

*The Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Settlement:
Contested Place as an Invitation to Curriculum*

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Abstract:

Using Lippard's conceptual framings of *place* (the physical, ideological and imaginary), we consider how the dominant White pioneer narrative shapes stories told about a historic Black pioneer settlement in Grey County, Ontario. The contested history of this community demonstrates the importance of place to people's stories and it also points to new imaginings that might restore this forgotten community to its rightful place in local history. An oral history project with community elders and an engagement with children in the local school are used to explore the tensions and a hopeful way forward.

Keywords: Canadian pioneer narrative, contested history, curriculum of place, ideological place, Lippard

In a curriculum of place the activities with which we engage children are the very activities they need to dwell in this place, to be nourished by the place and to nourish it. (Chambers, 2008, p. 120)

In 2000, a National Film Board production, *Speakers for the Dead*, by Toronto filmmakers Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland, was released and soon after broadcast to the nation on television. The film told the story of the reclamation of a Black pioneer burial ground on the Old Durham Road in Grey County, Ontario, and the subsequent community spat about when and where the reclamation project should end. In the 1930s the burial ground was tilled over and planted by the farmer who then owned the land. The headstones disappeared. Some may have been ploughed under, others removed and possibly used for building foundations and flooring, and some were thrown into a rock pile. Members of the local community formed a committee in 1989 and worked to register the land as a cemetery, convince the current landowner to donate the land to the municipality, uncover four headstones, and turn what had been a potato field into an attractive historic site. A large engraved boulder commemorates the day in 1990 when Lieutenant Governor Lincoln Alexander officiated at the cemetery's grand opening. Subsequent to this, some committee members resigned over the decision to dig in the reclaimed cemetery in order to find more headstones (Holness & Sutherland, 2000).

Even after this film aired, like much of Canada's 19th century history about African Canadians, the story of the Black settlement on the Old Durham Road in Artemesia Township, Grey County, Ontario, remains largely unknown. It has not made its way into the curriculum on pioneers that is taught in Ontario schools. Its absence marks the issues we wish to explore in this paper: the pre-eminence of the White pioneer in Canada's historical narrative, the importance of place to that narrative, and how a re-reading of *place* can challenge that narrative, in order to make new spaces within school curriculum for Black pioneer settlement history. We draw on three conceptualizations of *place* as the physical, the ideological and the imaginary (Lippard, 1997) to explore how stories of Old Durham Road Black pioneer settlement have the potential to disrupt the centrality of the White pioneer to Canadian identity and curricular practices.

We begin by outlining the recorded history of the Old Durham Road. We then use data from an oral history project¹ to examine competing versions of that history and explore how the concept of place worked to support the pre-eminence of the White pioneer narrative within the stories of settlement that were told. We briefly consider how school curricula contribute to these dominant practices. We end with an example of how we were able to make a space in the local elementary school's social studies curriculum for this contested history and how, through a class composition, stories about the area's Black pioneer settlers were re-placed.

The southeast portion of what is now Grey County had been ceded from the First Nations in 1818 (Marsh, 1931) and the British government intended to populate this new territory with non-Native settlers. Blacks were amongst the first to settle there. Some had come to Upper Canada as early as the 1820s, fleeing the bonds of American slavery. This exodus grew substantially after the American government passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which allowed slave holders to enter any state in the union and reclaim their human property. Since slave holders were known to make illegal forays into Upper Canada, Grey

and Bruce Counties were acknowledged as being the furthest from the American border and the threat of bounty-hunters.

The eastern portion of the Durham Road was surveyed in 1848-49 and divided into 50-acre lots. By August of 1849, about 16 families had obtained the location tickets that would lead to patents for their land once they fulfilled settlement requirements. The 1851 census lists 127 Black settlers living in Artemesia Township. Throughout Grey County there were small Black settlements here and there in almost all of the townships, including the village of Sydenham (later called Owen Sound), the county's port on Georgian Bay.

