

23 “But where am I?”

Reflections on digital activism promoting Indigenous People’s presence in a Canadian heritage village

*L. Anders Sandberg, Martha Stiegman
and Jesse Thistle*

“But where am I?” This is the question one of us, Jesse Thistle, asked himself when stepping into Black Creek Pioneer Village, a heritage village that celebrates and documents life in a mid-nineteenth century farming community in Toronto, Ontario. Jesse is Métis-Cree and traces his heritage to the Métis Rebellion in 1869, a resistance that was triggered when the newly formed Canadian government, in taking over the Indigenous lands previously granted by the British government to the Hudson’s Bay Company, threatened the culture and rights of the local Métis residents.

Jesse, a recent graduate of York University and scholar of Indigenous history in the Greater Toronto Area, is a resident of the Black Creek area that borders the village. The visit prompted Jesse to write, as an assignment for an undergraduate course at York, an open letter to the management of the Village telling how, as a young elementary school child, he had visited and been infatuated by the experience but how he had then come back as a mature student to see the village in a very different light. Most notably, he noticed that Indigenous peoples were not represented in the village. Specifically, he critiqued the Village’s British-only foundation narrative of Upper Canada (the colonial name of the province of Ontario) and the traumatic effect that it had on him and on Indigenous people more generally. The letter, however, was not presented to the village administration at the time.

“But where are they?” This is the question that another one of us, Anders Sandberg, a Professor in Environmental Studies at York University, asked as he also noted the absence of Indigenous peoples in Black Creek Pioneer Village. Anders and collaborators have since spoken about this absence on campus walks that they conduct regularly for various groups on and off-campus. These tours are organized under the name the Alternative Campus Tour, a tour that encourages participants to think critically about their everyday surroundings, that gives voice to different and marginalized voices on campus, and that offers students the opportunity to venture out of the classroom (Bardekjian et al. 2013; Sandberg 2013, 2015). Besides a walking component, the tour has a digital form in the shape of a website with text and image-based stories about different sites on the

campus. New material is added on a continuous basis to the website (Alternative Campus Tour 2015).

In 2014, Anders heard Jesse read his open letter at a presentation at the university. This was the beginning of a collaboration. Anders felt that Jesse's letter could become a valuable web-based contribution to the Alternative Campus Tour. And they both felt the letter should be presented to the village administration, but were not sure about its exact form or the timing. They were more certain about the basic premise of the project. They wanted to set out to directly challenge Canadian history as it was represented by Black Creek Pioneer Village and to ask why Indigenous people have been left out, what that means, and how it affects Canadians and Indigenous people alike.

They also hoped that the project would contribute to the reassertion of an Indigenous presence at York University, in Toronto, Upper Canada, and Canadian history as a whole, and in doing work to make places like Black Creek Pioneer Village include, rightfully so they felt, Indigenous peoples in the formation narrative of Canada. They also felt that strengthening Indigenous people's inclusion in the metanarrative of Canada would make the public aware of deeper issues like treaties and cohabitation, and the rights and responsibilities Indigenous peoples and Canadians have on Turtle Island (the Indigenous name for North America) in regard to both. It might also open a discussion about the settler responsibilities that derive from the treaty relationships in this part of the country, that bind Indigenous and settler peoples to each other, and the lands we now share. The project then would be part education and part active resistance.

They also resolved that the project should be web-based and have a biographical focus on Jesse's life, as is a customary Indigenous storytelling strategy; they decided it best to work through his experiences as a focus, given the potency of biography. This is where Martha Stiegman, also a professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, joined the project. Martha is a videographer with an extensive background working with Indigenous groups. Anders and Jesse asked her to co-develop the script with Jesse and to shoot the video. She would thus support the creation of a site story for the Alternative Campus Tour with not only a written and photographic content but also a video and audio component.

