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The Heritage Village: Sifting through Immaterial Histories of Land

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> History is very very important. We cannot possibly exist without memory. Memory makes us. Memory gives us context. Memory gives us both a notion, of course of the past, but also of the present and certainly of the future. History is no more than collected memory, so we have to put all of our memories together in order to create the phenomenon of continuity.
>
> – Peter Greenaway

The heritage village has a bad reputation. Unlike those places that can boast being authentic sites of history, the heritage village exists in an in-between space, a referent to history but also characterized by its modern design. It is where history is curated into heritage, a manipulation of the past into something that can be shared and made common. Rarely however do these family-friendly sites showcase anything more than a caricaturization of the past, often with employees dressed in period costumes recreating the predictable scenes we have come to associate with pioneer living. However, hidden behind the faux-history facade there is a rich and revealing environment that tells us more than first meets the eye. As the materialization of selected and interpreted history becomes surreal – or "more than" real, fantastical even – the heritage village becomes an artifice that is familiar but also imagined and strange. Here we turn to this space of heritage – this constructed and often idealized representation of history with very particular kinds of material iterations of the past – as a site to consider the immaterial – unknown, vanished or covered-up – histories that are omitted from its narratives. Through site-specific contemporary art engagements, we can find a way of "re-imagining" the heritage village, shifting from a material legacy of pioneer living to surreal and uncanny encounters with immaterial histories, all in the effort to reconsider the way we build the present and future as legacies of, or responses to, the past.

The heritage village belongs to that category of museum that is referred to as the "on-site museum," of which there are many varieties: "some are total re-creations of the past, others are restored buildings on a new site, while still others preserve buildings on their original site often with the addition of extra buildings relocated from other areas" (Shafernich 43). These kinds of places go by many names: open air museums, folk museums, pioneer villages, living history museums, etc. In Canada, which is the focus of our discussion, though they are regularly built on a pioneer narrative, they are habitually referred to as "heritage villages" and began to crop up alongside the suburbanization of the 1960s (Gordon). This terminology of the "heritage village" emphasizes, rather heavy-handedly, the ambition to design these sites as hubs of cultural heritage, constructs that position them into what Pierre Nora would call *lieux de mémoire*, or the sites of memory. While the heritage village presents itself as a coherent representation of history, by opening it up as a *lieu de mémoire* we can uncover the immaterial

and unrepresented layers of memory that are contained on the site.

Here, it is important to recall David Harvey's description of "heritage [as] a present-centred cultural practice and an instrument of cultural power" (Harvey 336). In other words, heritage is not a by-product of the past, but rather history as constructed and manipulated, written as heritage in the present, often as a means to explain the current condition or justify future actions. Put differently, "reduced to its simplest of terms, heritage refers to the contemporary activities through which the past comes to matter in the present. … Within such activities, judgments are made as to which particular aspects of the past are worthy of preservation and are of potential significance for social memory" (Ashley & Simon 2). The heritage village is therefore a space that indicates a deliberate process of making choices, one which includes exclusions and silences. Certain narratives of history are put aside and regarded as intrusions not only upon this space of a curated and defined heritage, but consequently also as having no value for contemporary or future imagination. In this way, whereas heritage is "a process, a verb, related to human action and agency, and as an instrument of cultural power" (Harvey 327), the heritage village is a space in which the process has been calcified, reduced to an artificial snapshot, rather than reflecting the continuously changing perspectives on and towards the past. To overcome this problem, Carla Corbin suggests that making connections to the original sites of the buildings and showing how they have changed "would 'unfreeze' time, so the past is not represented as static in the heritage village … [rather] the past would become apparent as a fluid continuum that connects to, and has consequences in the present-day landscape" (243).

A recent contemporary art exhibition on the site of such a heritage village worked to reconsider and reimagine the relationship of its "heritage" to and between the past and the future. *Land/Slide Possible Futures* (2013) was a site-specific project on the grounds of the Markham Museum heritage village that sought to address the tension between ecology and economy through the histories of the land. [1] The team devised an exhibition that would invite over thirty local and international artists, emerging and established, whose work has engaged with ecological issues, to help create a collective conversation around the future of land use in Markham. [2] [3] The chosen site for the exhibition, a 25-acre open-air historical village that included over thirty heritage homes and 8,000 artifacts, served as an ideal "laboratory" for a site-specific exhibition that sought to engage with the layered stories of place.

