Asserting Control Over [A]Historical Consciousness:

How the Settler State Perpetuates Indigenous Homelessness

Abstract:

The following historiographical analysis briefly outlines the legacy of Indigenous encampments on the Aboriginal Burial Ground in Rossdale Flats in what is colonially known as Edmonton, Alberta. Specifically, the following analysis documents the grassroots activism of prayer camp pekiwewin in the final months of 2020. Beginning with a brief overview of the encampment site, this research analysis critiques the ongoing colonialism in urban settler cities which regulates how peoples can operate in relation to the land. The methodologies of the state explored herein pertain to the function of public history, ongoing settler colonial oppression, and the criminalization of homelessness as factors that reproduce inequalities.

Keywords: settler colonial, public history, homelessness, Indigenous Peoples, urban cities

Friday the 24th of July 2020 marked the first of what would be approximately one-hundred and ten days of community-based activism led by “Indigenous 2 Spirit women and femme folks working in solidarity with Black, LGBTQ2S and settler allies” to “welcome…the house-less community in [what is now known as] Edmonton” to “an anti-police violence, emergency relief and prayer camp with a harm reduction approach.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The prayer camp pekiwewin existed on a small parcel of parkland situated alongside Rossdale Road NW and 96th Avenue NW, a space that is otherwise recognized as one portion of the larger Fort Edmonton Cemetery/Aboriginal Burial Grounds.[[2]](#footnote-2) Instead of the space serving an ongoing commemorative function, it is only used occasionally by the settler majority population as an overflow parking lot for the baseball field across Rossdale Road NW, which was deliberately constructed directly on top of the burial ground.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This urban space is particularly remarkable for the level of attention it has received by the City of Edmonton, as well as EPCOR, a private resource company, following the 2005 official commemoration of the site as the Fort Edmonton Cemetery/Aboriginal Burial Ground, the same year the province of Alberta celebrated its centennial.[[4]](#footnote-4) The historical myth that continues to be perpetuated about this site has led the collective consciousness of the majority to believe that it was ‘forgotten’ and only recently rediscovered; however, it has been demonstrated that at no point in time over the one-hundred and fifty years since the sites last internment has the original function of the space been forgotten by Texto

Descripción generada automáticamentestakeholders, and that includes on behalf of the City of Edmonton.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Figure 1.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Fig. 1 is a plaque from the site that reads “dedicated to the people of Alberta to

commemorate Alberta’s 100th anniversary as a proud member of Canadian confederation.” It remains to be seen the ways in which the state positions itself as an authority over the designation of space usage. Considering the historical panels installed within the vicinity that cement settler history in the region, the state is also central to the production of historical consciousness publicly. Of noteworthy interest is the dedication to all people of Alberta, which can be further reduced to the class of people that recognize and depend upon the legitimacy and authority of Alberta as a measure of governance: settler Canadians.

The significance of the site for Indigenous Peoples, in particular the Papaschase Band, as a space of commemoration and reclamation that challenges the ongoing erasure of Indigenous Peoples, outweighs and predates settler claims stemming from the fur-trade and the adoption of the site by missionaries into what became known as the Fort Edmonton Cemetery.[[7]](#footnote-7) The larger impetus for the 2005 commemorative project and site recognition was Indigenous advocacy and research methodology that privileged oral tradition as equal to written record, most notably conducted during the Rossdale Flats Aboriginal Oral Histories Project (RFAOHP).[[8]](#footnote-8) This same patch of land where pekiwewin camp advocated for Land Back, Indigenous sovereignty, and to de-center the settler colonial state as a method to solve Indigenous homelessness was historically a site of Indigenous encampments. Notably, the approved record only began documenting this activity during the first quarter of the 20th century when Indigenous Peoples would migrate to the space and collect treaty annuities.[[9]](#footnote-9) The civic repurposing of the space and its designation as public parkland (which cannot be inhabited from 10 P.M to 5 A.M. daily according to City Bylaws) serves the covert function of erasing the historical record from the public consciousness by literally quelling the ability of Indigenous Peoples to claim space on this territory.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Ultimately, it is against the interests of the state to acknowledge divergent ways of being in relation to these lands that are extrinsic to settler colonialism. Settler colonialism demands Indigenous relationships to the land be disrupted so that these same spaces can be reimagined as extractable resource commodities for the benefit of the majority settler society.[[11]](#footnote-11) As has been documented, settler cities ignore Indigenous land claims using the *terra nullius* myth to inform the collective settler consciousness and consolidate its authority.[[12]](#footnote-12) In this way, camp pekiwewin threatened the urban settled space as more than just a volunteer encampment that did for the local homeless population what the municipality seemingly could not during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The camp demonstrated how anti-Indigeneity has been legislated into urban spaces as a means of establishing colonial power.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The proceeding image is from the forced closure of camp pekiwewin on November 17th, 2020 when approximately thirty Edmonton police officers erected a fence around the site and forcibly removed the persons living rough there. Ironically, organizers had asked the municipality repeatedly to errect fencing around the parkland due to the heavy traffic on Rossdale Road, but only saw fulfillment of the request as a measure of policing. The provincial legislature building can be seen from between the trees in the top right corner of Figure 2. The foreshadowing offered by the placement of this park in relation to the legislature building ironically recalls how the population of people that are homeless remain underserved by these structures of governance.