On a broader methodological scale, their project speaks to a number of themes of this book, including the de-colonizing of research, and the affective and digital turns in nature-culture and environmental history research. They were especially interested in using digital methods to convey an affective and artistic message to a broader public and to political and administrative decision-makers rather than confine a discussion to the academy. Their aim in employing a digital-affective method was to highlight "something that moves, that triggers predominantly personal reactions ... [and where] [t]he senses, the personal and the body are thus at the forefront ..." (Berberich et al. 2015, p. 1). This would in turn aim to defy the dominant language, tropes and narratives of settler society "to enact new forms of expression, production and reception that try, in differing ways, to uncover 'the story-telling of the people to come' and through various 'art

practices' intervene in and challenge the 'general distribution of the sensible' and help 're-define the 'social'" (ibid. p. 40).

Together, the three of us set out to do a three-part project on Black Creek Pioneer Village, all of the three parts calling attention to the erasure of Indigenous history in the village and with the aim of changing this situation. One part is the current chapter, which provides a background, context, and record of the progress of the project as it unfolded and is unfolding. The actual methodology and process of conducting research is thus ad hoc and contingent, where we learn and change our procedure and tactics as we go along and learn from our interactions. Part of this methodology is to consider and reflect on the ethical and strategic issues surrounding our dealings with the Black Creek Pioneer village administration. The other part consists of the two digital activist interventions. One is composed of a short written introduction and several photos of Black Creek Pioneer Village as well as a reproduction of Jesse's open letter. The other is a video that challenges the Village's erasure of Indigenous peoples in its constructed pastoral imaginary by drawing on Jesse's biography as Métis-Cree visiting the village as a young boy and a university student. These items are posted on the Alternative Campus Tour website.

Black Creek Pioneer Village

The mission of Black Creek Pioneer Village, as stated on its website, is to help

people apply the history of life in the Toronto region to build a better future in their own communities. We invite everyone to join in this exploration. We care for and show a historical collection of value to all, create experience of benefit to all, and tell meaningful stories for all. Our programs and exhibits focus on experiential learning and encourage people to draw connections between the mid-1800s and contemporary life. Our services enhance these connections and encourage diverse usage of the site (www.blackcreek.ca/v2/museum/mission.dot).

Such a mission statement is not unusual for heritage sites. They typically have a nostalgic and moral message that tell us more about the present than the history they purport to describe. In this case, the present denies the place of Indigenous nations, justifies Canadian claims of sovereignty, bolsters the myth of terra nullius, and refuses a space for Indigenous claims for recognition of lands and resources. The distortions and erasures in "pioneer villages" are well described and evidenced in the academic literature. Tivy, for example, says it well: "Museum brochure pictures show happy, healthy people engaged in domestic, agricultural or social activities. These are people the tourist would want to meet, activities we can join" (1993, p. 42) (Figure 23.1). She goes on to state:

Few museums have challenged this narrative with stories of local contention, desolation or social struggle. Social issues such as industrial



Figure 23.1 The focus in Black Creek Pioneer Village is on the “village folk,” the white settlers who formed the core of the community. Indigenous peoples and the knowledge and practices they would have shared with early settlers are absent in these depictions

Source: Photo courtesy of L. Anders Sandberg.

labour, cultural or racial conflict, suffrage, poverty, crime and so on are minimal in exhibits in these museums. Instead, one sees, even in local history museums with chronological gallery exhibits, mainly local culture in the form of three dominant groups: pioneers, Victorians, and Indians.

(*ibid.* p. 38)

Black Creek Pioneer Village falls into this category, though without the “Indians.” When exploring the village, we only found a few signs of Indigenous history. In the gift shop, there is the standard assortment of items, such as dream catchers, miniature canoes, jewelry, and books, depicting renditions of “Plains Indian” life and other stereotypical ideas of Indigenous life completely detached from the local context. In the village itself, we found an Inuit doll in one of the displays and a canoe made according to Indigenous peoples’ conventions, but with no attribution (see Figure 23.2). At the village’s website, there is one page dedicated to the First Nations’ presence in southern Ontario, but the information is highly general and is not specific to the Black Creek area. The text, accompanied by a photo of a group of Ojibwa in front of a tipi, points out that Aboriginal peoples have occupied the Great Lakes region for at least 12,000 years, naming the Ojibwa, the Iroquois, the Ottawa, the Huron (Wendat), the Fox and the Mississauga. It also mentions that Aboriginal peoples survived on hunting, gathering, and fishing and that they taught the early settlers about medicinal herbs, sources of food (such as maple sugar and corn), the use of animal hide for clothing, and how to travel on snowshoes or in birch bark canoes



Figure 23.2 There are very few Indigenous artifacts displayed in Black Creek Pioneer Village. This canoe is an exception, built according to Indigenous peoples' principles, but with no attribution

Source: Photo courtesy of L. Anders Sandberg.