White settlers began arriving in earnest in the 1850s. Many descendants of the original Black settlers moved on to Owen Sound or elsewhere. Some may have returned to the United States during or after the American Civil War. Many intermarried with White settlers. The practice of denying Black heritage meant that as the visible presence of the Black community disappeared, so did the history. The history that populates the local museums, the new pioneer village at Grey Roots Museum and Archives, and the many published township histories, is, for the most part, the history of the White settlers.

The predominance of this history is shown in the following paragraph on the history of the Township of Artemesia which appeared in the 2005 Business Directory for the village of Flesherton:

Artemesia Township was described by the Government of the Dominion of Canada as a "veritable Garden of Eden" in its solicitation for emigrants to settle in this area.

With the promise of 50 acres free and 50 acres for 50 cents per acre, European settlers began arriving in the mid 1850s. By 1861 Artemesia had a population of 2,575. (Flesherton & District Chamber of Commerce, 2005, p. 3)

Black settlement is denied by its exclusion.

Pioneer settler society embraced a violence to the land, as they chopped and cleared ancient forests and established agrarian livelihoods in what had been indigenous hunting territory. The British government's Upper Canada policies of settlement depended on the depopulation of First Nations' people followed by a repopulation by immigrant settlers. Canadian curriculum and history books are replete with stories that support these practices; stories that make up the White pioneer narrative. In her study of the commemorative practices in a museum in a small city in British Columbia's interior, Elizabeth Furniss (1997/98) explores how the myth of the frontier and the idea of the White pioneer have become embedded in Canada's "master narrative" (p. 11). The "untamed" and "untouched" wilderness is how the "frontier" is imagined. Central to the endeavour of its taming and claiming, is the White pioneer, who, not only ignores First Nations' presence and history, but also that of other immigrants groups, which in British Columbia included East Asian and South Asian immigrants. Furniss (1997/1998) concludes that "the accumulated silences of the frontier myth do have implications for the shaping of public consciousness. The frontier myth . . . encodes a systematic forgetting of contentious issues of the past" (p. 40).

Place operates in interesting ways to support this narrative. Sherene Razack (2002) insists that White settlers' stories are "spacialized stories" (p. 3). Firstly, Europeans chose to view the "new world" as a "terra nullius," an empty place, awaiting fulfillment (both literally and figuratively) by European colonizers and settlers. Secondly, pioneer settlers were from a place. In Ontario, in the 19th century, for the large part, those were places that signified Whiteness: Scotland, England and Ireland. Thirdly, pioneer settlers won over and tamed a wild place through their hard work, skill, luck, tenacity, and faith. Lastly, pioneer settlers

stayed put in their place and their stories, material artefacts and contributions became sedimented in current-day commemorations of place, such as local museums, pioneer villages, pioneer cemeteries and subsequently, school curricula. Thus, they are understood as key participants in the founding and building of the nation.

The importance of place can be seen in Ontario's mandated social studies curriculum (Government of Ontario, 2013) which starts in grade three with the exploration of "the diverse communities that existed in Canada between approximately 1780 and 1850" (p. 83). The guidelines summon grade three students to "identify some of the communities in Canada around the beginning of the 19th century, and describe their relationship to the land and to each other" (p. 84) In addition to learning how to identify countries of origin of Canada's "founding nations" (p. 86), students will gain competency in identifying "French along the St. Lawrence River; English and Irish in Kingston, Bytown, and York/Toronto; African Canadians in Grey County, Scots in Nova Scotia . . . Mennonites in Waterloo County . . . Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia" (p. 88). The guidelines "fix" people of different cultural, national and racial backgrounds in certain places.

This suggests how place is both physical and ideological. Lucy Lippard (1997) observes that *place* often has "a seductive embrace" (p. 5) as it is the "intersection of land, history and culture" (ibid). Physical place refers to the actual land, the waterways, topography, geology, plant and animal life, roads, trails, lots and fence lines, etc., and how these are encountered by those who live there. Physical place both shapes and is shaped by its inhabitants. Physical place stays "in place" (although it may have environmental and ecological changes over time). How we think about it and value it, along with the experiences we have in that place, is what Lippard (1997) calls "ideological" place (p. 14). It is ideology that determines what is remembered and what is forgotten (or denied) about place. Physical place comes to mean something more as it is shaped over time by ideology. The contested history of the Old Durham Road Black pioneer settlement is indicative of the ways in which place becomes laden with competing ideologies and hence, competing versions of history.