The buildings at the Museum were uprooted from their original locations and moved to the site designed to look like a 19th century agricultural village. The hodge-podge assortment of buildings in different styles ranging from the 1820s to the 1930s but organized as a singular historical village creates a surreal disjuncture that, one critic claimed, has the smell of Dada. Indeed, this kind of collage is not unusual in the construction of a heritage village, something some critics have decried is like "putting buildings in a zoo" (Young 322). In the case of Markham the village included dwellings, a church, a general store, a slaughterhouse, a barn, a train station, a printing shop, and others. Though pioneer settlements did not in fact organize themselves into these kinds of "villages," collections of dwellings brought together in close proximity, as is the case of this site, are "almost inevitably understood as villages" (Young 321). This is in fact not an accidental design: as heritage villages across North America were products of the post-war suburb where they became popular cultural forms, the heritage village brought an historical and linear anchor to the "non-place" of the subdivision, providing an artificial "heritage" to the suburb itself. Not only was the village a response to suburbanization, but many houses in heritage villages were themselves displaced and relocated there due to massive suburban development. Such villages, as Alan Gordon shows in his study of the Canadian pioneer village of the 1960s, reinforced and provided a highly artificial historical precedent for the government's (in this case the Canadian Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation) suburban ideal of the single-family dwelling on a private plot of land and "represented a reference to the past that confirmed the direction, and the legitimacy, of the present and the

future" (480). In this way the heritage village served to write a material history of the suburb as a way to justify a suburban model of development by anchoring it in a pastoral idealism that never was. The power of this fantasy was harnessed though the heritage site, a place that could provide material evidence of imagined histories.

Thus the heritage village functions by presenting an imagined world as a coherent whole, assuming a sense of totality, perspective and logic. While the village may be inspired by history, it rather presents something other, a "sur-reality" that masquerades as heritage, which is above or beyond the real, a projection of the past to justify the present, a false foundation on which to build the future which leaves many things out. As Linda Young argues, this conceptualization of a village,

> is bolstered by a nostalgic wish for the supposed ideals of small town life. Stresses on the larger rural economy, such as drought and world prices, never impinge. The tragedies and imperfections of individuals affect no real families. The museum village presents a cosy world, enabled by a mass of buildings, furnishings and equipment that seems to be its own solid evidence. (329)

Indeed, this is one of the very definitions of on-site museums, whose "two advantages … are a limited and defined scope and a favorable psychological setting for learning. These non-art museums are intended to help visitors understand a particular site, which represents a particular place in time, presenting the story as an organized, understandable whole" (Shafernich 44). Like most heritage villages, the Markham Museum site is largely defined by white settler stories of the 19th century, and as such relies on a simple set of narratives and unproblematic materials. It relies on, and is defined by, a limited version of history, one which leaves out the "ancillary structures such as outbuildings, the detritus of multiple activities, and the social life of the original: mess, smells, conflict, class distinctions, and other difficult and unappealing subjects" (Corbin 241). In doing so the heritage village reflects the prejudices of the 1960s and 1970s when most of the heritage programs were developed. For example, the layout of the villages mirrors the spatial arrangement of subdivisions by featuring a gendered division of labor and omitting to include rooms for boarders and itinerant workers who would have been the dominant labor pool in rural Upper Canada in the middle of the 19th century. In effect, the heritage village became a material artifact that legitimized the conservative values of the 1960s Canadian suburb.