(Black Creek Pioneer Village 2015). A more detailed history could, among other things, acknowledge the presence of several pre-eighteenth century Wendat villages a few hundred metres from the Black Creek Pioneer Village's site, the Toronto Carrying Place (a major transportation route across the southern Ontario peninsula) only about three kilometres west of the village, the land claims against the area by both the Mississaugas of the New Credit and the Six Nations of the Grand River, the past occupancy of other First Nations groups, and the growing Indigenous presence among institutions, faculty, staff and students on the York University Campus in the present (Sandberg, 2013, 2015).

Overall, the Village resembles what Jean Baudrillard has called a simulacrum, a mirror image of something that never existed. Journalist John Bentley Mays alludes to this situation in the following:

Black Creek is annoying, because of everything from the cloying sweetness and phony rusticity of the "village" itself to the vast, junk-crammed boutique and fries-and-burger outlet masked by all that sentimental, schmoozy exaltation. But it is also rich in delights for the connoisseur of wicked ironies. The buildings so diligently hauled to Toronto and carefully set up here to evoke nostalgia for a "harder, simpler" time, for instance, were abandoned precisely because the hard lifestyle to which they belonged was being made obsolete by Ontario's swift modernization and consumer revolution in late Victorian times.

(Mays 1992)

In academic and private conversations, village staff and administrators readily admit to the selective and romanticized rendition of village life but rationalize it

on the basis of maintaining its revenue stream and serving a public demand. The visitors, the majority of whom are school children, families with young children, and pensioners, so the argument goes, favour a sanitized and partial view of history.

On the basis of the candor of the Village staff, who admitted to the partial and distorted stories told about mid-nineteenth century rural life in Ontario, we decided to first explore whether there was any aspiration within the administration to expand its mandate to explore in more detail the presence of the original inhabitants in the area. We felt that such support might help if we were to put pressure on the institution to change its mandate, and perhaps also help us shape how that pressure might be applied. We were inspired by such a tactic by President Franklin Roosevelt who allegedly responded to one lobby group: "Ok, you have convinced me, now go out and put pressure on me to change." However, we found very little sympathy for such change. The staff and administration's standard and rehearsed answer is that the village's mandate is not to cover the original inhabitants and, besides, so their argument continues, there were no Indians in the area at the time of European settlement.

There are several problems with such an argument. To begin with, it is typically based on written sources, such as the census and legal documents, where Indigenous peoples are notably absent. But that does not provide conclusive evidence that Indigenous peoples did not travel, camp, extract sustenance, or work in the area seasonally or temporarily as has been documented in other places. Their presumed absence, in other words, is a question for closer investigation not only in the oral record of Indigenous peoples themselves but perhaps also in the archival record, such as newspapers, settlers' diaries, the correspondence of the Department of Indian Affairs, and other forms of daily records.

The bias towards acknowledging a permanent rather than temporary presence of "settlers" is by no means only a characteristic of Indigenous peoples in Black Creek Pioneer Village. It is also clearly shown in a small exhibit on Black settlers' history in the area that is displayed in the village. Once again, the census constitutes the basis for establishing Black people's presence. In addition, the narration biases the recording of "settlers" to those who fit into the "settlers' mold", as illustrated, for example, by the statement: "Like people from other ethnic groups, people of African descent worked in a variety of jobs. They were farmers, labourers, artisans, home makers, and professionals." In such schemes that recognize presence only in censuses, property records, and permanent residency, there is no allowance for documenting Black people who occupied the area temporarily or informally. In a similar way, Indigenous peoples who moved seasonally through the area to work, sell products of their own making, or to hunt, fish, or gather, are erased. We hypothesize that if equal resources had been put into researching the Indigenous presence in the area as had been afforded to the settler presence (as, for example, the history of one single barn (TRCA, 2015)), the Black Creek Pioneer Village of the 1860s may have looked very different.

