Canadian Jewish Studies
Études juives canadiennes

Braided Words: Re-storying Holocaust Testimony through Indigenous-Jewish Dialogue

jason chalmers and Krista Collier-Jarvis

Volume 40, Spring 2025

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1118236ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40415

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Association for Canadian Jewish Studies / Association d'études juives canadiennes

ISSN

1198-3493 (print)
1916-0925 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

chalmers, j. & Collier-Jarvis, K. (2025). Braided Words: Re-storying Holocaust Testimony through Indigenous-Jewish Dialogue. *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes*, *40*, 14–33. https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-0925.40415

Article abstract

This article explores how material culture and shared testimony can be the basis for relationship-building between Indigenous peoples and Jews in Canada. It relies on Indigenous Métissage, a decolonizing methodology that uses artefacts to re-story Indigenous-settler relations. Drawing on their experiences as intergenerational survivors of the Holocaust and of Residential Schools, the authors apply this practice to the wartime diary of Melania Weissenberg, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust and immigrated to Canada as a war orphan in 1948. By exploring key points of entanglement, the authors create a braid wherein Mi'kmaw and Jewish narratives overlap, intersect, and knot together. This sort of dialogue can illuminate the structures and processes of settler colonialism while beginning to transform Indigenous-settler relations. Although the analysis addresses histories and legacies of genocide, it also shows how Indigenous and settler experiences are related through tradition, place, and memory.

jason chalmers and Krista Collier-Jarvis

Braided Words: Re-storying Holocaust Testimony through Indigenous-Jewish Dialogue

Abstract

This article explores how material culture and shared testimony can be the basis for relationship-building between Indigenous peoples and Jews in Canada. It relies on Indigenous Métissage, a decolonizing methodology that uses artefacts to re-story Indigenous-settler relations. Drawing on their experiences as intergenerational survivors of the Holocaust and of Residential Schools, the authors apply this practice to the wartime diary of Melania Weissenberg, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust and immigrated to Canada as a war orphan in 1948. By exploring key points of entanglement, the authors create a braid wherein Mi'kmaw and Jewish narratives overlap, intersect, and knot together. This sort of dialogue can illuminate the structures and processes of settler colonialism while beginning to transform Indigenous-settler relations. Although the analysis addresses histories and legacies of genocide, it also shows how Indigenous and settler experiences are related through tradition, place, and memory.

Résumé

Cet article explore comment la culture matérielle et le témoignage partagé peuvent être la base de l'établissement de relations entre les peuples autochtones et les Juif.ves au Canada. Il s'appuie sur le métissage autochtone, une méthodologie de décolonisation qui utilise des artefacts pour retracer les relations entre les Autochtones et les colons. S'appuyant sur leurs expériences en tant que survivants intergénérationnels de l'Holocauste et des pensionnats, les auteurs appliquent cette pratique au journal de guerre de Melania Weissenberg, une juive polonaise qui a survécu à l'Holocauste et a immigré au Canada en tant qu'orpheline de guerre en 1948. En explorant les points clés de l'enchevêtrement, les auteurs créent une tresse dans laquelle les récits mi'kmaq et juifs se chevauchent, se croisent et se nouent. Ce type de dialogue peut éclairer les structures et les processus du colonialisme de peuplement tout en commençant à transformer les relations entre les Autochtones et les colons. Bien que l'analyse aborde les histoires et les héritages du génocide, elle montre également comment les expériences des Autochtones et des colons sont liées par la tradition, le lieu et la mémoire.

This article emerges from "Trauma, Memory, and Material Culture," a groundbreaking dialogue between the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), and Thinking Through the Museum (TTTM), which took place in Washington, D.C. in May 2023.[1] During this workshop, participants visited the diary of Melania Weissenberg (Molly Applebaum) in the collections at the Shapell Center. Encircling the open diary, they shared stories about its discovery and publication, the care it has received from conservators, and

how those who read Melania's story find meaning within its pages. These stories became a polyphonic conversation where individual experiences were braided together around an artefact. Following this visit, we (jason and Krista) performed a semi-rehearsed dialogue where we drew on our respective experiences as a third-generation Holocaust survivor (and Molly's grandchild) and a third-generation Residential School survivor, respectively, engaging with the diary as both narrative and material object. What follows is an adapted transcription of this session.

Our analysis moves beyond comparative studies by exploring how dialogue can illuminate genocide and settler colonialism as structural phenomena. As A. Dirk Moses notes, straightforward comparisons risk reinforcing claims about the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust: "The discourse [of genocide commemoration as a zero-sum competition] is also remarkably static because each side dogmatically asserts the similarities or differences between cases for its own advantage without exploring the conceptual and historical relations between them."[2] Moses explains that asserting the "specialness" of a particular genocide distracts from the structures that undergird genocide in general. Our performance at "Trauma, Memory, and Material Culture," as well as what follows in this article, is therefore about placing lived experiences of genocide in conversation–as a collaboration to pursue healing and decolonization through braiding.[3]

Our dialogue explores the wartime diary of Melania Weissenberg as curated material artefact and as a catalyst for decolonial museum practice. Melania was born in Krakow, Poland in 1930 to a Jewish family who owned and operated a small store. Shortly after the German occupation of Poland, Melania and her family fled eastward to the town of Dabrowa Tarnowska. When news spread in 1942 that the Lublin and Krakow ghettos were being liquidated, followed by initial liquidation of the Dabrowa ghetto, Melania went into hiding with her older cousin, Helena, on a farm owned by a Polish family. From 1942 until her liberation in 1945, Melania maintained a diary of thoughts and feelings, events and gossip, poetry and meditations while living in a wooden box buried beneath a barn. Upon liberation, Melania immigrated to Canada with a group of war orphans in 1948 where she became Molly and began a new life. Paired with a memoir written in the 1990s, an English translation of the diary was published in 2017 as *Buried Words*.[4] The original diary is now part of the USHMM's permanent collection in Washington, D.C.[5]

