

# “SETTLED MEMORIES ON STOLEN LAND:

## Settler Mythology at Canada’s National Holocaust Monument”

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In this article, Jason Chalmers is asking the question: How does Holocaust memory in Canada reproduce settler colonialism and Indigenous genocide?

### Terminology

**Settler Colonialism:** Settler colonialism is a form of colonial occupation which relies on the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples’ from their land. Settlers who occupy the territory present their own narratives of why they belong and are entitled to the land. The lasting existence of these settler states depends on narratives which justify to settlers the continued occupation of these territories. This is at the expense of Indigenous people who are violently removed from their lands. Settler colonialism follows a linear structure, meaning it sees itself as progressing. The settlers become the civilized future while Indigenous people are framed as a part of the past.

**The National Holocaust Monument (NHM):** The NHM was unveiled on September 27, 2017. It is located in downtown Ottawa on unceded Algonquin territory. In this article, Chalmers presents the NHM as a way to “canadianize” the Holocaust and enforce a national myth which presents Canada as a morally superior nation in contrast to Nazi Germany. The failure of the monument to acknowledge its location on unceded Algonquin territory, as well as its design features which try to embed the monument within a Canadian landscape, are key ways that it enforces settler myths that eradicate Indigenous nations in favour of European settlers.

**Asterisk-ing:** “Asterisk-ing” refers to the way Indigenous people are presented in research to make them seem, as a demographic, insignificant. This allows settler public discourse on Indigenous rights and issues to be pushed to the side in favour of issues deemed more “important.” Instead of being presented as a group with unique and significant demands, Indigenous people are sidelined.

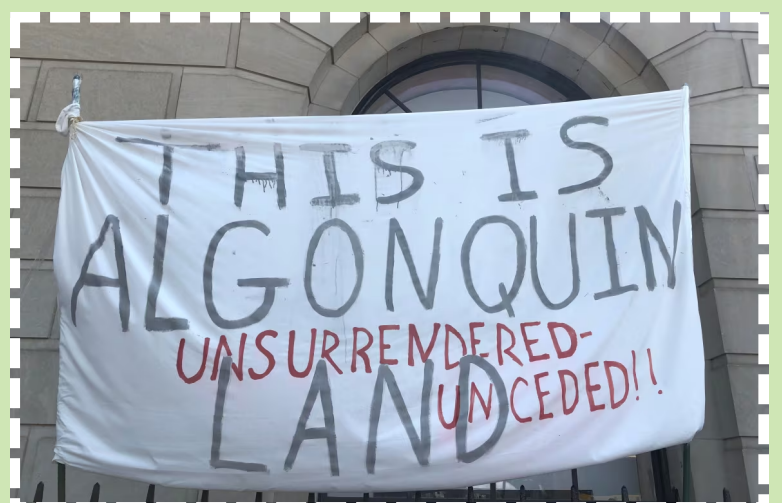
**Terra Nullius:** Terra Nullius is a colonial concept that justifies European settlement on the lands of Indigenous Peoples. It supposes that these lands are “uninhabited” and “unproductive,” and thus can be occupied by settlers. This contributes to the erasure of Indigenous Peoples.

### Terminology Continued: What is Canada’s National Mythology?

**National Mythology:** National mythology refers to the **powerful narratives** which are constructed by nations to enforce a particular perception. It can include both the ways people are **excluded** as well as who is **included** and how these forces work to present a country in a certain light. Chalmers argues that Indigenous people in Canada are excluded from these narratives while the construction of the NHM includes Holocaust survivors and commemorators. Through the creation of a national mythology, Canada is framed as a progressive and “civilized society” which allowed Holocaust survivors to rebuild following World War II. This narrative does not recognize the **genocide** of Indigenous people in Canada as well as the violent **occupation** of unceded territory.