Many artists in the *Land/Slide Possible Futures* exhibition responded to this selective top-down history of the heritage village through works that turned to those histories and memories that are nowhere to be seen, renewing this site as a *lieu de mémoire*. The title of Urban-Iroquois artist Jeff Thomas' installation, *Where do we go from here?* is a direct response to the exhibition's "possible futures." Located on the edges of the museum site, in the strange space of a historic railway station and its accompanying train on tracks that lead nowhere, Thomas pulled out a dozen postcards of early photographs of First Nations people that served as souvenirs from the early 1940s, and that were tucked in the museum's archive. Thomas' installation also included a roster of iconic images of aboriginal people whose "indianness" was used as a short hand for "nature" to sell the Canadian railway and the conquest of the vast Canadian wilderness – a conflation of technology and the human body that naturalizes colonial rule and obfuscates the violence that was done to the Indian population in Canada. Julie Nagam's poignant multimedia sculpture *singing our bones home* consisted of a wigwam installed in the heritage wagon shed, contrasting nomadic lifestyles with a symbol of settlement. The installation grappled with the myth of *terra nullius* with audio and images: songs from the Six Nations women's drum group or Haudenosaunee people, songs in Cree and Anishinaabe, images of nearby landscapes, all pointing to an ossuary in the Markham area not far from the museum. Together, Thomas' and Nagam's installations highlighted the other histories of the land beside the story of the "pioneer," the First Nations and aboriginal histories that are not visible (and

that the museum consciously choses to avoid) but that must be accounted for, considered, and felt. Meanwhile, in *Stomping Ground* the artist Jennie Suddick, who grew up in Markham, created an anthropology of the teenage white girl by transplanting her bedroom into one of the houses in the historic village. In addition, Suddick interviewed dozens of the seniors living in Markham who grew up in the area about their childhood memories of place. Through these interviews, she created a series of walks, some of which are now impossible, long gone due to the transformation of the land and development in the area. A series of maquettes also lined one of the rooms – these are of service stations that once existed along Canada's transnational highways. Such stations were once unique markers of place that have been replaced by generic rest stops. Suddick reconstructed these older service centres lovingly from memory adding strange childlike flourishes that bring them into the realm of dreamspace. In all of these installations, invisible histories, histories of displacement and violence, and vernacular mundane histories of suburban lifestyle must be thought together in a layered mosaic that connects the histories of land with the histories of imagination, projection and fantasy. This is not chronological history but a search for ways to tell the stories, individual and communal and as they are remembered, of memories of the land. They leap outside of the structures of the museum and create a dissonance with the materiality and coherence represented in the village.

Mark Wagstaff has observed that the "solidifying of heritage is essentially reactionary, a retreat to one past and denial that pasts are many" (114). Through this solidifying however it becomes ubiquitous, so that heritage sites like that of the village routinely enforce the perspective that this is actually all that was, that life was so simple or standardized that the particularities of individuals, even of places, becomes invisible, and hardly matter in the larger recounting of the myths of history. In many ways the *Land/Slide* exhibition functioned as such a site-specific pedagogical environment that questioned our relationship to the past and the blind spots of heritage in a way that would serve to provide a better context for addressing current crises of (the) imagination. This artificial and suspended depiction of history that renders the heritage village a constructed reality, often feels surreal and strange. Whereas real places of history can connect and overwhelm us by their sense of temporality – we can *feel* the energy, the movement, the liveness, of history – the heritage village functions differently, as a space historically imagined, where history is designed as a culture's "inheritance," a fait accompli, a planned and designed still image. These works draw on individual and plural memories, which can be misremembered. They move towards the imagination while still rooted in actual events.

The incongruity between history, as represented in the heritage village, and memory – the fluid, immaterial knowledge of land, spaces and sites – is a tension Pierre Nora worked to define in his influential work on the *lieux de mémoire*. Where memory can be "affective and magical … out of focus or telescopic," history is an "intellectual and secular production" that can be analyzed and criticized (Nora 8-9). *Land/Slide*, as a project that turned to the past to think about the future, responded to the historicity of the museum heritage village and the particular representation it creates, by turning to those immaterial layers of the land contained in real and imagined memory. Whereas history – here represented in the heritage village – "binds itself to temporal continuities and progressions" and "belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority," the site – the *lieu* – of memory "takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects" (9). In the *lieu*, memory is understood as "by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural and yet individual" (9). For Nora, the site of memory is the necessary antidote to history as a representation of the past and as "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (8). The *lieux de mémoire* "are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived" and originate from a conscious and deliberate, rather than spontaneous, search for history (12). This does not mean that memory and history are opposed. On the contrary, memory needs history: "*Lieux de mémoire* are created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that results in their reciprocal overdetermination" (19). For Nora, the *lieu* however has no referent in reality and escapes from history so that "it is double: a site of

excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations" (24). This is what makes the heritage village, once it is conceived as a *lieu*, such a rich semiotic landscape.