As a recently uncovered wartime diary written by a teenage girl, Melania's diary provides insights into the history of the Holocaust and the experiences of Jews in rural Poland. The diary and subsequent memoir also illuminate the history of postwar migration to Canada. It is the transnational and transhistorical flow of both people and material culture that is the focus of this article. In particular, we ask what *Buried Words* reveals about settler colonialism on Turtle Island (North America) and

especially in so-called Canada. How are Holocaust survivors (and other refugees) implicated in settler colonialism? How can we productively understand relationships between Indigenous peoples and Canadian Jewry? Can material culture be a site of decolonization? To broach these questions, we turn to Indigenous Métissage, a methodology that braids stories together to illuminate and re-envision relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler society in Canada. We contend that engaging with material culture from the Holocaust, such as the diary of Melania Weissenberg, can illuminate Indigenous-Jewish relations as well as the broader structures and processes of settler colonialism. When used as a catalyst for dialogue, such artefacts become part of an ongoing and intergenerational testimony that can re-imagine, transform, and potentially decolonize Indigenous-settler relations in Canada.

Decolonizing Public History in Canada

Museums and other sites of public history require decolonial practices that are specific to their geographical and social contexts. In Canada, this means addressing colonialism as a transnational phenomenon while responding specifically to settler colonialism—a form of imperial domination wherein colonizers permanently settle on and inhabit Indigenous land, which they achieve by displacing Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories.[6] Museums historically functioned as material archives for the many objects, artefacts, and human remains that European explorers appropriated on their voyages and during their encounters with Indigenous peoples around the world.[7] As such, museum collections are intimately connected to the history of European imperialism and colonialism. The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples released a report in 1992 that addressed colonial history and recommended "the return of human remains and illegally obtained objects along with certain non-skeletal burial materials and other sacred objects to appropriate First Peoples."[8] While Canadian museums have in recent years begun to include Indigenous perspectives and discussions of settler colonialism, they often do this in a way that reproduces settler mythologies and colonial violence.[9]

In order to decolonize their exhibits, museums need to address how they frame artefacts for public consumption. One strategy is to challenge the distinction between *art*, which is perceived as a contemporary product of civilized societies, and *artefact*, which is often treated as a remnant of more "primitive" peoples. The opposition between art and artefact is closely connected to other binary oppositions, such as self/other and civilized/savage. As such, troubling this distinction can be an effective way to disrupt the colonial gaze that many visitors and curators apply, however inadvertently, to museum collections.[10] One way to do this is by "re-storying" artefacts and exhibits, which can include designing exhibits that disrupt dominant historical meta-narratives, using Indigenous or marginalized perspectives to interpret artefacts, or framing museum collections in a way that highlights their plural and often

contested meanings.[11] Re-storying museum content can be an especially effective approach to decolonization because it engages with material culture as well as the hermeneutic frameworks that visitors use to interpret these artefacts.

Decolonization is an epistemic process that challenges the domination of European knowledge over the knowledges of Indigenous and other non-European peoples. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes colonialism both as an act of political domination and as a set of assumptions about "the validity of specific forms of knowledge;" in particular, she explains that colonizers establish the "positional superiority" of Western knowledge while delegitimizing, suppressing, or appropriating Indigenous knowledges.[12] Decolonization therefore entails the "epistemological reordering" of colonial regimes through the recovery of marginalized perspectives and, especially, by re-legitimizing Indigenous ways of knowing.[13] From the perspective of Indigenous Métissage, which is an Indigenous-informed way of knowing that we explore in the following section, this can also involve situating Western and Indigenous knowledge as distinct but equally valid–and ultimately as interconnected–epistemic positions. It is important to note, however, that decolonization should not only be directed towards Indigenous and colonized peoples but must also facilitate the transformation of European and Western identities, histories, and worldviews.[14]

Indigenous Métissage as Decolonial Practice

A crucial part of decolonization in Canada is to explore and re-imagine the ways in which settler and Indigenous histories are entwined. In his critical re-reading of local and national history, Dwayne Donald observes that Canadian society has a "tendency to separate the stories of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people" in a way that positions these groups, and their respective histories, as isolated and unrelated.[15] This perceived separation is problematic because it erases Indigenous peoples from official historical narratives while also ignoring past, present, and future relationships between settler society and Indigenous nations. In response, Donald developed a methodological approach that works to resolve historical erasure and build more respectful ongoing, interconnected relationships. Using a metaphor from the visual arts, he describes Canadian history as a pentimento wherein settler narratives have effectively "painted over" Indigenous ones.[16] His methodology involves "peel[ing] back the layers of memory that are encapsulated in [historical] artefact[s];" this process "does not imply a search for an original and pure beginning hidden underneath the layers," but rather acknowledges "that each layer mixes with the other and renders irreversible influence on our perceptions of it."[17] In this way, Donald's pentimento reveals how settler society and Indigenous peoples are linked through their shared histories of place and provides new ways to imagine Canadian history and identity. Like a pentimento that reveals what has been painted over, Canada's colonial

history will increasingly have to acknowledge and engage with its silenced stories.

