

# “Dig Where You Stand”: Challenging the Myth of the “White Pioneer”

Naomi Norquay

Berlin, West Germany, May, 1985:

"On May 8, a small group of young people arrived at the site of the Gestapo, carrying signs that read "Dig Where You Stand", and before a crowd of astonished onlookers, they began to hack at the earth, to dig into the history of the place, so to speak - to excavate the foundations of a taboo past."<sup>1</sup>

In the mid 1960s, my family bought three adjacent fifty-acre lots from a farming family in Artemesia Township. It was, as my father called it, "scrub land", which meant that it was not really suitable for farming. It had been farmed, at some point, because most of the land was now meadow, suggesting that sometime in its “post contact” history, it had been logged - cleared of the trees and underbrush. The land slopes down to the Saugeen River, the soil is glacial till - full of rocks and gravel, and the ground is full of springs, with a large expanse of swamp down by the river. It was not an idyllic pioneer farm, by any stretch of the imagination, but it was a farm, nevertheless.

My family soon learned from the farmer who cut our road that the land had been first farmed by "black slaves" who had been given the land by Queen Victoria. Our property fronted on the Old Durham Road, and this farmer told us that the first settler on the property was "a black preacher". This was an interesting piece of information because my father was a preacher. We thought it amusing that two preachers had now lived on the same property. The grassed-over foundations of old buildings and the bits of pottery, porcelain and old rusty square nails that we, to this day, dig up in the garden, are a constant reminder of this first settler.

Thinking back, now, to that time, I have been trying to piece together how I, as a child, might have made sense of the fact that there were no longer any black people in the area, and no evidence at all that the township's first non-native population had been black American refugees.<sup>2</sup> Since, by the age of nine or ten, I had already been schooled and socialized to assume the centrality of (white) Anglo-Canadian culture, I very much doubt that I ever questioned why there were no longer black people in the area. However, as a teenager, I do remember learning that there was a black community in Owen Sound and that all the settlers from the area had moved to Owen Sound or Collingwood. This had a certain “logic” to it: the black people wouldn't have been able to stand the harsh winter conditions of farming. Black people, I reasoned with certainty, are used to warmer climates, so town life would be preferable. That they had been given land by “our” Queen, was more a reflection on her beneficence than their worthiness or capability. I saw it as an act of charity - charity being something that those “who matter” confer upon those who do not.

Interwoven in my reasoning were the years of mis-education and un-education that I had received. No Canadian history text mentioned our black settlers, no novel or

story book explored the lives of Black Canadians. My racist assumptions about race stood in for real knowledge. For example, I did not know that Priceville had been named after a black man. From childhood, I had known that Priceville had been named after a "Colonel Price", but that early teaching did not include his racial identity, and because this information had been left out, I had assumed he was white.

The gaps, erasures and silences in both Canadian history and Canadian school curriculum, are now being addressed through such means as "Black History Month". However, the contents of this curriculum, if taught at all in Ontario schools, occurs as an add-on, and has not been integrated into the regular "main-stream". Its inclusion usually depends on there being a sizeable Black student population in the school, and/or the interest and willingness of individual teachers.<sup>3</sup>

It was the reclamation of the Black cemetery on the Old Durham Road that sparked my interest in unlearning and then relearning the history of Artemesia Township. Because I teach in a faculty of education, I followed the unfolding story, clipping newspaper articles when they appeared, to bring into my teacher education classrooms. One of the topics we address is "who's here?", both in terms of present-day school populations and nineteenth-century school populations. The Old Durham Road Cemetery story challenges assumptions about who was here in the nineteenth century. We read Afua Cooper's account of Mary Bibb, one of the first black educators in the province.<sup>4</sup> Her account traces Bibb's career and persistently asks the question, why is it so difficult to find historical records about this important nineteenth-century educator? And, in my endless search for more material on black history, I viewed the recent film, *Speakers for the Dead*.<sup>5</sup> It laid bare the gaps and erasures in Artemesia Township history, and sent me tumbling back to my own childhood memories, and the breaches in the history of my own land and soil that they held in place. I knew I needed to heed the call of the German protestors: I would begin to dig where I stand.