The settlers challenge the physical place by clearing the land, fencing it in, piling the rocks, draining the swamps, and participating in other activities connected to the hard work of settlement. Physical place becomes ideological, as the harsh environment is claimed for the White pioneer settlers by the value given to their labour and their tenacity. Place becomes embedded in the community signposts of the White pioneer narrative. It is seen in the crisp signage that announces a pioneer cemetery, in the freshly painted gingerbread that adorns the porches and eaves of late 19th century brick farmhouses, in the ancient barn that advertises a "century farm," in the plaques placed on buildings in the small village of Priceville which list 19th century proprietors by name and trade. Until recently the village of Flesherton held an annual fall fair that was called the "Split Rail Festival," honouring that pioneer tradition of splitting white cedar logs into long rails for fencing.



Figure 1. Township signage on local (White) pioneer cemetery. Photo by N. Norquay

The White pioneer descendants in the oral history project reinforced this white-pioneering narrative with stories of hardship about their immigrating forebears. These included the dangerous Atlantic crossing, the denseness of the forest, the harshness of the climate, illness, accidental death and homesickness. One descendant broke down into tears when she recalled the trans-Atlantic journey of her ancestors and the tragic deaths of members of the family both before and shortly after they reached their Artemesia destination: “And when they got there, the mother and father and a couple of sons came up to stake their claim . . . and the father—they were just there a short time and the father had a stroke and he died” (research interview, September 16, 2012). Others emphasized the difficulty of clearing the land: “It was bush farming . . . with big trees . . . farming was not easy work” (research interview, March 17, 2012). These testimonials reflect White pioneer settler history as it is written in the local history books, *Priceville and its Roots (Routes)* (Harrison, 1992) and *Split Rail Country: A History of Artemesia Township* (Hubbert 1986).

All the participants made sense of the disappearance of the Black pioneer settlers with commonly held truisms: they weren’t really farmers, they couldn’t take the cold, they did not know anything about clearing bush, they were really tradespeople who were more suited for work in the towns. One participant suggested: “They [the Black settlers] just weren’t accustomed to that type of work [clearing land] and that’s why they went to where they could be porters and servants and do house work and stuff like that for the people in Owen Sound” (research interview, March 17, 2012). Their imagined unsuitability does two things: it provides a kind of logic for the community’s disappearance that is based on choice and, it reinforces the appropriateness of this place for the White settlers. In other words: since the Black settlers are no longer here, this place is not theirs to claim. These truisms of “unfitness” for place suggest that, through no fault of their own, the Black settlers were mis-placed. By leaving the community, they became placed more appropriately. By virtue of

their sense-making of the disappearance of the Black pioneer settlers, the research participants claimed their community as a White space.

When asked for specifics about the Black pioneer settlers, participants had few stories. They mostly retold stories they claimed had been told to them by their parents and grandparents. They all remembered knowing that what became a potato field in the 1930s was a burial ground for Blacks. What was interesting was the inconsistency with which they recalled the presence or absence of headstones. Most of the participants, who were descendants of both the White and Black pioneers, had attended the local one-room school that was directly across the road from the burial ground. Some recalled playing baseball in the burial ground. Others recalled it being a planted field. Others were adamant that there were fallen-down headstones. Some claimed there were none. These details did not necessarily match up with when the participants had attended the school, which spanned the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. It was impossible to trace the changes to the burial ground from their stories.

They recalled hearing stories about the “beautiful singing” that wafted out of the little Black church that no longer exists. The location of the church is still marked as a point on the road some of the participants called “the church hill.” Some of them knew exactly where that church had stood—even though it had not been still standing during their own lives. Their parents’ stories enabled them to mark the spot. The church stood on a small rise beside a dip in the road. When the road was leveled, the hill the church had stood on was used as fill for the dip in the road—a testament to the long-held practice of using local gravel for road projects. It was, ironically, another act of erasure.