Donald further develops this approach as Indigenous Métissage, a "decolonizing research sensibility" for understanding and exploring Indigenous–settler relations in Canada. He offers this sensibility as both a critique and extension of the postcolonial theory of métissage, which posits that cultural mixing in colonial contexts can facilitate conciliation between otherwise opposing groups.[18] Whereas métissage emphasizes cultural hybridity through the blending of peoples and histories–and thereby possibly erasing Indigeneity–Indigenous Métissage focuses on the way settlers and Indigenous peoples are distinct but connected. Specifically, Indigenous Métissage envisions Indigenous–settler relations as a braid that contains multiple "standpoints [that] are interreferential, interconnected, and yet simultaneously rife with the power dynamics of coloniality."[19] Within this braid, settler and Indigenous histories are separate strands that overlap, intersect, knot together, and become entangled with one another. As a methodological approach, Indigenous Métissage can illuminate history and material culture in settler colonial contexts. This involves addressing artefacts as "storied aspects of [the] world" and explicitly interpreting how they are inscribed with multiple stories and perspectives.[20] In this way, Indigenous Métissage positions "the researcher as the weaver of a braid" who parses out these stories and "braids parallel perspectives together to show that our individual preoccupations with certain artifacts, places, and colonial constructs are really part of a larger collective" awareness.[21]

Indigenous Métissage can therefore be an effective way to decolonize Canadian museums and other sites of public history.[22] Its relevance to museums emerges from the fact that, as an analytical process, Indigenous Métissage addresses both historical narratives and the sort of cultural artefacts that are readily housed in museum collections. Moreover, it enables people to view the world from a trans-systemic perspective, that is, in a way that recognizes and engages with multiple knowledge systems.[23] This includes working with Western and Indigenous worldviews in a relational and complementary way, but it can also involve working across disciplines or institutions (i.e. across multiple museums, archives, universities, and so on) or genocidal histories and experiences, as with the "Trauma, Memory, and Material Culture" workshop. Indeed, Anna Mendoza observes that museums are multimodal sites that comprise many interwoven dialogues, artefacts, cultural identities, languages, spaces, and places; knowledge is both situated in place and embedded within a larger "tapestry created by a multitude of overlapping, sometimes convergent and other times divergent, individual and group narratives."[24] Furthermore, Indigenous Métissage is a useful tool for museum practitioners because it involves "the braiding of theory, practice, and ethics" and, as such, is concerned with multiple aspects of human experience (i.e. thinking, acting, and relating).[25] In other words, it is a wholistic framework that can create more complete and fulfilling experiences for museum visitors and

researchers while also enabling people to engage with artefacts in more respectful and ethical ways.

A Braid of *Buried Words*

The object of our Indigenous Métissage braid is the diary of Melania Weissenberg. This diary has received considerable attention from educators and historians following its publication. Much of this attention comes from the way Melania's diary provides a gendered and sexualized account of the Holocaust, which is an underrepresented perspective in the historical archives and one which has been largely neglected by scholars.[26] While acknowledging that these studies are deeply important, our analysis considers other less-explored dimensions of the diary. First, we treat the diary not only as a historical document but also as an artefact–a physical object situated in place(s) at the nexus of diverse narratives. Furthermore, we apply Indigenous Métissage to the diary by exploring how it is embedded in the structures and practices of settler colonialism. This critique is based on the fact that Melania/Molly immigrated to and permanently settled in so-called Canada. In doing so, she (somewhat unknowingly) became an inhabitant of Indigenous land and a subject of Treaties between the British Crown and the Indigenous nations of Turtle Island.[27] Turtle Island is not only where Molly built a new life and had a family, but it is also where she processed her experiences of survival and wrote her memoir. Through our conversation, *Buried Words* and the stories around it become a braided embodiment of the Holocaust and post-war migration, Indigenous-Jewish relations, and shared healing through dialogue.

We use Indigenous Métissage as the methodological framework for this analysis with particular emphasis on the way it "relies on collaboration and collective authorship as a strategy for exemplifying, as research practice and text, the transcultural, interdisciplinary, and shared nature of experience and memory."[28] As such, we each tell the story of Melania's diary from our own perspectives: Krista (Mi'kmaw) offers an Indigenous account while jason provides a reading that is rooted in Jewish and settler experience. We weave these stories together with Melania/Molly's. In doing so, we hope to illuminate how Holocaust memory is entwined with the structures and processes of settler colonialism and, moreover, how shared remembrance can contribute to more respectful relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler society.

Tradition and Place

Movement upon land, and survival beneath it, are central elements in Melania/Molly's story, and so we begin with place. Place is essential to both Jewish and Indigenous identities. While Indigeneity is rooted in ancestral connections to and kinship with the land, Jewishness is shaped largely by histories of displacement and migration.

Understanding different relationships to land–as well as the various ways people become displaced from land–can help to understand the context of Melania's diary as well as her journey to and settlement on Turtle Island.

jason's strand

To understand Melania's diary and Molly's memoir, it is helpful to consider the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Jewish experience, and especially Jewish relationships to place. Jewish tradition is shaped by many factors and defined in many ways–as culture, religion, ethnicity, language, forms of legal interpretation, bodies of literature, styles of cuisine, among others. An integral part of this tradition is the Jewish relationship to land and place. This relationship is influenced largely by experiences of diaspora, that is, as a people not defined by or limited to a particular geographic territory but rather scattered across many regions. Some scholars argue that diaspora is "the ground of Jewish identity" and propose a national story that "begins with a people forever unconnected with a particular land, a people that calls into question the idea that a people must have a land in order to be a people."[29]

