

# Towards Explosion 2017

## Perspectives on the Centenary of the Halifax Explosion

October 21-23, 2016



Towards Explosion 2017, a research/connections symposium funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, took place at NSCAD University and the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic Halifax, Nova Scotia October 21-23, 2016

Located on the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq  
We are all Treaty People

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## Perspectives on the Centenary of the Halifax Explosion

At approximately 8:45am on December 6, 1917, the SS Imo and the SS Mont-Blanc collided in the Narrows of the Halifax harbour. The resulting sparks ignited a heavy load of munitions on the Mont-Blanc that was intended for the battlefields of WW1. As the relief vessel Imo drifted towards Dartmouth, the crew of the Mont-Blanc abandoned their blazing ship and rowed their lifeboats across the harbour towards safety, reaching shore at the Mi'kmaq settlement of Turtle Grove. Wedged alongside the wharf at Pier 6 on the Halifax waterfront at the foot of the working class neighbourhood of Richmond, the Mont-Blanc exploded at 9:04:35. No one other than the Mont-Blanc crew and the harbour pilot had been notified that the ship was loaded with a lethal cargo of munitions. The resulting explosion, tsunami and fires that raged through the neighborhood of Richmond killed almost 2000 people and injured 9000 more.



Victoria School of Art and Design, Argyle Street at the Corner of George Street, Halifax.  
W.G. MacLauglan, 1917. Halifax Relief Commission Nova Scotia Archives accession no. 1976-166 no. 64

Thousands of homes and businesses were destroyed. The Halifax Explosion was the largest human-made explosion until nuclear weapons were used to annihilate Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Towards Explosion 2017 originated through the public artwork and research-creation activities of Narratives in Space + Time Society (NiS+TS) and their critical examination of the contemporary debris field of the Halifax Explosion. Founded in 2012, NiS+TS uses mobile media, storytelling and walking to creatively and critically explore urban spaces that are often overlooked and disregarded. The psychogeographic practice of the *dérive*, an attentive form of drifting or walking through urban space, is central to NiS+TS's use of interdisciplinary and experiential research methodologies.

***“It is the critical act of walking in urban space that enables one to understand firsthand how power operates on the body-politic in subtle and enduring ways.”***

Tina Richardson, “Power and Place”, in *Walking Inside Out: Contemporary British Psychogeography*, ed. by Tina Richardson (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) 129



NiS+TS's work in the debris field of the Halifax Explosion demonstrates how the past and present haunt the future, and asks what is learned through a contemporary practice of exploring interdisciplinary methods for creating historical knowledge and understanding. The Halifax Explosion was not an accident. It was an inevitable and predictable wartime disaster that was inflicted on a civilian population far from the battlefields. Like most disasters, it affected Indigenous People, the working class and poor disproportionately. The work of providing relief, support and solidarity, and then of rebuilding the city, was carried out primarily by those same communities of everyday people. In the ongoing militarization of the harbour, the burden of impending disaster continues to be borne by ordinary people.



Notation from the concluding workshops held during the symposium, NSCAD University

Towards Explosion 2017 was held 15 months prior to the centenary of the Halifax Explosion, and drew on research practices in art and design, social sciences, urban studies, and history. Participants addressed three principal themes:

1. The Explosion as place: with sub-themes on indigenous, African Nova Scotian and settler communities; urban morphology, landscape design and commemorative sites
2. The Explosion as heritage, culture and communication: with sub-themes on cultural landscapes, public art, museums, and urban mobility
3. Living the legacy of the Explosion: with sub-themes on memory, identity, systemic trauma, reconstruction and community development

The symposium examined and disrupted several of the underlying stories, themes and traumas that reach back into settlement history, including African Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaq and immigrant narratives, and addressed contemporary issues of reconciliation, mobility, unwritten histories, and urban and economic development. Participants connected scholarly investigations of war, trauma and displacement with contemporary and reworked accounts of the Halifax Explosion's impact within the communities of interest (families, institutions and organizations) engaged in the centenary.

An opening welcome was led by Catherine Martin, Mi'kmaq drummer, storyteller and filmmaker, member of the Millbrook First Nation in Truro, Nova Scotia, and 2015-2017 Nancy's Chair in Women's Studies, Mount Saint Vincent University. Later in the proceedings, a special tribute to the renowned historian and author Janet Kitz was held at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic.