When given names of particular Black pioneers (such as the settler who had sold the land on which the school stood, or the lay preacher, or the family whose son’s headstone is one of the four now on display), they did not know these names. They knew only of one Black-identified family, as there are still descendants of this original Black settler in the community who carry his name. Even though this family intermarried with White settlers, and the descendants self-identify as White, they are readily identified by others in the community as being the ones with Black heritage. None of the descendants of the other intermarried families are so identified, even though they too have Black heritage. Individuals who were connected to the Black-identified family were described in marked glowing terms. A daughter of the original settler who married a White man was described as “a gentlewoman—the nicest person you could ask for” (research interview, September 16, 2012). Some were marked by references to skin colour or hair quality, these markers being a kind of code for race. Someone “looked Black” or “certainly had brown skin” or “had colour.” While these distinctions were readily noted, participants were adamant that they did not “see” colour. They did not use race as a way to understand or engage with their neighbours of by-gone days. Descendants of the one Black-identified family were often referred to as “not looking Black” or having “the whitest of white” complexion. Yet still, one descendant from that family was called “Nig” by his classmates in school: “I got ‘Nig’ from my buddies in high school. In fact a couple of them still call me ‘Nig’ if I run into them [in town]” (research interview, July 23, 2012).

Newcomers to the road were “warned” about the Black presence. One participant, who bought the farm house kitty-corner to the burial ground in 1960, was warned that their new home was across the road from a Black burial ground: “We were told that if you buy this

house you buy right across the road from the Black Cemetery and we just said, 'Well, that won't bother us'" (research interview March 17, 2012). Another family who also purchased an old farm house around the same time noted that the man who was living there at the time

had colour. He was a very elderly gentleman when we met him. But the neighbours were very quick to tell me: "you know, you are going into a 'rude name' house?" Yes. When we bought it, it met me on all sides. I was stunned. (research interview, May 29, 2012)

Other newcomers spoke of hearing about the Black community as gossip. One described it as "all hush-hush" as if "to create a sensation" (research interview, September 30, 2011). Others knew nothing of the Black settlers until after the burial ground's dedication ceremony hit the local papers. One participant had spent 22 years working in the library and main office of the local high school: "For all the time that I spent in an educational institution, I don't remember anybody saying anything. . . . It's funny how you're in your own microcosm" (research interview, January 3, 2012).

The stories told by these community elders are marked by the "absented presence" (Walcott, as cited in Peake & Ray, 2001, p. 180) of the Black settlers who are acknowledged but almost immediately banished from the stories told. Their presence lurks in gossip and warnings and in illogical imaginings of their unsuitability to pioneer life. Linda Peake and Brian Ray (2001) note that these kinds of comments mark "psychic negotiations of whiteness . . . that deny various non-white spaces" (p. 181). And while archival research has confirmed the active presence of the Black settlement, the various historic documents do little to inspire the same level of imaginary place that the stories of White pioneers enable. Physical place, therefore, becomes crucial in reimagining the Black settlement and re-placing them into the historical and hence, the ideological renderings of place.

There are remnants of Black settlement, if you know how to read the land. Settlers of any racial identity did the same things: they cleared the land, used local stone and home-made mortar to build the foundations of their first homes. They split cedar into rails for fencing, planted apple trees, and gathered the annual crop of fieldstones into large piles. All of these remnants mark the Black settlement as readily as they mark the White. They are marks on/in the physical land that make that land "place." They mark both the ideological and the imaginary. They are ideological because they signal pioneer life as we know it: they are the remnants of all those good pioneer attributes (hard work, etc.). They suggest the imaginary in a couple of ways: they can reify an imagined all-White space, but they can also provide evidence of the mis-placed Black settlers.



Figure 2. Foundation remnant. Photo by N. Norquay

With these insights we turned our attention to the school curriculum and the dual challenges of the centrality of the White pioneer narrative and the limitations the Underground Railroad narrative has regarding Black settlement. In the fall of 2013 Naomi was invited by the music teacher at the local elementary school in Flesherton to come and informally share stories about the historic Black community on the Old Durham Road. The music teacher was concerned that this local history was never taught at his school and that few of the children knew that there had been Black pioneers. We were aware that his desire to em-place in curriculum what has been mis-placed suggested a pedagogy of reparation (Kelly, 2009) as it involved a “history that has not been confronted and has not been mourned effectively” (p. 139). The music teacher was hopeful that he would be able to use music as a way in to helping the children explore this contested local history.