Yet Jewish communities also develop attachments to place and have often inhabited locales for many generations. At the time of Melania's birth in 1930, Jewish communities had been living in Poland for more than 800 years. Many European regions hosted Jewish communities for even longer, such as Greece or Italy, where Jews had lived for more than two millennia. Increasing persecution and displacement in the 1930s and 1940s, however, catalyzed a significant shift in Jewish experiences of place and a returned emphasis on diasporic migration. The creation of the State of Israel from British-ruled Mandatory Palestine in 1948 further complicated Jewish perceptions of place. While the significance of Israel to Jewish history and identity remains contested, many Jews view the region as their traditional homeland and perceive the creation of the modern nation-state as an act of homecoming.[30]

Jewish relationships to place have unfolded distinctly in Canada and other settler societies where Jewish communities are much younger but have also grown through post-war immigration. As Donald observes, many migrants who travelled to and settled in the Americas were motivated by dreams of material wealth and financial prosperity; this prosperity came at the expense of Indigenous peoples whose lands were (and continue to be) appropriated to produce material resources.[31] Early Jewish settlers were part of this economic dream. Jews have been living in Canada since at least the mid-18th century, and even longer in other parts of the Americas, and many participated in the resource-based economy as merchants or traders.[32] Some even specialized in the acquisition and sale of "Indian curios"–Indigenous artefacts that fascinated the European imagination, such as pipes, headdresses, or wampum belts–which resulted in the earliest encounters between Indigenous peoples and Jewish migrants.[33]

It was not until the late-19th century, however, that Jewish migrants began to arrive in Canada en masse. By this time, the reasons for immigration had changed considerably. During the late-19th and early-20th century, Jewish families in the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe fled their homes in response to rising antisemitism, pogroms, and political instability, with thousands of asylum-seekers arriving in Canada.[34] A combination of war and racist immigration policies slowed this influx until after the Second World War, when Canada began to relax its immigration policies. Holocaust survivors arrived in Canada as war orphans, skilled workers, and displaced persons, with more than fifteen thousand survivors settling between 1946 and 1951.[35] In sum, Jewish experiences and perceptions of place are as plural and nuanced as any other dimension of Jewish experience. The plurality does not resolve but rather creates an ongoing tension between displacement and belonging.[36]

Krista's strand

Indigenous conceptions of place are similarly storied in a tension between displacement and belonging. The establishment of reserves in Canada and Indian reservations in the United States resulted in the displacement of many nations from their home territories, forcing Indigenous peoples to learn different ways of being on the land. Indigenous relationships to place are therefore multifarious, but they generally emphasize belonging–the term "indigenous," after all, is rooted in the idea of being from and in place long before settler colonization–and thus land- or place-based practice is a cornerstone of Indigenous approaches to knowledge.

Take the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer (member of Citizen Potawatomi Nation), for example, whose 2013 nonfiction book *Braiding Sweetgrass* interweaves traditional Indigenous knowledge about plants with botany, the science of plants.[37] These two teachings are distinct but connected approaches that Kimmerer braids together to better understand her own, as well as her community's, relationship to place. For example, Kimmerer opens with sweetgrass' "scientific name: *Hierochloe odorata,* meaning the fragrant, holy grass. In our language it is called *wiingaashk*, the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth."[38] Kimmerer's understanding of sweetgrass is distinct to her nation's understanding of place, but she does not share this at the expense or silencing of settler scientific kinship with the sweetgrass; just as she does with the sweetgrass itself, she braids the two together. Sweetgrass braiding, Kimmerer proclaims, "is an intertwining of science, spirit, and story–old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with the earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other."[39] Sweetgrass use varies by community, but in the end, almost all Indigenous communities that use it emphasize the connection between community practices and land. The land, then, is where Indigenous cultures and communities are rooted and from where they/we understand relations

with other peoples, and braiding becomes an important method for understanding various entanglements between place and the people who engage place, including newcomers to so-called Canada.

Placed-ness and Displaced-ness

Because Indigenous peoples and Jews have different yet similarly nuanced experiences of place and land, they/we may also experience and interpret displacement in different ways. The displacement of Indigenous peoples from their/our ancestral territories through settler colonialism is a violent process that disrupts Indigenous identities and ways of life. For Jews, displacement is also disruptive, but it may be perceived as continuous with a long history of exile and return. Perceptions of displacement can inform how people encounter and engage with new places; it can also be the basis for building new relationships with land and between peoples.

jason's strand

Melania's diary expresses an ambivalence towards place. Poland has a history of state- and social-tolerance towards Jews dating as early as the 12th century, which resulted in Poland becoming one of the main European centres of Jewish life and culture; this tolerance reached a peak in the 14th century under the rule of King Casimir III the Great.[40] By the 20th century, however, this acceptance had largely eroded, and this is the Poland into which Melania was born. Molly's memoir begins by acknowledging this history while also highlighting the increasingly marginal position that Jews had come to occupy in Polish society. Even before the Second World War, she notes, many Jews found Poland an undesirable place to live, and families would spend years saving enough money "to buy a passage to the New World."[41] Melania's sense of displacement becomes particularly extreme when in hiding during the war. In a diary entry from April 7, 1943, slightly more than two months after she and Helena moved underground, Melania writes:

> There is a place on the surface of the earth for all living creatures. Sadly, there is no place on the surface of the earth only for two miserable, abandoned living creatures. So these two poor, miserable human beings are forced to live under the surface, squeezed in a small box…Confinement–dirt, bugs, darkness and stuffiness–as in a grave. But these creatures are so happy that it is as it is and not worse and they are thankful for this 'grave' in their daily prayers. And they say nothing, they do not even complain anymore because they know that there is no place for them on the surface of the earth. [42]

In this deeply despairing passage, Melania feels deprived of both her humanity and her place in the cosmos. She has begun to internalize the dehumanising gaze that

Polish and German societies directed at Jews; there is "no place" for Melania and Helena, so they are forced to live amongst insects and filth. Underground, disconnected from the rest of humanity, Melania feels that she no longer has a home or even a voice with which to complain about the lack of home. Despite being as close to the landscape that a person can be–literally buried within the soil–Melania is utterly displaced.

