

History 1040: The Presence of the Past
Second Term Research Essay: 25%

Proposal: 2 pages; due February 6. 5%

Essay: length: 2000 words (approximately 8 pages, double spaced); due April 3, 20%

The second term research essay invites you to delve deeper into one of the instances of erasure or “silences” in commemoration that we will be exploring in term 2.

Students may choose from the sites and sources listed below, or propose a topic of their choosing in consultation with the course instructor. Either way, papers must identify a particular memorial or site/work of historical memory related to one of these topics, place it in the wider context of commemorations on that topic, and analyze its purpose and effectiveness.

The Public History of Settler-Indigenous Relations in Canada

Read the following two articles about Métis history and the evolution of national historic sites in Canada (both are available via links on the course moodle page, under Assignments):

Campbell, Claire, and Larry Ostola. “[Shifting Sites](#).” *Canada’s History* 91, no. 6 (December 2011): 28–32.

Andersen, Chris. “[More than the Sum of Our Rebellions: Métis Histories beyond Batoche](#).” *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 619–33.

Choose ONE of the following historical sites related to indigenous and Métis history in Canada and review its website and associated resources.

Batoche National Historic Site

Historic Places register: <http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=14598&pid=0>

Parks Canada site: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/index.aspx> (explore the history and interpretive activities at the site via the left menu)

And view this short 4 minute video by Parks Canada:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VEgMf7sG1I>

Riel House National Historic Site

Historic site register: <http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=7762&pid=0>

Parks Canada site: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/mb/riel/index.aspx> (explore the history and interpretive activities at the site via the left menu)

And view this short 4 minute video by Parks Canada:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4e8Ym6_H130

Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site

Historic site register: <http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=7827>

Parks Canada site: <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/ab/rockymountain/index.aspx>

(explore the history and interpretive activities at the site via the left menu)

And view this short 4 minute video by Parks Canada:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MepESIAS2LU>

Transcripts for all of the Parks Canada videos listed above are available here:

<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/agen/aa/Metis-videos.aspx>

For additional context on the North West Rebellion of 1885, and the significance of the sites above to Métis and indigenous history and to the history of Canada more generally, consult the additional scholarly works listed below. Brief overviews of the North-West Rebellion and specific battles are also available on The Canadian Encyclopedia website at:

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/>

Additional Resources

Andersen, Chris, "*Métis*: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood.

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014. Ebook link:

<http://www.library.yorku.ca/e/resolver/id/2559114>

Flanagan, Thomas. *Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered*. Saskatoon: Western Producer

Prairie Books, 1983. Ebook link:

http://books1.scholarsportal.info.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/viewdoc.html?id=/ebooks/ebooks0/gibson_crkn/2009-12-01/6/417984

Friesen, Gerald. *The Canadian Prairies: A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.

Ebook link:

http://books1.scholarsportal.info/viewdoc.html?id=/ebooks/ebooks0/gibson_crkn/2009-12-01/5/417362

Taylor, C.J. *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Canada's National Historic Parks and Sites*

(Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1990). Available for 2 hour loan at the Scott Library Reserve desk.

For your chosen site:

- 1) provide a brief summary of the site's historical significance
 - a. What happened here?

- b. Describe the main historical actors (groups or individuals) associated with your site and the significance it held for them.
 - c. Why is the site of national significance? (i.e., what is its connection to the story of Canada's development as a nation?)
- 2) Provide a brief summary of the site's commemoration as a national historic site. Draw upon the resources provided for your site to describe the reasons for commemorating the site when it was first dedicated.
- 3) Draw upon the articles and resources provided to describe how the interpretation of the site has changed over time. What evidence of changing research or education practices can you point to? Make specific reference to examples from the Parks Canada short film associated with your site. Consider the following questions:
 - a. What are some of the challenges that your site might face in interpreting the past? (e.g., survival of historical structures or material evidence, links to historical events or figures, etc.).
 - b. How does your chosen site respond to Larry Ostola's comments (p.34) about the challenges faced by Parks Canada in terms of declining attendance and interest in history at Canada's national historic sites?
- 4) Evaluate the success of those changes within the context of reconciliation. Consider the following questions:
 - a. Does the site present a celebratory story, or one that is darker or more complex? Discuss.
 - b. To what extent does the site discuss indigenous-settler relations historically, and in the present? Is conflict represented? (if so, how and to what extent?)
 - c. How does the significance of the site to Métis or indigenous groups differ from its significance to Canada as a nation? Based on the evidence you have, does the site represent this tension in its interpretation?
 - d. Consider Chris Anderson's arguments in his article, "More than the Sum of Our Rebellions," and the tension between "official" and "vernacular" histories that he identifies. What is his critique of Park Canada's interpretation at sites of Métis identity? Do you think this is a fair critique? What more, in your view, might your chosen site do to represent the history and present context of indigenous-settler relations, in the spirit of reconciliation?