Media presentations on research-creation projects completed by graduate students took place throughout the symposium; Towards Explosion 2017, by Katie Kirkpatrick and Ben Moore (with accompanying bibliography); Halifax Explosion Story Maps, by Douglas McGlynn; and the Sugar Refinery, Cotton Mill and Richmond School as archival and virtual sites, by Jose Lopez Vega. Whistleblowing, a participatory audio art project by Evan Cameron and Matt Harrison commissioned by NiS+TS was presented during the boat excursion, with an accompanying map and animation by cartographer Gordon Campbell. Short videos made for NiS+TS by Marcia Connolly and Yalitsa Riden were shown, as were several earlier film representations of the Halifax Explosion: NSCAD alumnus Jenna Mark's 2013 animated film What Happened to Esther; the 1991 CBC Halifax Explosion Heritage Minute; and Report on Redevelopment: New Course for Halifax, NFB, 1961.



Acadia Sugar Refinery, 1880 Notman Studio  
NS Archives accession no. 1983-310 number 47660



Site of the Acadia Sugar Refinery, December, 1917

A highlight of Towards Explosion 2017 was a boat excursion that shadowed the routes of the SS Imo and the Mont-Blanc in the Halifax harbour, and provided new perspectives on key sites. Janet Maybee, Catherine Martin and Sunday Miller shared their knowledge and stories, and media artists Evan Cameron and Matt Harrison presented the commissioned audio work, “Whistleblowing”, based on the warning signals between the two ships.

The summary session generated numerous provocations for NiS+TS and other organizations planning centenary programs. As the marker of a disaster, the centenary clearly calls for counter-monuments and alternative narratives.

**“...perhaps the more memory comes to rest in its exteriorized forms, the less it is experienced internally. In this age of mass memory production and consumption, in fact, there seems to be an inverse proportion between the memorialization of the past and its contemplation and study. For once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory-burden.”**

James E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today” in Critical Enquiry, Critical Inquiry, Vol. 18, No. 2. (Winter, 1992), 273

**“Disaster, along with moments of social upheaval, is when the shackles of conventional belief and role fall away and the possibilities open up.”**

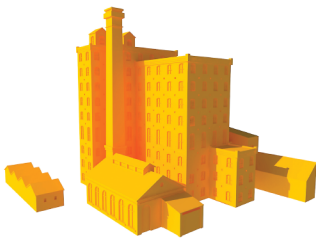
Rebecca Solnit, A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster (New York: Viking, 2009) 97

Symposium participants recommended that a follow-up colloquium be considered for later in 2017 or 2018, to allow for adequate reflection and analysis of the centenary. In keeping with the spirit of “Connections” (the SSHRC program that provided support for Towards Explosion 2017) many contacts, associations, networks and friendships were established between the participants. Some examples are:

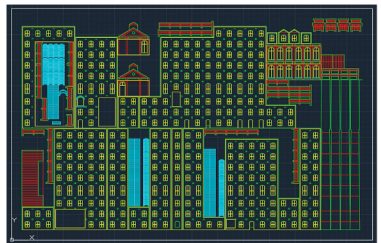
Catherine Martin and NiS+TS held a Commemoration Ceremony at Turtle Grove on December 6, 2016.

Catherine Martin and NiS+TS collaborated on a Turtle Grove presentation for the Partnership Development Group, Thinking Through the Museum: Difficult Knowledge in Public, April 2017.

Lorraine Albert consulted with Halifax Regional Municipality regarding public sculpture concepts for Fort Needham Memorial Park.



Render of the Acadia Sugar Refinery  
Jose Lopez Vega, 2016



Cut Sheets for Acadia Sugar Refinery Model  
Anton Christiansen, 2014

Crystal John and Brian Lilley planned a Dalhousie School of Architecture Freelab in Summer 2017, focusing on lighting designs for Mulgrave Park murals.

Crystal John and Ren Thomas presented Mulgrave Park urban housing plans to the federal government (Infrastructure Funding), and to a national housing conference (April 2017).

Jose Lopez Vega developed 3D imaging work of architectural sites in the debris field, alongside Dalhousie Computer Science colleagues and NiS+TS, featured as part of a Fall 2017 exhibition at Dalhousie Art Gallery.

James Boxall's work on storymapping is included in Dalhousie Art Gallery's Fall 2017 Explosion-related exhibition by curator Peter Dykhuis.