Krista's strand

While Melania's experience during the Nazi occupation of Poland is characterized by displacement, her relocation to Canada offers opportunities for transforming displaced-ness into a kind of re-placed-ness. In June 1948, Melania arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia–my home–before moving on to Sydney, Nova Scotia, both of which are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. Molly writes, "I ventured out around the neighbourhood, and the grocery stores amazed us. We could not figure out why oranges and cabbages were displayed side by side."[43] Nova Scotia provides her the freedom to venture, to explore place through relationality, as a kind of braiding on its own. While buried with Helena in Poland, she understands herself in terms of what she shares with the dirt and bugs, as a "miserable, abandoned living creature," yet in Canada, she questions how things that share space (the displays in a grocery store) are relational. As fruits and vegetables that come from away, displaced, she wonders at how they find themselves together in place.

Similarly, as Melania enters the foster care system (where she becomes Molly)–a system that has consistently seen the overrepresentation of Indigenous children–she feels as if "we just existed side by side" rather than in a relational manner with her foster family.[44] Her understandings of family are relational and braided, just as she is with Helena, and these qualities seem to be largely lacking in her experiences of foster care.

In relationality, with Molly inhabiting the land of my ancestors, I sought to better understand if Melania's experiences of displaced-ness can be better understood in Poland. In 2022, I travelled to Poland where I spent time in the areas where the Warsaw Ghetto and the Treblinka II killing centre were located. Reflecting on this experience, I wrote:

> It takes about an hour by tour bus to get from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka. I stand just outside where the gates would be–that is, if the gates still stood at the entrance. The air is fresh; it smells like flowers and is just the right temperature; I've never heard birds sing this loud. Before me stand two concrete monuments, one slightly askew as if a door has been opened. The tour guide tells us we have the choice to enter, which is something that was not afforded to the victims who lost their lives here. I enter willingly.

> Across the threshold, it is as if someone has covered me with a blanket. The birds still sing, but the air is quite different–it's heavy. I traverse forward, walking alongside the old, moss-covered slabs where the railway tracks carted thousands to their final resting place. Later, people would look at my pictures and ask if those slabs are grave markers. They may as well be. After all, many never made it this far, and their lifeless bodies were carelessly tossed from the trains between Warsaw and Treblinka.
>
> We reach the end of the tracks and turn left, beckoned toward the massive monument that stands at the place where the gas chambers may have been–not much remains of the original camp. A smooth faced stone tells us 'Never Again' in many languages. The central monument is surrounded by thousands of smaller stones. They stand at various angles, leaning in, leaning away, jagged in parts, smooth in others. No two are alike. In the distance are two massive trees, whose greenery punches the sky. They stand as guardians upon the mass graves beneath them.
>
> I walk toward the trees and find myself stopped by a mound of dirt that extends in both directions, turns abruptly once, then twice, and re-meets several feet from me across an expanse. I stand at the edge of the pit where the bodies were burned. I refuse to photograph this part.[45]

Upon my return, I revisited *Buried Words*. On Sunday March 14, 1943, Melania wrote, "I am chilled to the bone even though it is mid-March and the weather is beautiful, the sun is shining brightly and the earth is fragrant."[46] Like my experience standing in Treblinka II, the stark contrast between the weather and the embodiment of place, which has been tainted with violence, cannot be overlooked. It invades the senses and functions both as a form of placed-ness and displaced-ness. Melania's diary, for instances, focuses intensely on spring and how this season has abandoned her. Place modifies stories, and my relationship with Poland and thus the artefact, *Buried Words*, changed. Donald argues that when Indigenous peoples and settlers "face each other across historic divides, deconstruct their shared past, and engage critically with the realization that their present and future are similarly tied together," they can engage in meaningful relational understandings.[47]

Locating the Self and Caring for the Object

We (Krista and jason) have both inherited histories of genocide and feel a responsibility to care for these histories and share them with others. Our respective histories have similarities and differences but, more importantly, they have concrete points of overlap and intersection (largely through Jewish migration to so-called Canada). We have used *Buried Words* to explore some of these intersections and begin a dialogue.

By exploring our different relationships to Melania's diary, Molly's memoir, as well as larger history of modern genocide, we hope to better understand our relationships to one another.

jason's strand

While Melania's decision to settle in Canada was shaped largely by chance and circumstance, her diary played a noteworthy role in guiding this journey. Molly reports in her memoir that she and Helena registered with the Red Cross and Jewish aid societies, through which they could find the names and addresses of relatives who had survived the war in Europe or were already living overseas. Melania recorded this information in the back of her diary: "Our most treasured possession was our notebook [i.e. diary cum address book] with addresses of relatives in the US."[48] As a displaced person in post-war Europe, Melania gives her diary new meaning; it becomes not just a chronicle of past experiences but also an archive of potential futures. When Melania's uncle, who had also survived the war, learned that a transport of war orphans would be admitted to the United States, he encouraged her to register. Molly recounts that "after I registered to immigrate and was accepted, I was asked where I wanted to go and I said America, but the interviewers told me that the quota was full. However, I could register for Canada, so I agreed."[49] Thus in June 1948, Melania arrived by ship in Halifax, later traveling by train to Sydney where she would stay with a foster family. After several years in Sydney, Molly ultimately made her way to Toronto where she started a family and began her new life.