Tips and strategies for preparing the final research essay will be discussed in class throughout the winter term.

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 Date: 3rd April, 2017

This essay will discuss Parks Canada’s website for the Batoche National Historic Site in Saskatchewan. Batoche was the site of a Métis village and community, and the location of the final battle of the 1885 North West Rebellion, in which militia fighting for Louis Riel’s Provisional Government of Saskatchewan were beaten by government of Canada troops. The website introduces and describes the physical site and its visitor attractions, and outlines the history of Batoche. I will offer a close reading of parts of the website and, using the Wayback Machine internet archive, will trace minor but significant changes in the text and presentation of the site since 2010. I will analyse the website in terms of how it presents Métis history and to what extent post-1885 history is given space and meaning. Drawing on Chris Andersen’s call for more ‘history from below’ when putting together representations of indigenous people’s pasts,¹ I will argue that the site seems to concentrate on picturesque, somewhat generic and folksy depictions of Métis culture; that the site depoliticizes Métis experience and freezes it in time; and, that their story is framed as being merely a component of Canada’s grand narrative. There are interesting challenges to that analysis though, which I will also examine.

Batoche was designated a National Historic Site in 1923, the intention primarily being to commemorate the battle, the Métis community and their culture and heritage, and their river-lot land allocation system.² This last reason, according to Claire Campbell, was not originally part of the rationale for designating Batoche a historic site, but was recognised later, in the 1980s.³ This

¹ Chris Andersen, “More than the Sum of Our Rebellions: Métis Histories beyond Batoche,” *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 4 (2014): 630.

² “History,” Batoche National Historic Site, Parks Canada, accessed 31 March, 2017, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/decouvrir-discover/histo>

³ Claire Campbell, “Shifting Sites,” *Canada’s History* 91, no. 6 (2011): 31.

development of the different aspects of commemoration does not seem to be recognized on either the Batoche site or the page for Batoche on the Canada's Historic Places website.⁴ Andersen describes the further stages in the development of Batoche's historic designation: a plaque to commemorate the battle was put up in 1923; content was added in the 1950s to discuss the Métis community itself; in the 1970s and 1980s its geographical and agricultural significance was recognised; its watershed role in the development of the West was acknowledged next, before recognition of Métis war veterans in more recent years.⁵ Again, this step-by-step history of the building of memorialization seems to be absent from the Batoche website itself, as if it wants to present itself as having been fully formed from its inception, and I suggest that the presentation of the site's history of itself as a place of commemoration is somewhat weak.

The first noticeable aspect of the site is its apparent emphasis on 'journeying back through time.'⁶ Tours around the site are promoted, which will be conducted by 'knowledgeable staff in period costume,' acting out the parts of Métis homesteaders.⁷ Visitors are also encouraged to participate in homestead chores such as pegging out the laundry, building a house, or gardening.⁸ Pictures on the site show staff playing with children on toy wooden horses. However, this all combines to produce a domesticated, homely tone to the site, something of an idealised historic vision. There is no indication on these pages about why the Métis had become homesteaders. There is a brief history of the Métis in a separate section of the site which alludes to the reasons for pushing west from Manitoba,⁹ but its more serious tone is not maintained in the

⁴ "Batoche National Historic Site of Canada," Canada's Historic Places, accessed 2 April, 2017, <http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=14598&pid=0>

⁵ Andersen, "Rebellions," 624.

⁶ "Batoche National Historic Site," Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche>

⁷ "Journey Through Time," Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/activ/activ9>

⁸ "Learning Experiences," Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/activ/edu>

⁹ "The move to Batoche," Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/decouvrir-discover/histo2>

‘journey through time’ section. These two pages – the history section and the visitor attractions section – looked at together, illustrate that Métis history is not being erased, but it looks as if it is being sidelined and watered down in favour of picturesque domestic representation. The ‘headline attraction’ is the homestead experience, which is a framing that puts nineteenth century Métis people into the mainstream narrative of Canada: one of humble, honest homemaking and nation building. There is little sense from the site of any particularity about the Métis of Batoche that makes them distinct from white prairie ‘pioneers’ – they are described as ‘townsfolk’ enjoying ‘life on the prairies.’¹⁰ Andersen describes the site’s portraits of Métis as ‘abstracted and disembodied,’¹¹ as if their own unique motivations and stories are not informing their inclusion at the site: their position – in terms of how the larger state was operating around them and marginalizing them – appears absent from the website representation.

