loose remnants of affect, interpretation, and meaning. The crossroads of place and narrative, the space where stories occur, is powerful. The Mohawk Institute is one such intersection.

The Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School building at the Woodland Cultural Centre has been providing in-depth and historically significant insight into the Residential School System for the past 44 years. The Mohawk Institute is one of less than 10 residential schools still standing across Canada. With close to 10,000 visitors every year, tours and programs offer a distinctive look into First Nations and Canadian history. The *Mush Hole Project* aims to raise awareness and encourage support for the *Save the Evidence* campaign, to ensure that the physical evidence of this dark chapter in Canadian history is never forgotten.

Curatorial Selection Process (Call for Submissions)

The selection committee encourages proposals by artists from Six Nations of the Grand in Ontario and from the greater Ontario region; however, all Aboriginal artists are encouraged to apply. Artists may propose new works or offer existing works for the consideration of the selection committee. The committee is interested in a wide range of media including, but not limited to: dance, film/media, installation, sound art, visual/theatrical/musical performance, and visual art.

As a collaborative research-creation project, members from Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities from across institutions, fields, disciplines, and communities have been working together for the past two years and have forged sustainable relationships that will come to fruition at the site. The outcomes from the site-specific installation will be presented by many of the collaborators at the *Integrating Knowledges* Summit (October 14, 15, and 16, 2016), which promises to materialize meaningful and sustainable resources and methods in the process of decolonization.

Visit the *Truth and Reconciliation Response Projects* website for more information:

<https://uwaterloo.ca/truth-and-reconciliation-response-projects/>