Melania/Molly's story is also my story. Molly is my grandmother, and she played a critical role in forming and nurturing my passion for the history and memory of the Holocaust. In turn, I played a small role in the publication of *Buried Words*. In 2011, I enrolled in a master's program at the University of Ottawa where I planned to study Holocaust commemoration in Canada. As part of my coursework, I joined a graduate seminar on the history of the Holocaust taught by Jan Grabowski. This was a serendipitous occasion because Grabowski is an expert on the Holocaust in Poland who is passionate about wartime diaries, but also because, unbeknownst to me, he was at the time preparing an English version of his book on the Jews of Dabrowa Tarnowska.[50] During a break in the school term, I was visiting family when my aunt mentioned the existence of the diary and proposed finding a translator. I made copies of the diary and returned to Ottawa in hopes of gaining some insight to its contents. When I shared these with Grabowski, he immediately recognized the historical value and took responsibility for having the diary translated, published, and ensuring that the physical artefact would be carefully preserved by the USHMM. My contribution to *Buried Words*, then, is not measured by any work I did but by the connections I made.

These experiences have helped me connect to my own history but also to better understand my position within settler society. After completing my master's, I enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Alberta. I planned to compare Jewish and Indigenous experiences and memories of genocide, which quickly led to a curiosity about settler colonialism and decolonization. Dwayne Donald helped introduce me to decolonization and consider how it can be integrated into research practice. One bit of guidance he offered was the importance of positionality: that both colonization and decolonization are shaped by one's identity, ancestry, location, and the network of relationships they are embedded within. In other words, if I wanted to develop a decolonial practice, I needed to do it from my own perspective. Though I never identified strongly with the religious dimension of Jewish tradition, I have always felt a close connection to the history and memory of the Holocaust, so I began to approach decolonization from the perspective of an intergenerational Holocaust survivor. I began to ask questions, which I am still trying to answer. How has Jewish immigration shaped settler colonialism in Canada? Does Holocaust commemoration perpetuate settler colonialism and contribute to the genocides of Indigenous peoples? How can distinct peoples use their respective histories to build shared memories that dismantle colonial structures?[51]

Krista's strand

In many ways, jason's questions are also my questions, and in particular, how distinct peoples can disrupt settler colonialism by sharing history. My grandmother, who attended the Shubenacadie Residential School, the only Residential School located in the Maritimes, is no longer around to tell her story; she did not leave behind a diary or a memoir to help me understand her experience and the ways in which I am implicated in the history of Residential Schools. There are certainly many Residential School memoirs, but there are virtually no diaries–no real time documentation from the victims and survivors. And so, the colonial structures of Residential Schools maintain "colonial memory," that is, where the stories of the children who experienced the schools "fail to enter fully into signification."[52] This leads me to question whether there are ways in which Melania's diary can bring me closer to my grandmother's story.

The preface to *Buried Words* embodies such a possibility, as it claims that "in telling these stories, the writers have liberated themselves."[53] In reading *Buried Words*, I am interpellated and interpolated into multiple difficult histories as both a reader and an intergenerational survivor of Residential Schools. I am a witness to Melania's experiences and the places in which she wrote her diary and her memoir. I am implicated in caring for the knowledge contained in this artefact as well as caring for the stories of my ancestors. While these experiences are distinct, their storied strands share points of commonality that can be braided, not for comparative purposes, but

to better understand the structures that give rise to such difficult histories, relationships to place, memory, and trauma; and to use this understanding to interrupt colonial structures more broadly on Turtle Island and beyond.

Diaries, interestingly, are often misconceived as stories and artefacts for the self, but they often suggest a hypothetical reader. For example, Melania often addresses her friend and love interest Sabina Goldman (Bineczka) directly–"I am writing to you [...] I am writing to you"–even after finding out that Bineczka had not survived.[54] Melania also writes to a hypothetical male gendered reader: "If someone were to read these words, he would think that the writer was deranged."[55] Her hypothetical reader is also potentially dangerous: "if someone finds you and reads the words written in you, then I shall immediately be exposed."[56] The diary, after all, was a living document at the time in which it was written, embodying Melania–"these are the pages of my existence, my life"–and thus acting as a hyperreal version of her when the world around her placed her body in ever more precarious positions.[57] The hypothetical reader changes early on, becoming less associated with Bineczka and more often gendered male and potentially representative of the threat of persecution. In doing so, the diary at first seems to fear the systemic violence. Yet, as the diary progresses, Melania seems to openly confide in the hypothetical reader more, seemingly repositioning the reader less as a danger and moreso as a body experiencing the same fear, hunger, thirst, darkness, and loneliness that Melania feels. This reader is a friend and confidant who sits in solidarity with Melania, and so, Melania begins to resist and write back against the structures that keep her in hiding. As such, the reader is implicated in and responsible to and for the diary and Melania's story and wellbeing, both as a testament to be shared but also as material culture. As Thomas King (Cherokee, German, and Greek) famously stated in his 2003 Massey lectures, "don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story, you've heard it now."[58]