It is also, we feel, wrong to rigidly hold onto the mandate of the village to only depict life in the 1860s. The artifacts and displays in the village in fact stray from

this rigid mandate on many occasions, including the inclusion of buildings from other periods and showing long-range histories of other ethnic groups in the area. By contrast, there are few references to First Peoples, including any mention of the nearby remnants of the pre-eighteenth century Wendat communities, the series of land and resource claims to the area that Mississauga and Haudenasaunee nations have asserted and that Jesse mentions in his appearance in our video, and the recognition of a growing Indigenous people's presence in Toronto today (Sandberg 2013, 2015).¹

But more broadly and fundamentally, the Black Creek Pioneer Village narrative speaks against persistent efforts to make connections between historic treaties and other agreements between settler society and Indigenous peoples. These agreements have relevance for how we live together in the present: how we embody the spirit and intent of those agreements (despite their being undermined by colonial government interpretation and application), and how we use them as a framework to work towards reconciliation. One of the things that struck us in reading the village mandate—to “encourage people to draw connections between the mid-1800s and contemporary life”—is that the version of history presented at the village encourages people do the very opposite. This is particularly disturbing at a time when there are at least some efforts to address the historical injustices inflicted on Indigenous Peoples in Canada (see, for example, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

Pursuing the project

Given the seemingly entrenched view on the exclusion of First Nations histories and present realities in the village administration, and the negative reaction our challenge might pose, we decided that our very first task should be to seek official permission to film *Thistle in the village*, a process we started on 16 July 2015. This proved more difficult than we anticipated. In spite of the fact that our project lacked a budget, was non-obtrusive (our plan was to have Martha filming Jesse for a couple of hours, a plan that changed only slightly at the time of filming), and was non-commercial, the village administration insisted we go through the formal application process that is standard for the dealings with large-scale commercial productions of the Hollywood variety. This involved providing evidence of insurance and workers' compensation coverage for the principals and having the Village administration review the film script in advance of filming. Other provisions in the contract stipulated that we were not allowed to interview the public or village staff. We also had to provide a \$300 security deposit and pay a \$150 hourly fee for filming, a rate that was half the regular rate, a concession made by the village administration in recognition of the small scale and low budget of our project.

We recite this process not because we think that the village administration wanted to scuttle the project, but to show the disciplining that typically takes place through formal rules and regulations within an institutional setting that make difficult any challenges to its everyday routine activities. On 19 November

2015 our project was approved and on 20 November 2015 we filmed inside the village. Besides featuring Jesse, the video also contains one jingle dancer and one grass dancer, both in full regalia, whose performance disrupted the dominant narrative told in the village (Figure 23.3).

The video challenges the version of history presented at the village, and its erasure of Indigenous peoples. We open with images of the village itself: a woman passes across the screen dressed in a 1850s bonnet, shawl and full skirt. Sheep bleat, fenced in their pasture. A young native boy, roughly ten years old, watches in amazement as a tinsmith crafts a small tool. Jesse's voice comes in, remembering his first visit to the site as a schoolboy, and his fascination with the craftsmanship on display. "The leather workers, blacksmith, print shop workers – they all mesmerized me," he recalls. "My brothers and I played pioneers for weeks after that visit".

Jesse links the spark that trip ignited in him, to his now-love of history and his recent position as a historian at York University where he is tracing the road of his people, the Cree/Métis Road Allowance community of Park Valley Saskatchewan. In the video we move from images of York campus and a defiant Jesse, facing the camera in front of York's Vari Hall, to a series of images from his Métis community. "I trace my road back to Louis Riel and the Battle at Batoche" he asserts, over a series of archival photos of his ancestors who fought as part of the Riel Resistance: Jesse's great uncles, the Arcane brothers who fought there as child soldiers and his great grandmother, Marianne LeDoux, who would spend the rest of her life traumatized, hiding in the bush.



Figure 23.3 An Indigenous jingle dancer disrupts the settler narrative in Black Creek Pioneer Village

Source: Photo courtesy of Martha Stiegman.