And so, I returned to my copy of Priceville's history, *Priceville and its Roots (Routes)*, and undertook a "close read" of the text, as a way to begin to understand why these omissions occurred, and how they were kept in place. I noted that the text begins with a quote: "A community that forgets its past has no future". What I found was a text that, perhaps unwittingly, holds in place the very exclusions it wants to eradicate.<sup>6</sup>

The text begins with a brief overview of the native and original black settlers. There are five short paragraphs on the "native Indians", and an accompanying photograph. Then, there are five paragraphs of text and a photograph about the original Black settlers. The paucity of information betrays the title of this section: "Black History of *Our* Area" (emphasis added). The "real" history is what fills the remaining 276 pages of the book. The official history of Priceville belongs to the descendants of those who claimed it as "ours". Initially referred to as "newcomers" in the text, the white Anglo settlers who came after the black settlers are celebrated as the true forefathers and foremothers of Priceville's history. They are the "pioneers", as the text repeatedly calls them.

"Pioneer" is an interesting word: "Originally a French military term to designate trench diggers, it came to mean any labourer involved in work that enabled others. It implies a certain pre-eminence, that of being the first. As such it is an interesting term for Canada's successive waves of Anglo-European immigrants. Each generation of pioneers claims for itself the privilege of being first. Of course, identifying

as “the first” precludes any consideration of who came before. It is a seductive term, and is used liberally throughout the Priceville text. Indeed, the book is dedicated to “the memory of the pioneers who survived only by determination and hard work and set the example for those who followed in building our community”.<sup>7</sup>

This image of the pioneer is central to an article included in the text, entitled “Pioneers of Ontario”, written by Emma Oliver in (circa) 1927, for a public speaking contest held in Artemesia. She wrote:

The great majority of our pioneers came from the Motherland, many from houses of wealth and ease. ...Fresh from the staid old land, he marvelled at the lack of good roads, the lack of schools and churches and the lack of well-tilled fields. To him it was as though he had discovered a new, unexplored land, and so it was. But was he daunted? Did he turn back? No, indeed! In one great flame of self-sacrifice he automatically accepted his lot and became the explorer, builder, the pathfinder of this fine province.<sup>8</sup>

Emma Oliver echoes the prevalent assumption of her time that the white settlers in Artemesia Township encountered *only* “unexplored land”, and she credits them as the sole progenitors of the farming community in which she lived.<sup>9</sup> As an artifact from the 1920s, her article may have been understood as a primary resource, containing factual information about an historical time that is more distant to us than to her.

In deference to the undeniably hard work and the hardships that faced the white ancestors of today's Priceville community, the Priceville text privileges their history, and honours it. But when we interrogate the centrality of the white pioneer to the text, we come across the very information that does point to who did come before - those who have been erased from the history. On page 5, we are introduced to Sarah Maclean, “believed to be the first white baby born in Priceville”.<sup>10</sup> I suggest that, in order to confer on a child the designation “first white baby”, there must have been other babies born in Priceville who were not white. Similarly, on page 198, a photo of “Katie and Ronald (Born 1857)” states that “[their parents are believed to be the first white settlers on the South Line, Artemesia.”.<sup>11</sup> Sarah Maclean's birth, and the parents of Katie and Ronald MacDougall, from a historical point of view; set the line in the sand: race mattered, both then and now.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the essay written by Priceville resident and school girl, Catherine McTaggart, in 1915 or 1916, also marks this line. She wrote in her school project:

The Village plot was laid out by Surveyor Price, who as the story goes [my emphasis]<sup>13</sup>, had helped runaway slaves across the Niagara River. When the Village plot was being named some of the whites wanted it called “Grovesend” but the negroes got their way and named it after *their* [my emphasis]<sup>14</sup> hero.<sup>15</sup>