The NHM contributes to this national mythology in four ways:

- It creates a narrative of **civilization** and **progress**
- It **frames Canada** as a **civilized society**
- It **erases Indigenous People** from the Canadian landscape
- It uses Holocaust memory to **Indigenize settler society**



Retrieved from:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/anishinabe-algonquin-nation-parliamentary-precinct-site-1.7225404>

### Key Learnings

- In narratives of **civilizational progress**, societies are depicted as starting uncivilized and moving towards civilization. In this understanding those who are “uncivilized” need to become civilized to develop. This understanding legitimizes the colonization of Canada by framing the settlers as “peacemakers” who came to teach the “uncivilized” Indigenous Peoples. Proponents of the NHM use similar language of “savagery” and civilizational progress to describe the Holocaust, thus **reproducing these narratives**.
- Civilization progress also presents Canada as a “civilized” society despite historical events that contradict this. Canada was complicit in the Holocaust by not allowing entry to Jewish refugees during the Second World War. However, in the post war era, through it’s supposed “generosity” and “progressiveness” the country is allowed to overcome this narrative. Moving forward, Canada can present itself as a morally superior nation. This is an intentional way of **framing Canadian history as European** and ignoring the continued attacks against Indigenous Peoples.
- By failing to address the location of the NHM on **unceded Algonquin territory**, supporters are contributing to the marginalization of Indigenous people in Canada. This erases Indigenous Peoples from their rightful land. By ignoring Indigenous sovereignty and Title, proponents of the NHM contribute to “state-mandated hatred” allowing narratives of Indigenous eradication to be sustained.
- Many of the designs presented for the NHM worked as a way to Indigenize settler societies. The proposed monuments **created connections between Holocaust survivors** and the **Canadian landscape** through the symbolic use of trees, forests and movement through the monument. **The NHM**, which is located on stolen land, **becomes a part of the Canadian landscape** and the **national myth** and ignores the meaningful connections to the land held by the Algonquin as well as other Indigenous people across Turtle Island.

### Beyond the Canadian Context

- In the global context, supporters of the NHM refuse to recognize the **parallels** between the settler **occupation of Palestine by Israel** and **Canada** as a **settler colonial state**. The expansion of the Israeli state relies on the eradication of Indigenous Palestinians which can be closely compared to the genocide of Indigenous people in Canada. Further similarities can be witnessed in the ways pre-Israel Palestine has been framed, using the language of **Terra Nullius** which has also been presented as justification for settler colonialism in Canada. By claiming that these territories were “unoccupied,” Canada and Israel justify their colonial projects.



Retrieved from:

<https://www.designboom.com/architecture/daniel-libeskind-national-holocaust-monument-ottawa-canada-10-02-2017/>

### Conclusion and Recommendations

- In his concluding remarks, Chalmers points to the concern of Holocaust memory creating competition in the form of “Oppression Olympics,” where the experiences of groups are compared against each other to privilege and prioritize their own suffering. Instead, he points to the need for a **noncompetitive approach**. This would allow conversations about one genocide, such as the Holocaust, to enhance discourse around the genocide of Indigenous people in Canada by bringing attention to these issues. Instead of using Holocaust memory as a way to enforce a national mythology, it can be used to challenge these norms and form dialogue around injustices to Indigenous people in Canada

### Significance - “Nations Create Narrations”

In this article, Chalmers argues that Holocaust memory in Canada reproduces settler colonialism and Indigenous genocide by producing a national mythology surrounding Canada’s relationship to the Holocaust and its survivors. Although Canada tries to frame itself as a “progressive” and “multicultural” nation these concepts cannot exist alongside forced assimilation of Indigenous cultures and the occupation of unceded territories. Settler narratives that undermine Indigenous sovereignty are intentional and have consequences which need to first be acknowledged before they can be dismantled.

### Bibliography

Chalmer Jason. “Settled Memories on Stolen Land: Settler Mythology at Canada’s National Holocaust Monument.” *The American Indian Quarterly* 43, no.4 (2019): 379-407. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2019.a736438>