Halifax Regional Municipality and NiS+TS partnered (along with Arts Nova Scotia) in developing an app about the Explosion debris field, and in planning events for the October 2017 Creative City Summit.

Maura Donovan hosted a tour of her Relief Commission house with NiS+TS (January 2017), organized an Explosion-themed Jane's Walk in Dartmouth, in May 2017, and is currently working with Dalhousie University Architecture and Planning on a proposal for an inventory of Relief Commission Housing.

Sunday Miller, Cyrus Sundar Singh and Renée Gruszecki continued work on Africville history and archives issues, including the premiere of Singh's media project Africville Revisited (HotDocs, Toronto and Halifax, May 2017).



Halifax harbour Narrows, Turtle Grove and Tuft's Cove

More information about Towards Explosion 2017, including links to the media projects and other resources, can be found in the "Research" section of the NiS+TS website.  
<http://www.narrativesinspaceandtime.ca>



Renée Gruszecki with Catherine Martin and Sunday Miller during the boat excursion through the Narrows of the Halifax harbour

***"So, the questions remain: Have these costly lessons finally been learned? Is Halifax Harbour safe now? Or are there still dangers to consider, in view of the occasional presence of visiting nuclear warships, drifting oil rigs, hazardous cargo dropped from giant cranes, power-deprived container vessels headed for bridge abutments?"***

Janet Maybee, *Aftershock: The Halifax Explosion and the Persecution of Pilot Francis Mackey* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2015) 125



Africville Park, 2016



**Applicant:**

Barbara Louder, NiS+TS  
Professor, NSCAD University

**Co-Applicants:**

Robert Bean, NiS+TS  
Professor, NSCAD University

Mary Elizabeth Luka, NiS+TS  
Banting Postdoctoral Fellow, York University

**Collaborators:**

Renée Gruszecki, NiS+TS; Brian Lilley, NiS+TS; Heather Braiden, Landscape Architect; Lindsay DuBois, Social Anthropologist; Peter Dykhuis, Gallery Director and Curator; Martha Radice, Social Anthropologist; Roger Marsters, Museum Curator;



Architectural model of the Acadia Sugar Refinery (destroyed in the Explosion) being burned during Walking the Debris Field: Public Geographies of the Halifax Explosion (December 6, 2014) NiS+TS

Paige Farah, Community Activist; Roger Lewis, Ethnology Curator; Catherine Martin, Storyteller and Filmmaker; Janet Maybee, Writer; Juanita Peters, Actor and Playwright; Heather Wilkinson, Community Artist; Melissa Marr, Community Artist; Jessica Winton, Community Artist

**Participants:**

Sally Morgan, Dancer; Ren Thomas, Urban Planner; James Boxall, Geographer; Cyrus Sundar Singh, Media Artist; Maura Donovan, Social Worker; Angela Henderson, Artist and Designer; Yalitsa Riden, Research Assistant; Lorraine Albert, Research Assistant; Jose Lopez Vega, Research Assistant; Katie Kirkpatrick, Research Assistant; Ben Moore, Research Assistant; Douglas McGlynn, Research Assistant; Alex Saunders, Research Assistant; Vanessa Cornell, Student Assistant; Yu Zheng, Student Assistant; Olivia King, Student Assistant; Matt Harrison, Media Artist; Evan Cameron, Media Artist

**NiS+TS** (Narratives in Space+Time Society) is an interdisciplinary creative research group working on public art projects involving mobile media, psychogeography and walking. Founded in 2012 and based in Halifax and Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, NiS+TS promotes the use of mobile media by artists and members of the public. NiS+TS projects are sited in spaces that are often overlooked, disused or vacant. Participants use mobile media such as GPS, smartphones and mobility tracking devices, in combination with other modes such as walking, talking and making objects, in interactive explorations of locations and subjects. The members of NiS+TS are Robert Bean, Renée Gruszecki, Brian Lilley, Barbara Lounder and Mary Elizabeth Luka.



Janet Maybee, Janet Kitz, Renée Gruszecki at the Artifacts Workshop, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic

<https://www.facebook.com/narrativesinspaceandtimesociety>

[www.narrativesinspaceandtime.ca](http://www.narrativesinspaceandtime.ca)

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<https://twitter.com/NiSTSNS#halifaxexplosion>

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