Conclusion

During our performance at "Trauma, Memory, and Material Culture," our colleagues from TTTM, NMAI, and USHMM seemed suddenly compelled to respond in kind with their own stories, turning the traditional Q&A into a veritable moment of braided storying. Participants positioned themselves and shared stories about themselves and their ancestors, sometimes admitting that they have never told these stories prior. Our stories, braided together, invited other stories, largely unprompted, in what we experienced as collective healing. This is not new, of course. For example, Robbie Waisman, a Holocaust survivor and educator whose work addresses reconciliation and Indigenous Jewish relationships, explains that he is motivated largely by the silence surrounding the history and legacy of Residential Schools: "When I ultimately shared my experiences as a Holocaust survivor with First Nations communities, first in Yellowknife and later elsewhere in Canada, I was totally astonished

and rewarded by the fact that some who had never spoken about their horrible experiences were encouraged to do so."[59]

This article seeks to put the decolonial research sensibility of Indigenous Métissage into practice by braiding together histories: Melania's experience of hiding during the Holocaust combined with the experience of memory after liberation and immigration to Canada; jason's experience of discovering the diary and understanding what it means to be an intergenerational Holocaust survivor; and Krista's experience as an intergenerational survivor of Residential Schools understanding trauma through reading experiences of the Holocaust. In doing so, we, and our stories, remain distinct but relational. Our analysis shows how dialogue–between individuals, peoples, histories, and artefacts–is crucial to decolonizing both museum content and the experiences of museum visitors. Indigenous Métissage offers a productive way to structure this dialogue. While it can illuminate the sort of colonial narratives one might find in a Canadian national museum, for example, it can also begin to unsettle and re-story the history, memory, and museology of the Holocaust. The history and memory of the Holocaust are intimately linked with settler colonialism in Canada and across Turtle Island, and by weaving these realities together Holocaust museums can facilitate productive encounters for visitors.

Holocaust museology–and the discipline of memory studies more broadly–considers how to acknowledge and preserve the authentic, communal, and intricate experiences of first-generation survivors while also critiquing and making space for intergenerational survivors (and perpetrators) who have inherited the history, stories, and trauma of their/our ancestors. Marianne Hirsch asks, "what do we owe the victims? How can we best carry their stories forward without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced. How are we implicated in the crimes? [and] Can the memory of genocide be transformed into action and resistance?"[60] There is no tidy, easy answer to these questions just as there is no singular experience of either the Holocaust or of Residential Schools. Just as *Buried Words* exists in two forms–as diary and as memoir–so too do these experiences take more than one shape. Melania's story becomes our story, not to replace or rewrite or silence her, but to better become ourselves, who exist as memory keepers, as intergenerational survivors, and as distinct peoples living on Indigenous land.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank Thinking Through the Museum, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the National Museum of the American Indian for co-creating a space of exploration and storytelling. This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Krista Collier-Jarvis is a member of the Mi'kmaw First Nation and an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Mount Saint Vincent University. Her research focuses on Indigenous and American literatures and cultures, Gothic and horror, climate fiction, popular culture, and critical museology. She is a third-generation residential school survivor and often finds that her work intersects Indigenous experiences and difficult histories. She is an Affiliate with Thinking through the Museum and the Co-Lead on the Two-Eyed Seeing project. She has published on uncanny play in *Pet Sematary*, endemicity in zombie narratives, the rise of the rhizombie, and haunting back against Canadian national narratives in *Blood Quantum*.

jason chalmers is an independent scholar and recent SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow at Concordia University. jason's research explores settler colonialism and decolonization in Canada, with particular focus on museums, monuments, and memory. Their research appears in journals including *American Indian Quarterly*, *Contemporary Jewry*, and *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*. jason is a settler of Jewish and Scottish ancestry who now lives in Mi'kma'ki but did most of this research in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal.

1
"'Trauma, Memory, and Material Culture' Workshop Reflections," Thinking Through the Museum, accessed April 2, 2025, https://www.thinkingthroughthemuseum.org/blog/trauma-memory-and-material-culture-workshop.

2
A. Dirk Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (2002): 18.

3
By focusing on the Holocaust and its material culture, we recognize the risk of perpetuating an imbalance between Indigenous and Jewish experiences. Following Moses' example, we strive to focus on the structural elements of genocide rather than superficial similarities which could result in Holocaust-centrism. Moreover, we also feel that a dialogic approach can resist Holocaust-centrism by instead turning towards "multicentrism" which "envisions a world of irreducibly diverse and multiple centres of being and value." See Anthony Weston, "Multicentrism: A Manifesto," *Environmental Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2004): 25-40.

4
Molly Applebaum, *Buried Words: The Diary of Molly Applebaum* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2017).

5
"Melania Weissenberg papers," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accession number 2016.442.1, last modified March 26, 2025, https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn551471?rsc=21950&cv=0&x-=775&y=1129&z=1.0e-4.

6
Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

7
Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 9-16; Bryony Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonising Engagement* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 26-44.

8
Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples*, 3rd ed. (Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association, 1994), 5.

9
Krista Collier-Jarvis, "Oka-Nada: Historical Contagion and Haunting Back in Jeff Barnaby's *Blood Quantum*," in *Global Indigenous Horror*, ed. Naomi Simone Borwein (University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming); jason chalmers, "National Myth in Canada: Reproducing and Resisting Settler Colonialism at Memorial Sites (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2019).

10
Divya P. Tolia-Kelly and Rosanna Raymond, "Decolonising Museum Cultures: An Artist and Geographer in Collaboration," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45, no. 2 (2020); Michael D. Carrasco, Lesley A. Wolff, and Paul Niell, "Curating the Caribbean: Unsettling the Boundaries of Art and Artefact," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 7 (2021).