I cannot fault the authors of the Priceville text for researching and writing their history: it is both a vital and crucial history. It is about having roots (origins and a sense of belonging) and routes (glimpses of roads traveled that might explain or justify

the roads currently travelled.) It takes painstaking, endless, and often thankless work to produce a community history book. Countless communities in Canada have embarked on this task and have produced volumes which lovingly and sometimes vividly, document "their" history. As these texts are intended to celebrate and commemorate, they are rarely critical, and they almost always start with homage to the white pioneers who were the forefathers and foremothers of the current community. The limits of these texts are, however, marked by what is often excluded (or marginalised): those who came before.

Often, these exclusions are exacerbated by limited historical knowledge and limited access to historical documents that might bring additional information. For example, in one of my courses in the Faculty of Education at York University, I ask my students to research their family immigration histories. The intent is to prod them to consider who is a "Canadian" and who remains an immigrant. Interestingly, it is usually the white-Anglo students who have the most difficulty with this assignment. They often do not know when their families came to Canada, or where they came from. Often what they do know are stories about the family once they were settled in Canada.

Consider the response of this student: "Janet".<sup>16</sup> As far as Janet knows, her family has been in Canada for an unknown number of generations. She identified Canada as "country of origin". She described her mother's family as originally coming from "England or Scotland or something to that extent".<sup>17</sup> She made sense of her immigration history in this way: "They were basically settlers. They came for land and they farmed the land. And they've been farmers ever since."<sup>18</sup> Growing up, her mother had told her stories about her grandmother, who had lived in the bush. These stories supported the family's identity with traditional "pioneer" roots, which focus on "here", rather than "there": "I mean, everyone I know has always been here ... and whoever my parents know have always been here, and I've always been here, I don't know any differently".<sup>19</sup>

I suggest that this "always having been here" identity relies on the myth of the white pioneer, which, given our racist history, holds in place the pre-eminence of white settlers over others. It's a difficult myth to dislodge as it is central to how we think about "local" history, which is "down home", "folk", unpretentious, it's about "the little guy", and common, everyday struggles for survival. It also masks white racism, in that it implies a certain innocence, simple honesty, and of course, myriad pioneering hardships, which it claims exclusively as its own.

There are several challenges when it comes to trying to re-balance our history, by including those who did come before (or during, or after), but who have disappeared from both our historical and our current cultural landscape. Clearly, there is much more digging to do. Firstly, we must understand that acts of erasure went hand in hand with other historical events. The first settlers, for the most part, did not remain in Artemesia Township on their homesteads. They mostly moved to Owen Sound and Collingwood to take up jobs in the shipping industry and its related trades. The motivation for these acts of departure is little known: some were forced off their land,<sup>20</sup> some sold their land, some intermarried and through time their descendants "lost" their black heritage. What is left to us is white sense-making of why they left (they could not withstand the harsh climate, they were really tradesmen and not farmers)<sup>21</sup>, and white acts of erasure (plowing under black cemeteries). These acts of erasure removed not only the memories of these black settlers, but also the history. Subsequently, we lose track of the actual historical acts in our historiographical accounts (such as in the Priceville text).

In addition, we must look closely at the connections between the pioneer, whiteness, and Canadian identity.<sup>22</sup> How are these connected? How do they hold each other in place, now and in the past? Lastly, we must do the much harder historical research needed to retrieve what is lost. For example, what else might be known about Colonel Price (and why do I think he had a military title)? Who knows it? How is it known? What got erased in the tellings? How did a farmer come to own a cemetery? Was this sanctioned by the state? If not sanctioned, why was it tolerated? If black pioneers lost their land to new immigrants, how did the land grant process make this possible? What was the deed process like? Who administered the deeds? Where? When? How long did it take? What laws were in place to protect pioneers who had not yet had the opportunity to apply for or receive the deeds to their land? What role did illiteracy play in this history? These are important questions because they relieve the individual white newcomers from full culpability for the erasure of the black community from Artemesia. They place some of the blame where it belongs, at the feet of the state and its various apparatuses of governance.