He invited three colleagues and their classes (two grade 2/3 classes and one grade 5/6 class) to come and listen to Naomi’s tales. She told stories about Edward Patterson, a stagecoach driver and lay preacher who had lived on the road; Gabriel and Elsie Black who had sold a quarter-acre of land to the school board so their community could have a school; and the Simons family whose son Christopher’s headstone is one of four remaining headstones at the Old Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery.

The stories were purposefully chosen to introduce the children to Black *settlers*, and not to refugees on the run from slavery. The stories were accompanied by discussion about how remnants of these settlers are still present on the land. The children considered whether an indentation in a field might mark the foundation of a settler’s log cabin, shed or barn. They shared their knowledge of the cedar-rail fences that still ‘snake’ their way along property lines. They were fascinated by the photos of the stone foundation of Edward Patterson’s log house and the broken bits of crockery and porcelain that have been found in what must have been his kitchen midden. They knew about the large stone piles that farmers make to clear their fields for spring planting. They knew how the snow flattens the

tall grasses and makes land contours easier to see in the early spring. They knew what kinds of plants and animals could be found in the forest. They connected the many gravel-extraction operations in the municipality to the nature of the soil, which they learned is called glacial till. Their in-depth knowledge of the land suggested both an attachment to physical place, and ideological place that was unwittingly racialized as a White space.

They are rural children: some live in the area's small towns and villages and others live on farms or acreages. They love to spend time in what is called "The Flesherton Hills", a nature conservation area right beside the school. This is where the school does outdoor education and where the music teacher holds an annual outdoor student-run music festival. The music teacher's hunch was correct: the children did not know about the Black history that is at their doorstep. The Old Durham Road is a mere 6 kilometers from the school, and while many of the children knew of the road and regularly travelled on it, they did not know the history of its first non-Native settlers, nor that there was a Black cemetery located there.

The teachers of the two grade 2/3 classes took the provided resources (a picture book about Edward Patterson, samples of foundation mortar, and shards of crockery) and built a science unit on soil that explored glacial till and the notion of frost heave. The story we will share here, is that of the grade 5/6 class and the music composition they created. The music teacher teaches composition to the grades 5, 6, 7 and 8. The resources provided (in addition to what is listed above) included photographs of the headstones, a copy of the bill of sale for the school land that Gabriel Black had signed with an 'X', and an excerpt from a book originally published in 1889 called *Broken Shackles* (Meyler, 2001) that includes a soliloquy by Chauncey Simons, one of the first settlers on the road and father to Christopher Simons whose name is on one of the reclaimed headstones.

The students composed some music they called *The Underground Railroad Suite* which consisted of four short instrumental pieces: "Night Time Pursuit," "Snake Rail Fence," "Cuckoo Valley," and "The Arrival". It is not surprising that the children chose the Underground Railroad for the title, as that is what they have mostly learned about in school. Each piece within the suite tells part of the story, as the children understand it and wish to retell it. The music is simple, at times repetitive, but overall, the pieces are suited to their titles. "Night Time Pursuit" is low, quiet and somewhat ominous. The students explained that what they wanted to convey in the music was someone hiding in a tree and watching his pursuers hunt in vain for him in the woods below. What is interesting is that the music does not portray someone being chased, rather, it portrays someone staying still and watching. It is not someone on the run, it is someone who has stopped running. It is about someone who has found a place – a place of safety, a place to call home.

"Snake Rail Fence" is a jaunty little piece that develops around a melody that zig-zags back and forth. It explores a very common feature in the area. The children are old enough to remember the "Split Rail Festival." The fall fair featured a cedar rail splitting competition, in honour of the pioneer practice of constructing snake rail fences out of the white cedar that still grows in abundance in the region's wetlands. The snake rail fence has long been a symbol of the area's pioneer history. By including it in the suite of pieces, the students acknowledged it as something shared by all pioneers, White and Black.