While it is clear that staff interpreters have been a feature of the site for some time – a photograph from 2010 shows a costumed guide¹² – it could be that the site is responding to what Larry Ostola argues is a declining attendance at Canada’s historic sites¹³ by organising itself increasingly around more easily accessible and relatable activities. This can be seen as a more populist orientation that emphasises the aspects of the site that are connected to ‘lived experience.’ There is a visible change of emphasis between 2010 and now: the home page snapshot from 2010 shows more textual emphasis on the battle, and an overhead view of the church – this has been replaced in 2017 by the costumed interpreters and children’s activities. While this re-emphasis could be defended as simply giving more space to an interesting ground-

¹⁰ “Journey Through Time,” Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/activ/activ9>

¹¹ Andersen, “Rebellions,” 630.

¹² “Learning Experiences,” Batoche NHS, the Wayback Machine, accessed April 2, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110606072951/http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/edu.aspx>

¹³ Larry Ostola, “The Ongoing Challenge to Keep National Historic Sites Relevant,” *Canada’s History* 91, no. 6 (2011): 34.

level ethnographic interpretation of Métis lived experience, Andersen persuasively argues that this kind of approach both exoticizes the Métis as an Other, and sanitizes the wider historical moment that they found themselves in.¹⁴ Moreover, it stabilizes Métis history and reduces Métis people to colourful fiddle-playing characters from the past.

This theme of ossification – what Andersen refers to as ‘mummifying’ Métis in the wider Canadian commemorative project¹⁵ – is the second noticeable aspect of the Batoche site. While the site could be used as a vehicle for exploring Métis culture up to the present day, its ‘model village’ approach does seem to freeze Métis culture at 1885. As well as the ‘journey through time’ theme, the presentational choices made at the site fix a historic idea of ‘Métis-ness.’ The invitation to play in the rifle pits and the direction to observe the bullet holes in the building are a way of looking at Métis as actors in past events without moving towards any discussion of their history since. Visitors are invited to take the ‘Journey Through Time’ tour, and are promised that it will explore the Métis community ‘before, during, and after the events of 1885,’ but there is a complete absence of any post-1885 imagery or representation on the website.¹⁶ The short narrative history section of the site does have a few words on post-1885 Batoche. However, this section of the website resembles a kind of ‘vanishing Métis’ trope, and conflates the disappearance of the Batoche village and community with the disappearance of Métis culture.¹⁷ Andersen points out the folly of this broad generalisation when he discovers his grandmother’s archive of photographs. Drawing on Geertz’s idea of ‘thick description,’ he shows how a rich and dense ‘vernacular social history’¹⁸ is possible if you begin with the primary motivation of

¹⁴ Andersen, “Rebellions,” 620, 624.

¹⁵ Ibid., 620.

¹⁶ “Tours and Programs,” Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/activ/activ3>

¹⁷ “Batoche After 1885,” Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/decouvrir-discover/histo6>

¹⁸ Andersen, “Rebellions,” 625, 627.

depicting actual local lived experience, rather than one of trying to round off every corner in order to fit stories into a wider authorized version of the past. Also, meanings associated with the natural environment are incorporated into this idea of freezing and fixing Métis culture in the past: the website describes local vegetation and plant life, and how some of it was used for ‘ceremonial purposes of long ago.’¹⁹ This slightly misty-eyed evocation of simple pre-modern people again indicates a reluctance in the official story to include Métis on their own non-picturesque terms.

Returning to the idea of change and innovation at the site over time, and what this says about the orientation of the Batoche site, the new attraction of the ‘red chair’ is worth mentioning.²⁰ This is a red Muskoka chair placed somewhere in the historic site that visitors are invited to find using the supplied GPS co-ordinates, the reward being a secluded, beautiful view. Again, Parks Canada needs to attract visitors, and this addition seems to be part of a new focus on outdoor activities. Leisure activities like canoeing are also highlighted in ways absent from previous Wayback Machine captures of the site. However, this emphasis on ‘getting back to nature’ and relaxing against the backdrop of the ‘majestic’ South Saskatchewan River depoliticizes the site at some level. Already reduced to battle relics and authentically-costumed characters, there is an indication here that the Métis story is being allowed to slide into the undergrowth as Batoche becomes a scenic pleasure ground or an unpeopled wilderness, resembling the settler ideal of *terra nullius*. This may be an exaggeration, but Parks Canada does seem happy to present visitors with Batoche as simply a pleasant natural parkland, which is problematic.

