

***Cultural Memory:
The Role of Remembering and the Politics of Forgetting***

Conference Paper

Canada as Refuge? International Conference, May 1-2, 2008

Centre of Canadian Studies, University of Edinburgh

Note: Presentation will include related international press articles and the 10” bronze maquette, *The Welcoming Peace Sculpture* on display for viewing

With US immigrants of conscience finding refuge in Canada during the Vietnam War and now with the US war in Iraq, what is the role of “remembering” and the consequence of the “politics of forgetting” within Canada’s “Cultural Memory”. And what role in Cultural Memory might a Sculpture to US war resisters play in “remembering.”

In 2003, I sat in a popular Nelson café and envisioned bringing leading American anti-war leaders from the Vietnam era up to Canada, by crossing the US-Canadian Border. Then having these US leaders join up with Canadian peace activists in the village of Salmo, BC, directly 40 kilometres south of Nelson, BC. From Salmo, my vision had Americans and Canadians caravanning with peace sculpture to its unveiling in Nelson, BC.

Within the year, I commissioned local figurative artist, Naomi Lewis and her local art school instructor Dennis Klein to begin preparations toward the development of what would become a world renown sculpture to US war resisters in Canada, *The Welcoming Peace Sculpture*. Honouring the contribution to Canadian life by US immigrants of conscience, finding refuge in Canada, and thanking the thousands of Canadians that assisted these Americans of conscience.

By September 7, 2004, in preparation for a news conference, to announce the sculpture and the planning for a 2006 war resisters peace event, honouring US war resisters who came to Canada during the Vietnam War, Naomi Lewis completed the rough, clay maquette, showing two people coming over the US-Canadian Border and being welcomed by the generous, outstretched hands of a Canadian (that would becoming the Welcoming Peace Sculpture). Within 36 hours following our news conference, our announcement would attract a storm of criticism from conservative US veterans groups, and within a month, a public call by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, calling formally on President Bush to ask, then Prime Minister Paul Martin to put a stop to the “Monument to Cowards,” (as described in the front page top headline of the Saturday Vancouver Sun).

An organized right wing boycott of Nelson, BC, from mid September 2004 through November 2004 targeted Nelson, BC with virulent hate mail to Nelson, City Hall, the Chamber of Commerce and Nelson, Businesses, scared both public institutions in Nelson and the citizenry at large.

Virulent emails typically had the following tone, as expressed in these two samplings:

“Please allow me to express my outrage at the citizens of Nelson proposing to celebrate dishonour. Honouring those that deserted the U.S. for sanctuary in Canada is a dishonour to those brave enough to go, and those braver still who refused to fight and stayed at home and faced prison. A monument to cowardice is silly. A monument honouring criminal behaviour is disgusting. A festival celebrating draft dodgers appears to be a lame attempt by cowards to slap each other on the back and pretend they are really misunderstood heroes. But silly people enjoying the benefits of a free society have the right to celebrate any way they choose, standing on the corpses of those brave enough to fight and die for their freedom.” (Letter from North Carolina in mid-September 2004 on electronic guest book on the City of Nelson’s website.) This letter was included in an article about the sculpture printed in the electronic publication, *The Tyee*. The article stated, “It is one of a thousand letters and emails received by the city and the Chamber of Commerce after local resident Isaac Romano, speaking for a group called Our Way Home, announced plans for a conference of Vietnam draft dodgers in Nelson in 2006, and a memorial statue to be erected at the same time.”

The *Tyee* article went on to say, “Here’s another typical quote, from a resident of Iowa. ‘Say what you want about us Yanks, you should know one thing, we’re smarter than you, tougher than you, and we will kick your inbred ass.’” Many of the writers threatened never to visit Nelson or Canada again.” (from *The Tyee* electronic publication, TheTyee.ca)

When fear takes over the “rational thinking” stops functioning in a community

All strata of Nelson’s public, including the peace community and our liberal Mayor of that time, David Elliott and his city counsel, responded by December 2004 with the view that the Welcoming Peace Sculpture should not be build. It was too, “divisive,” I was told.

This standard view by Nelson’s liberal and peace community was highlighted by an evening meeting I attended at the home of then Mayor David Elliott, where he and his wife and associates convinced my team of Our Way Home representatives that the sculpture must not be build as envisioned, but instead should be replaced with a more “moderate,” less controversial monument to all persons who found refuge in Canada and the role of Canada in assisting those finding refuge here. A more generic monument would take the “edge” off of the attacks on Nelson and win all of Nelson’s citizenry over to such a sculpture.

At such moments of community “pressure” I reminded myself to not fall into the “politics of forgetting,” due to fears prevalent at the time of the “encouragement” by the former Mayor and his associates. And I might add, even with the “encouragement” of my own

Our Way Home staff, who were also responding out of fear, I stood my ground. I knew the reason for the sculpture was most vital:

To prepare a visual, permanent monument that would remind Canadians (for all time) of their noble, historic role of assisting US war resisters of conscience. Given the likelihood that the militarism of US policy will cause US immigrants of conscience to come across the US-Canadian border for refuge in Canada during future US wars, this sculpture would be a reminder to Canadians of their history of assistance and that of our government (e.g. Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau clearly enunciated Canada's policy during the Vietnam War, saying "Those who make the conscientious judgment that they must not participate in this war...have my complete sympathy, and indeed our political approach has been to give them access to Canada. Canada should be a refuge from militarism."). Such a monument would also be a means to honour the contribution to Canadian life made by this immigrant group over the last 35 years.