Figure 1: Duke & Battersby, *Always Popular, Never Cool*, 2013. Photo: Will Pemulis.

A diorama in the oldest pioneer log dwelling on the Markham site dating from 1820 created by Duke & Battersby, a team of artists from Syracuse, New York, emerged as *Land/Slide*'s most ambiguous and disruptive project, where the audience experience was one of discomfort. In *Always Popular, Never Cool*, tween mannequins that look like they could have been lifted directly from any GAP store, were used to stage a scene of "slut-shaming," stories now familiar to us through Amanda Todd's infamous suicide video [4] : a girl is lying face down on the bed while a preppy-looking boy stands nearby using a smartphone to film her. Another mannequin dressed in animal fur stands defensively, protectively near the girl. Clearly, something traumatic has just unfolded, a snapshot of sexual assault that is both timeless, but also marked in time by the very architecture and heritage interior of the log cabin. Layers of untold and timeless histories of assault and/or rape are contained in just one frame. The artificiality and wholesomeness of the heritage village (itself a diorama or staging), becomes uncomfortably disrupted, one still moment tapping into the way stories are told and retold while providing a reminder that certain narratives are absent from materialized history, and only emerge from their immaterial shadows through occasional ephemeral interjections, as in this case, through their existence on digital media and the ephemeral and unstable platform and circulation they provide.

Importantly therefore, the project is a counterpoint to the particular way women's stories are told in the heritage village, where what is habitually represented through material artifact are women's domestic spaces and the spaces of childrearing (rather than those associated with the production of crafts, for example, or of pain and inequality). It is also a way of confronting the mythology of the housewife. As Gordon argues, "the visual image of the pioneer village reinforced traditional gender roles as understood by modern suburbanites" such that the heritage space created a collective memory that did not so much speak to a past as it did reinforce and idealize the life of the suburban housewife in the post-war era who was its audience (485). Duke & Battersby create an uncomfortable portrait that flies in the face of the kind of gendered division based on the model of the happy housewife. In doing so they also open the doors to questioning what other kinds of oppressions are omitted in the heritage

village, for example as resulting from the idealized image of childhood and teenagers invented in the 1950s. This heritage village, that quaint and wholesome representation, is based on the selection of exclusionary narratives, on invisibility and silence as a primary mode through which we create collective heritage.

Duke & Battersby stage a disquieting moment of confrontation, between the quaintness of the village and its falsity, between the facade of pioneer living, and what goes on inside, what stories are hidden and repressed behind closed doors. The diorama installation is not just a materialization of an alternate story of the female experience, but it creates a situation which in its ambiguity revisits the tension of those events that "cannot be proven," taking an event that often lives on confined in the body while being otherwise unspoken and unseen, and creates instead a fixed scene where the assumed assault lingers, a staging, an uncomfortable and strange moment akin to the disquieting stillness of the heritage village itself.

The strangeness and disquieting encounter in *Always Popular, Never Cool* pushes the envelope of the re-imagination of the heritage site through the experience of the uncanny. As we move from histories rooted in actual events to those that are misremembered and finally those that are staged and invented or imagined, there is a shift towards the immaterial layers of history. The uncanny brings out the feelings of strangeness, insecurity and instability but also, as per Freud, of fear and dread (Freud 123). In that aesthetic experience of "repulsion and distress" (Freud 123), *Always Popular, Never Cool* is neither simply strange or a fantasy. Rather, in the tension between possibility and impossibility, in that feeling of something familiar but ruptured, there is the moment of frightful unease, a visceral if not quite explicable reaction spectators experience upon entering the room. This discomfort is not merely tied to the sexual connotations of the scene, or even to the mannequins themselves (which Freud notes are uncanny in and of themselves, as figures that may or may not be alive) but with an eeriness that transcends the individual aspects of the installation. What is ruptured is the coherence and idealization of the heritage village and the mirage of facades that leave nothing hidden. It ruptures the heritage village as a site of history – where once we saw positive affirmations and histories of suburbanization, we now shudder at the realization that the foundations on which our present is built is full of secrets and hauntings, that there is no past to return to, that the heritage village never did exist. Just as the suburb has become associated with falsity, with never quite knowing what goes on behind closed doors, here we face a dissolution of dreams, where the heritage village dissolves as a reflection of our visions or aspirations, about past and future, and we are left with nothing but artificial memories and empty promises. It is in this sense that the uncanny comes into play, as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud 124). The scene, which exists in a timeless space, unbound from chronology and the burden of "representing" history, is a cross-section of time and experiences that seeps out of the material markers of the heritage site. We were once familiar with our past, and now we are not.