¹⁹ “Natural Heritage,” Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/decouvrir-discover/natur>

²⁰ “Red Chair,” Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/activ/activ11>

A third aspect of the Batoche website is how it frames the Métis story within Canada's bigger foundation story. On the 'Journey Through Time' tour, visitors are told they will be 'immersed in a time that changed the face of Canada.'²¹ This speaks to what Andersen argues is a tendency to simply slot potentially destabilizing and dissenting indigenous voices into what he calls 'officially sanctioned celebratory narratives'²² in a way that neutralizes their distinctness and potential power. The Métis story exists only insofar as it is useful to the production of the Canadian story. Andersen's argument is that non-indigenous Canada controls the production of the mythology and story-telling capacity, and that the mere presence of Métis in the representation or commemoration of a place is not enough to modify the problematic nature of that basic framing. This is probably the most interesting and troubling aspect of the site. Batoche is both 'about' the Métis and acts as a way of marginalizing them. The battle is commemorated, but in terms of a kind of vague lament for the death of an exotic other, and in terms of the essential service the battle performed in the creation of modern Canada. Also, visitors are given an ambiguous 'affiliation' for their role-playing: one page invites them to 'join the North West Field Force'²³ while another evokes the site where 'our ancestors [i.e. the Métis] hid from the canon fire.'²⁴ Two significant questions that the sites raises, in view of these issues, are: what does Batoche offer Métis today? and who is the site actually for? The site is primarily aimed at tourists and families with a disposable income and school groups. As Ostola has written, attendance is declining at Canada's historic sites, and sites need to attract more visitors by engaging them with the environment and more picturesque historical projects. Modern Métis

²¹ "Journey Through Time," Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/activ/activ9>

²² Andersen, "Rebellions," 620.

²³ "Kid's Corner," Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/activ/edu/enfants-kids>

²⁴ "Journey Through Time," Batoche NHS, <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/activ/activ9>

history and change cannot be museumized in this way: their modern stories are invisible because the format for their presentation is more difficult to design. However, the view from the reverse angle is just as true: because of the stories that have been selected – battle, homesteading – the modern stories become incompatible anyway. Stories have to be able to be packaged in a way that will keep visitors coming, and those stories do not admit difficult, complex stories like that of the twentieth century Métis. As Andersen argues, such richness and density cannot be shown in this format: he argues for a form of history ‘between commemorative, scholarly, and community histories.’²⁵

There are two further points that can be made, which challenge the critical and negative interpretation I have offered. First, the Wayback Machine reveals that the Batoche site held an art exhibition in 2011 of historic and contemporary work produced by Métis people.²⁶ The description of the exhibition is reflexive and acknowledges that visitors have enquired whether a Métis community ‘still exists,’ which is a way of recognising the problems inherent in their characterization and presentation of the site. The site gives a space over to the ‘talented Métis artistic community, both historical and contemporary’ and includes some fairly challenging comments from one of the artists about how historically difficult it has been for indigenous artists to have their work shown. This exhibition offers what Andersen might call a ‘corrective’,²⁷ to the absences of contemporary indigenous culture in national commemorative sites, although it still could be interpreted as a superficial admixture. Second, Parks Canada – after contact from the Métis community – agreed to rename the site commemorating the Battle of Fish Creek,

²⁵ Andersen, “Rebellions,” 630.

²⁶ “Resilience/Resistance: Métis Art 1880-2011,” Batoche NHS, the Wayback Machine, accessed April 2, 2017, <https://web-beta.archive.org/web/20130209150137/http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/sk/batoche/natcul/histo/exhib.aspx>

²⁷ Andersen, “Rebellions,” 620.

adjacent to Batoche, so that it gave the preferred Métis name for the settlement first. The site is now signposted as the Battle of Tourond's Coulee/Fish Creek.²⁸ Correct or sensitive naming of places is significant. Tourond's Coulee makes it clear who settled the land first, gives a sense of permanence, and offers a correction to the idea that Métis are being erased from the land and from Canadian history. I suggest that these two points do re-energize the Métis presence at Batoche, albeit within the terms of a narrative over which they have little control.

In conclusion, then, it seems as if the Batoche National Historic Site could have followed one of three directions that roughly correspond to Andersen's analytical categories: offer a radical, vernacular representation from below of Métis history that incorporates their recent and complex social history; present an exclusively settler-produced narrative that provides no opportunity for Métis voices to be heard and completely erases their motivations and history; or, add Metis voices to the mix while maintaining the basic settler framing. I have argued that the Batoche site has adopted this last middle way. Parks Canada has to produce sites of 'national' historic interest. This is inherently problematic, because there is not one Canada. Canada is a multicultural country with different streams of history that can never be satisfactorily reconciled as long as there is one dominant, hegemonic worldview into which all other stories must be fitted. Andersen's call for localised production of history and stories is compelling: he seems to be arguing for nothing less than a deconstruction of 'national' history into a mosaic of different histories. To this end, 'ownership' of Batoche could be turned over to a Métis trust of some kind: given the room to breathe, new depictions of Métis history could begin to act on the present in new and interesting ways.

²⁸ "Batoche National Historic Site – Batoche and Tourond's Coulee: A Landscape Coming Alive," YouTube video, 4:34, posted by Parks Canada, May 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VEgMf7sG1I>

Bibliography

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