Jesse's current research documents the effects of inter-generational trauma, and links the trauma his family would have faced to the years he spent homeless on the streets of Toronto. He is researching the impacts on his great grandfather, St. Pierre Arcand, who fought at Batoche as a child soldier, the impacts on his people of being hunted as military enemies by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the breakdown of *wahkootiwin* (Cree for kinship) bonds of trust and family that held Métis-Cree society together prior to 1885. With the Riel Resistance, his people went from a lucrative status as middlemen in the fur trade to a landless people, spending generations in exile. Forced off their traditional territory and dispossessed of land from the so-called scrip process instituted by the new Canadian government, the only place they were able to establish somewhat permanent settlement were on the ten meters reserved on the side of public roads and railways for maintenance, and in between square block settlements, thus the name "Roadside Allowance". In the video, Jesse remembers the parting words of his grandfather, or Mushum, when he left at age three with his father and brothers for Toronto: "Don't tell them you're Métis or they'll hang you."

Jesse spent years homeless on the streets of Toronto, an experience he links, in part, to shame he felt about his native heritage—a shame to which the history presented at Black Creek Pioneer Village, echoed by a thousand daily erasures of Indigenous presence, contributed. If this version of history that glorifies pioneer triumph over terra nullius is justified as a "simplified" or "sanitized" account, Jesse's experience demands viewers consider for whom that narrative is experienced as sanitized, and for whom this account is in fact quite bloody. The story presented at the village is a story with very real, and violent, consequences.

An urban metropolis like Toronto might be viewed as an endgame of settler colonialism. It is a space where the land itself has been erased and buried under concrete, a space where all traces of Indigenous history and presence seems to have been removed—a canvas for the postmodern multicultural Canadian project. It is at the heart of this concrete jungle our video asserts Indigenous history and presence. "This land is Anishnabee territory. It's Huron-Wendat territory. Haudenosaunee territory" Jesse reminds us, over images of spaces where this urban triumph feels the most complete. And yet these are places that have never ceased to be of deep significance for the original peoples of this land (Freeman 2010; Johnson 2013, 2015; Woodsworth 2012). The four-storey-high billboards and video screens at Dundas Square lie over Yonge Street, a road that was built by the early citizens of colonial York and the Northwest Company (a fur trading enterprise based in Montreal) to replace the north-south axis of the Toronto Carrying Place along the Humber River, which is why Yonge Street goes from Lake Ontario to the city of Barrie and beyond, into the Canadian Northwest—roughly the same path the Toronto Carrying Place took (Robinson 1933, 1943). The crowds of pedestrians on Spadina Road cross an ancient pathway Ishpadina, an Anishnabee word referring to the rise in the land, sloping up from the shoreline of Lake Ontario. The CN Tower framed by the Toronto skyline, viewed from the Toronto islands, is a place of deep spiritual significance for Mississauga people, and contested in terms of the treaty of the Mississauga, the First Nations

inhabitants of the Toronto region at the time of British Loyalist immigrations in the 1760s to the 1780s. The Mississauga have contended for over 200 years that they did not relinquish the island in the Toronto "Purchases" of 1787, 1788, or 1805, but only the territory stretching inland, back from the shore line.

While listing the Indigenous and historical relevance of these sites in the film, Jesse says, "That's the version of history I'm here to assert." Indeed, the history Jesse is "revising", the deeper foundational Indigenous history of Toronto, has been erased by concrete and time, but more so by the settler narrative Canada uses to justify the often-hostile takeover of Indigenous lands and territory.

Conclusion

The digital revolution provides endless opportunities for academics conducting nature-culture and environmental history research to communicate their messages in different ways to different audiences. At York University, we have for many years conducted an Alternative Campus Tour for students, faculty, staff, community neighbours and the general public. The tour is advertised and available digitally on the World Wide Web. One of us has argued elsewhere that the tour can be a critical and subversive pedagogical tool for students as well as a means to establish closer ties with surrounding communities. It is also a way of conducting an affective and embodied learning of the everyday, learning not only from a text and a voice, but from walking, experiencing, enjoying and enduring a place with your full body (Sandberg 2015). In this context, we argue that a digital record can effectively illustrate the lack of representation of First Nations both in the past and present on and near the campus. The account draws in particular on a personal narrative of one of us, using an individual experience and associated emotions, everyday scenes, and an interview and dance to disrupt the dominant narrative of a settler pioneer village that neighbours the university campus. Our ultimate aim is to rally support that challenges and convinces local politicians and the village administration to include a fair representation of First Peoples in the region.