As I continue my own excavations (memories of childhood stories, and current research at the Grey County Archives), the information I gain provokes more questions. For example, I recall hearing a story, told by an elderly neighbour (now deceased), about her grandmother, who recalled seeing Saugeen Indians camping out on "our"<sup>23</sup> far knoll. If her grandmother remembered this, I wonder just who her forebears were? This story, at the very least, points to a far more complex set of social relations in the area in the mid-nineteenth century. The fact that a search of the deeds of my family's land at the Grey County Archives indicate the initial owner, a Black named Royal Simons, gained title to his land in 1855 and then sold it in 1856, begs the questions: How did his back-breaking work of clearing the land shape what subsequent landowners were able to accomplish? Why did he sell his land? If he is related to Christopher Simons, whose head stone was uncovered in the Old Durham Road Cemetery, what might have been his hopes for putting down roots in Artemesia, and remaining? What kept him from doing so. What we piece together will hopefully further rupture the myth of the white pioneer. In doing this, we do not challenge the work and lives of those people, but we do put them back into the context into which they actually lived their lives. This context is far richer than we have, until now, been able to imagine or perhaps even acknowledge. With this goal in mind, it may be easier to confront the gaps, silences and erasures head on - with the knowledge and the hope that the world will be a better place for it, if we do.

---

<sup>1</sup> Erna Paris, "Memory and the Second World War" in *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2000), 32

<sup>2</sup> I use the term "refugee" rather than "fugitive" to draw connections between those first settlers and Canada's ongoing policies of accepting people from around the world who are fleeing various crimes against humanity.

<sup>3</sup> See Keren S. Braithwaite & Carl E. James, eds., *Educating African Canadians* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 1996)

<sup>4</sup> Afua Cooper, "Black Women and Work in Nineteenth Century Canada West: Black Woman Teacher Mary Bibb", in Peggy Bristow et al., *'We're rooted here and they can't pull us up': Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 145-171.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland, *Speakers for the Dead* (National Film Board of Canada: 2000)

<sup>6</sup> Priceville and Area Historical Society, *Priceville and its Rural Roots (Routes)* (Owen Sound: Stan Brown Printers Limited, 1992). See page 1 in particular.

<sup>7</sup> Priceville and Area Historical Society, v.

---

<sup>8</sup> Priceville and Area Historical Society, 136.

<sup>9</sup> I note that it is only male pioneers who figure in her account!

<sup>10</sup> Priceville and Area Historical Society, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Priceville and Area Historical Society, 198.

<sup>12</sup> Although we tend to think that attention to race was greater in the past, I note that the interest in Sarah Maclean being "the first white baby", was important enough to the current-day producers of the Priceville text, that they made mention of it.

<sup>13</sup> "As the story goes" is a cliché phrase often used when we want to distance ourselves from the story because we are not certain that it is true.

<sup>14</sup> Racial divides made/make it difficult for whites to view black freedom fighters as their heroes, too!

<sup>15</sup> Priceville and Area Historical Society, 160.

<sup>16</sup> "Janet" was one of 20 students I interviewed in 1994 about their family immigration histories. A pseudonym has been used to protect her identity.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Janet, January 18, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Janet.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Janet.

<sup>20</sup> Holness and Sutherland. ....

<sup>21</sup> This last suggestion ignores the fact that many of Canada's nineteenth-century immigrants were tradespeople who wound up farming!

<sup>22</sup> For explorations of white Anglo identity construction in relation to immigration, see: Naomi Norquay, "Where is here?", *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 8, #1(2000): 7-21; Carol Schick, "By virtue of being white: Resistance to anti-racist pedagogy", *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 3, #1, (2000): 79-94; John Willinsky, *Learning to divide the world: Education at empire's end*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> My sense of land ownership becomes more and more tentative, as I continue digging.