In late autumn of 2004, while the fear of boycott threat coming from the US was high in Nelson, and with the "nudging" and wording prepared by the Nelson Chamber of Commerce, the city passed a measure indicating that the City of Nelson would not allow any public sculptures that did not have public support to be placed on public land in Nelson.

Meanwhile, the media continued to flock to Nelson from the far reaches of both Canada and the US.

National Post, first section, pg. 4, half-page article and third of a page photo of Isaac Romano, next to the three foot high Welcoming Peace Sculpture, (May 23, 2006). Major photos of Isaac with The Welcoming Peace Sculpture included a front page (full page) photo in the **Vancouver Metro (daily) Newspaper** (May 23, 2006) and three full pages with large half page photos in the **Vancouver Sun** (March 25, 2006).

The controversy of "honouring with a sculpture" within the US war resister community

With the Welcoming Peace Sculpture drawing major media attention, the question of whether such a sculpture was appropriate or necessary began to be addressed in articles written by Vietnam era US war resisters living in Canada. The most common response was that the sculpture was not necessary, as presented in the article by US draft resister and Canadian ecologist and author, Don Gayton.

"As one of those draft dodgers and now a proud Canadian citizen, I have mixed feelings. If such a memorial were to be erected anywhere in the country, Nelson or the West Kootenays would certainly be the place, because of the large draft dodger contingent here. These young American war resisters were attracted by liberal politics, cheap land, and the pacifist views of the local Doukhobor and Quaker

communities. Nobody knows how many there are. As I am part of that cohort, I can usually pick them out through the nuances of lingering accents, dress and lifestyle.

I am sure many of the draft dodgers feel as I do about the memorial, that we don't need any external validation for the decision we made; it was right for us, and that's that." (Letter to The Tyee.ca)

What role might sculptures or memorials play as various immigrant groups are honoured in Canada and what role might memorials play in reminding Canada of its noble role in history of assistance to immigrants to our country?

The Welcoming Peace Sculpture's story is important. As is the decision I made to not allow the "politics of forgetting," when pressure mounted to change the monument to something more benign and general on the theme of refuge. This would have been at the expense of the "conscience" of a nation. We must bring a true remembering, building it deeply into our culture. Even institutionalizing the remembering, as a cultural insignia of "care toward others, fleeing persecution and militarism."

What I learned is that the stories of our true history are important to retell. And to retell accurately, when possible. The themes of assistance to the refugee are to be recognized. Yes, I would say "recognized" in ways that "inform" future generations of the ethics and the goodwill that are so human and must be reinforced and shared from generation to generation. It is our history to truly embrace and openly appreciate.

The iconic figurative 10" bronze maquette, The Welcoming Peace Sculpture will be displayed and will be part of the visual understanding of "Cultural Memory," presented in Isaac Romano's presentation. Also, on display for this presentation will be major newspaper articles and photos from leading Canadian and US newspapers.



Isaac Romano is founder and director of the Our Way Home Research Institute for War Resistance and Policy Alternatives (The OWHR Institute is "housed" at the University of San Francisco, Department of Politics).

Isaac Romano initiated the film project along with filmmaker Michelle Mason, which

later became the feature length film, *Breaking Ranks*. Mr. Romano and Michelle Mason conducted in-depth interviews with US war resisters (who settled in Canada during the Vietnam War), living in Nelson, BC, and the West Kootenays

Mr. Romano is responsible for the international media attention, and corresponding international war resister events (Our Way Home Peace Event and Reunion and associated initiatives) and peace sculpture, honouring the contribution made to Canadian society by US war resisters who came to Canada during the Vietnam War (Extensive major news media coverage continues regarding Isaac Romano and his Our Way Home Peace Event and Reunion and related peace sculpture, The Welcoming Peace Sculpture in major national newspaper and magazine articles, to include: Sunday New York Times (2004, half-page), LA Times (2005, half-page), International Herald Tribune (2007), The National Post (2006, half-page), The Globe and Mail (2006, half-page), leading national Canadian Magazine, The Walrus (Sept. 2007, half-page). And major national Television news broadcasts, to include: The “Spotlight” piece on ABC World News Tonight, CBC TV “The National” TV national news program (10 minute special report, 2004), CNN’s “Anderson-Cooper 360” (eight minute special report, 2007), FOX News national broadcasts, September 2004 and July 2007).

Mr. Romano holds a Master of Science Degree in Education, Educational Administration Program, Bank Street College of Education, Manhattan, NY. Ph.D. Studies, Developmental and Child Psychology, Union Institute and University (Dissertation to be completed).

Since 1994 Isaac Romano has co-led Prejudice Reduction and conflict resolution workshops and trainings with one of the leading diversity training programs in North America, The National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), NCBI Seattle Chapter (1994-1999). NCBI Canada, 2000-Current). NCBI is the diversity training model “of choice” at over 60 universities in the US, Canada, England and Europe.

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