11
Karine Duhamel, "Kanata/Canada: Re-storying Canada 150 at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 28, no. 1 (2017); Janet Groen and Colleen Kawalilak, "Disrupting Narratives of Colonization–Museums as Pedagogical Spaces," *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* 31, no. 2 (2019); S. Anderson, "Unsettling National Narratives and Multiplying Voices: The Art Museum as Renewed Space for Social Advocacy and Decolonization—A Canadian Case Study," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 35, no. 5 (2020); Christiana Molldrem Harkulich, "Greg Deal's *White Indian* (2016): The Decolonial Possibilities of Museum Performance," *Contemporaneity* 7, no. 1 (2018); Ajeng Ayu Arainikasih and Hafnidar, "Decolonising the Aceh Museum: Objects, Histories and their Narratives," *Low Countries Historical Review* 133, no. 2 (2018).

12
Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012), 118-128.

13
Carrasco et al., "Curating the Caribbean," 685.

14
Johanna Turunen, "Decolonising European Minds through Heritage," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26, no. 10 (2020).

15
Dwayne Trevor Donald, "Edmonton Pentimento: Re-reading History in the Case of the Papaschase Cree," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004): 23. See also Dwayne Donald, "We Need a New Story: Walking and the *wâhkôhtowin* Imagination," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 18, no. 2 (2021).

16
Donald, "Edmonton Pentimento," 23.

17
Ibid., 23-24.

18
Métissage (a process of blending) is not to be confused with the Métis (an Indigenous nation).

19
Dwayne Donald, "Indigenous Métissage: A Decolonizing Research Sensibility," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25, no. 5 (2012): 548.

20
Ibid., 542. Donald explains that "I use artifact in a socio-cultural and historical sense to denote a vestige fecund with contested interpretations of culture and identity, rather than in an archaeological sense referring to findings fit for museums that attempt to 'capture' and 'define' meanings of culture and identity." In other words, he does not rely on the art/artefact binary. We follow Donald by also defining "artefact" in this way.

21
Ibid., 544-48.

22
Dwayne Trevor Donald, "Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage: Imagining Decolonization of Aboriginal-Canadian Relations in Educational Contexts," *First Nations Perspectives* 2, no. 1 (2009).

23
Vicki Kelly, "Radical Acts of Re-imagining Ethical Relationality and Trans-systemic Transformation," *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching and Learning* 7, no. 1 (2021).

24
Anna Mendoza, "Preparing Preservice Educators to Teach Critical, Place-based Literacies," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 61, no. 4 (2017): 414.

25
Heather E. McGregor, Brooke Madden, Marc Higgins, and Julia Ostertag, "Braiding Designs for Decolonizing Research Methodologies: Theory, Practice, Ethics," *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology* 9, no. 2 (2018): 2.

26
Arielle Berger, ed. "Buried Words: Sexuality, Violence and Holocaust Testimonies," special issue of *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021).

27
Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 249-254.

28
Donald, "Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage," 9.

29
Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 718.

30
Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenges of Representation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 57-84.

31
Donald, "Edmonton Pentimento."

32
David S. Koffman, *The Jews' Indian: Colonialism, Pluralism, and Belonging in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019); David S. Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History: Towards a Tangled History of Jewish-Indigenous Encounters," in *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, ed. David S. Koffman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

33
Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History."

34
Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews: A People's Journey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 75-6 and 93-4.

35
Ibid., 403.

36
See for example Madeleine Cohen, "*Do'ikayt* and the Spaces of Politics in An-Sky's Novella *In shtrom*," *East European Jewish Affairs* 50, no. 1-2 (2020).

37
Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

38
Ibid., ix.

39
Ibid., x.

40
This point is stressed in the unpublished version of Molly's memoir, which begins with the arrival of Jews in the fourteenth century under the rule of Casimir III. For a history of Polish-Jewish relations, see Bernard Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland: A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100-1800* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972).

41
Applebaum, *Buried Words*, 47.

42
Ibid., 19-20.

43
Ibid., 93.

44
Cindy Blackstock, Muriel Bamblett, and Carlina Black, "Indigenous Ontology, International Law and the Applications of the Convention to the Over-Representation of Indigenous Children in out of Home Care in Canada and Australia," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 110, no. 1 (2020); Applebaum, *Buried Words*, 94.

45
Krista Collier-Jarvis, "Braiding Stories: Walking through Treblinka," *Dalhousie University OpenThink*, July 4, 2022, https://blogs.dal.ca/openthink/braiding-stories-walking-through-treblinka/.

46
Applebaum, *Buried Words*, 19.

47
Donald, "Indigenous Métissage," 535.

48
Applebaum, *Buried Words*, 86. This content was not included in *Buried Words*, although it is available in the digitized version on the USHMM's website, (see endnote 5).

49
Ibid., 91.

50
Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

51
Jason Chalmers, "Settler Colonialism, Reconciliation, and Indigenous-Jewish Relations in Canada," *Contemporary Jewry* 44, no. 3 (2024): 619-41.

52
Bryanne Young, "'Killing the Indian in the Child': Death, Cruelty, and Subject-formation in the Canadian Indian Residential Schools System," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 48, no. 4 (2015): 63-76.

53
David J. Azrieli, "Series Preface: In Their Own Words...," in *Buried Words*, xi.

54
Applebaum, *Buried Words*, 13.

55
Ibid., 11.

56
Ibid., 1.

57
Ibid.

58
Thomas King, "The Truth about Stories – Part 1," *CBC Radio*, November 7, 2003, https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-2003-cbc-massey-lectures-the-truth-about-stories-a-native-narrative-1.2946870.

59
Lillian Boraks Nemetz and Robbie Waisman, "My Quest for Tikkun Olam," *Zachor* (Winter 2015): 13. https://vhec.org/images/pdfs/Zachor_Winter2015.pdf

60
Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 104.