Note

- 1 Some examples of wider Indigenous presence in Toronto around the mid-1800s include: Indigenous warriors playing a prominent role in the defense of Fort York against Americans in 1813; the Mississaugas living at the Credit River reserve from 1826–1847; Indigenous peoples selling crafts and other goods at Canadian National Exhibition and St. Lawrence Market in the mid-1800s; the Mississaugas protesting to the Duke of Newcastle in 1860 that their council grounds at the site of Centre for Addiction and Mental Health were still owned by them; Oronhyatekha (Peter Martin) finishing his medical degree at the University of Toronto in 1864; Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) writing an article in *Toronto's Daily Mail* in 1875 to defend Indigenous peoples against negative portrayals as 'savages'; Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show (featuring many Indigenous leaders and performers) being held at Woodbine Park in 1885; E. Pauline Johnson performing in Toronto towards the end of nineteenth century; and at least one Indigenous family having a camp on the Rouge River until about 1915. We are indebted to Jon Johnson for this list.

References

- Alternative Campus Tour. (2015). Accessed 1 October 2015 at <http://alternativecampustour.info.yorku.ca>.
- Black Creek Pioneer Village. (2015). Aboriginal people. Accessed 15 December 2015 at www.blackcreek.ca/for-kids/homework-help/aboriginal-people.dot.
- Bentley Mays, J. (1992). Toronto's 'pioneer village' is no village at all, but a series of non-nostalgic bits and pieces put together in a nostalgic way, *Globe & Mail*, 16 December, p. C1.
- Berberich, C., Campbell, N. and Hudson, R. eds. (2015). Introduction: Affective landscapes. In Berberich, C., Campbell, N. and Hudson, R., eds. *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life: Memory, Place and Senses* (1–10). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Bardekjian, A., Classens, M. and Sandberg, L.A. (2013). Reading the urban landscape: The case of a campus tour at York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 2(3), 249–56.
- Freeman, V. (2010). 'Toronto has no history!' Indigeneity, settler colonialism and historical memory in Canada's largest city. PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, Canada.
- Johnson, J. (2013). The Indigenous environmental history of downtown Toronto. In Sandberg, L. A., Bocking, S., Coates, C. and Cruickshank, K., eds. *Urban Explorations: Environmental Histories of the Toronto Region* (58–71). Hamilton, ON: L.R. Wilson Centre for Canadian Studies.
- Johnson, J. (2015). Pathways to the eighth fire: Indigenous knowledge and storytelling in Toronto. PhD dissertation, York University, Toronto, Canada.
- Robinson, P. J. (1933). *Toronto During the French Regime: A History of the Toronto Region from Brule to Simcoe 1615–1793*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Robinson, P. J. (1943). Yonge Street and the Northwest Company. *Canadian Historical Review*. XXIV, 253–265.
- Sandberg, L. A. (2013). On stockades and bridges: From York University to the Jane and Finch neighbourhood. In Sandberg, L.A., Coates, C. and Cruickshank, K., eds, *Urban Explorations: Environmental Histories of the Toronto Region* (97–120). Hamilton, ON: L.R. Wilson Centre for Canadian History, McMaster University.
- Sandberg, L.A. (2015). Subverting the enterprise university: The case of the alternative campus tour at York University, Toronto, Canada. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, 2(2), 12–19.
- TRCA. (2015). The Dalziel Barn. Accessed 25 September 2015 at www.dalzielbarn.com/home.html.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). Honouring the truth, reconciling the future. Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Accessed 16 December 2015 at www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf.
- Tivy, M. (1993). Museums, visitors and the reconstruction of the past in Ontario. *Material Culture Review*, 37(1), 35–51.
- Woodworth, B. Raweno:kwas. (2012). Urban place as an expression of the ancestors. In Ingrid Leman Stefanovic and Stephen Bede Scharper, eds, *The Natural City: Re-envisioning the Built Environment* (223–230). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.