Figure 3. Cedar rail fence. Photo by N. Norquay

“Cuckoo Valley” is a very animated and complex piece of music. It includes a spoken text over which individual instruments play phrases that imitate the sounds of animals, babbling brooks and a waterfall. The spoken text is Chauncey Simons’ above-mentioned soliloquy. *Broken Shackles: Old Man Henson from Slavery to Freedom*, is the biography of Jim Henson, a long-time Black resident of Owen Sound, as retold by a White businessman, John Frost. In Frost’s account, Old Man Henson tells a story of how Chauncey Simons (resident on the Old Durham Road), went to Lockport, New York where Henson was residing. Simons tried to convince Henson and others to come back with him to Artemesia Township and settle on the Old Durham Road. The soliloquy attributed to Simons speaks of the Eden-like conditions that await:

The hills of Artemesia are full of the best gravel for making roads. Its woods of fine building timber are full of pheasants, pigeons, fox, deer and black bear. Its pebbly streams swarm with speckled trout. . . . These and her little lakes are the home of the mink, marten, otter, beaver, and wild duck. On their banks, cherries, nut and berries of all sorts grow wild. . . . Thus are the wants of the settler well provided for. Right there is the great Cuckoo Valley, stretching from the big Artemesia Falls far away to the Blue Mountains and to Georgian Bay. (Meyler, 2001, p. 190)

The students were very excited about this soliloquy. They did not know that the current day “Beaver Valley” used to be called “Cuckoo Valley” and that this name pre-dated non-Native settlement. They delightfully equated the “hills of Artemesia” with their beloved “Flesherton Hills”. The music exudes a sense of pride in their knowledge, understanding, and sense of ownership of place. The last piece, “The Arrival,” lands the refugee in place. It explores “arriving,” of landing “here,” in this place, in these hills.

The grade 5/6 class took *The Underground Railroad Suite* to the local music festival, and performed it in a competition category for original student compositions. A couple of years prior, their music teacher had been instrumental in getting this new category added to the festival. Entering the suite in the festival's original student composition category was the students' choice. They won first prize!

The school curriculum has overburdened the historical place of the Canadian pioneer with a predetermined *Whiteness* that became both its meaning and its value. Historical Artemesia had long ago become the preserve of European settlers, so the local history books and tourist guides have proclaimed. The students had not had access to the local history that refutes this claim. Their introduction to historic Blacks had been limited to stories of the Underground Railroad. While the Underground Railroad does tell stories of displacement, it does not usually include stories about place, about arriving, about clearing the land and building a snake rail fence. It does not imagine that refugees could come to know place so well, they could recite its many attributes and call it *home*.

Brian Casemore (2008) worries that we can develop an "over-determined attachment to place" (p. 18) that may "forestall rather than promote awareness of our call into a culturally and politically complex world" (p. 25). By learning stories about the Black pioneers along the Old Durham Road, a new door into the historic past has been opened for the students. Their sense of historic place has been stretched – showing itself capable of holding more. Maxine Greene (1995) insisted on the important role the arts have "to subvert our thoughtlessness and complacencies" (p. 143). Greene advocated for the centrality of the imagination to arts-based learning, for considering the *what-ifs*. Imagination, Greene suggested, "makes empathy possible" (p. 3). It has "the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society" (p. 5).

The *Underground Railroad Suite* is a hopeful example of what is possible when the dominant narratives of physical and ideological place are opened up and the imaginary has a space to slip in. It is evidence of Chambers' (2008) desire and demand that curriculum be grounded in a place wherein children may be nourished and in turn, provide nourishment for their community.

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¹ **Note:** As part of a larger historical project on the Old Durham Road Black-Pioneer settlement, seventeen residents, between the ages of 60 and 93, who lived along or near the historic road, were interviewed between 2011 and 2014. Descendants of both Black settlers and White settlers took part, as well as people who came to the area in the 1960s and did not have ancestral roots in Grey County. This research was funded by two minor research grants from SSHRC in 2011 and 2013.