The heritage village in general exudes this uncanny feeling since it is more than, but also not even, a simulacrum of a village: the houses are so-to-speak "real" but come to be in a place that is completely manufactured. Thus there is the constant push and pull of reality and history, of real lives inside the walls and the traces of human labor, building methods, a "local intelligence" that went into the creation of all the heritage structures. Yet these same structures are completely dislocated from their origins, and they have lost their *milieu* – those unmediated, "real environments of memory" that, in the age of globalization, no longer exist (Nora 7). The "realness" of the heritage village becomes unmoored from its materiality, and as it becomes a *lieu* it turns into something messy and unfixed, a place that has become strange:

> The *lieux* we speak of, then, are mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Mšbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile. For if we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to

> block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial … it is also clear that *lieux de mémoire* only exist because of the capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications. (Nora 19)

Figure 2: Terrance Houle, *There's Things That Even a Drunk Will Never Forget*, 2013. Photo: Will Pemulis.

The interplay between history and memory is an important part of rediscovery of the heritage village as a *lieu de mémoire*, and as a relevant site for contemporary and future imagination, and one that often offers strange or unexpected openings towards the past. In this sense *lieux de mémoire* carry the strange and uncanny, familiar but also uncomfortable histories. Where *Always Popular, Never Cool* was a frightful disjuncture, Terrance Houle's ghostly three-part sound and video installation *There's Things That Even a Drunk Will Never Forget* used music and atmospheric projections to manipulate real stories into eerie and haunting experiences. Houle dug up the darker side of Markham's past, blending real historical events about a gang of criminals that terrorized the agricultural communities of Markham in the 19th century (Arculus) with imagined characters and situations: love triangles, passion, betrayal and murder. In the installation in the Hausler Barn, visitors walked through the workshop filled with axes as if through the scene of a crime engulfed with progressively louder folk and murder ballads, coming upon, in the final room, a glass vitrine that contained a bloody shirt. The curiosity and horror of this material artifact can be ascribed to its potential authenticity, but the shock lies in the confrontation with such violence as a memory of the heritage village and as constitutive of our collective past. The other component of Houle's installation took place in the gazebo-turned-carousel. A single horse from the old turn-of-the-century carousel was strewn with Christmas lights and accompanied by music inspired by old Hollywood spaghetti Westerns. Houle placed the history of the heritage village in tandem to the "Wild West," where Markham was a frontier town whose memory is much more complex, darker but also unstructured and chaotic, than that which is represented in the neat materiality of the village. The music enveloped visitors the moment they "entered" the village grounds and created an affective space that was historically inflected, where each visitor responded with different feelings and impressions to the strange music that cut through the banality and materiality of the heritage village, and set the tone for an unsettling re-imagination of the site and its history.

Land/Slide disrupts the cozy history of the Markham heritage village, of Markham, but also of

white Canadian settler history more broadly through explorations of the memories that are not materialized as heritage. The exposure of these immaterial pasts transforms the heritage village into a place of "sur-reality," where the past is contained in the feeling of being there yet not, a fluidity that is precisely one of the characteristics of *lieux de mémoire*. As Nora writes, "if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no *lieux de mémoire*. Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces *lieux de mémoire* – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded" (12).

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Endnotes

1. See the exhibition website <www.landslide-possiblefutures.com/> and forthcoming catalogue.
2. Markham is a new city on the northeastern border of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
3. The team was made up of Janine Marchessault (Curator); Jenny Foster (Urban Planning Research); Chloë Brushwood Rose (Pedagogy and Outreach); Helmut Klassen (Postdoctoral Fellow, Architectural Research).
4. The video is available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=ej7afkypUsc>

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