Figure 2.[[14]](#footnote-14)

To begin an analysis of the function of this space within a historiographic framework, it is necessary to acknowledge that people who are currently homeless are human beings first and that the language used in research methodology should always reflect this.[[15]](#footnote-15) For clarity, the purpose of this historiographic research is not to define or categorize the Indigenous Peoples that have lived experiences with homelessness, but to critique through a historiographic lens the ways in which settler colonial urban spaces perpetuate patterns of homelessness that in turn disproportionately affect Indigenous Peoples.[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed, an analysis of the different ways in which settler state governance has affected diverse Indigenous groups is outside the scope of this research, and care must be taken not to prescribe pan-indigeneity to Indigenous groups via the homogenization of experience as is typical to historical narratives.[[17]](#footnote-17) Accordingly, the objective of this historiographic analysis is to understand how contemporary scholars have interpreted patterns of homelessness that affect Indigenous Peoples under colonialism with a focus on urban spaces in the Canadian prairies. This research lens will explore how the themes of historical mythology, criminalization, and Indigenous rootlessness as an assimilative project have shaped the character of homelessness in urbanized spaces.

Beginning with a framework that will help define “urbanization,” it is useful to consult the historical analysis of indigeneity in urban spaces proposed by Evelyn J. Peters et al. in their discussion of settler colonial dispossession in the prairie context. According to Peters et al., the construction of city spaces has been essential to aiding the settler consciousness internalize stereotypes that differentiate urban and rural contexts, nuanced with common assumptions that Indigenous Peoples form part of a distant and natural past.[[18]](#footnote-18) Paramount to this ongoing project of divorcing the currency of indigeneity from urban spaces, three different facets that serve this strategy are posited: “containment, expulsion, and erasure.”[[19]](#footnote-19) An analysis of the function of public history is helpful in understanding the concept of ‘containment’ in particular. Pertaining to Rossdale Flats and the Fort Edmonton Cemetery/Aboriginal Burial Ground, not too far away exists the downtown core where, among other cultural institutions, the Royal Alberta Museum (RAM) is centrally located. Since themes of urban expulsion and erasure have already been introduced, it is helpful here to define one facet of the manifestation of ‘containment’ in terms of the colonial museum space. In this instance, the RAM acts as the governing authority for how Indigeneity is narrativized in urban spaces to qualify the ongoing dominance of settler understandings of history in the public imagination.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The need expressed by some settler historians to perpetuate myths that favour ongoing settler colonialism was made apparent in a blog post written by the previous historian laureate for the City of Edmonton Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail in 2015, where when referring to the ongoing gentrification of the Rossdale neighbourhood, a plea was made for “a permanent Indigenous Arts and Culture Centre along with space for a city museum.”[[21]](#footnote-21) What this attitude reveals in terms of implicit bias is a tentative willingness for increased visibility of Indigenous arts and culture contingent upon the ability of the city to control the over-arching historical understanding of contemporary Indigenous cultural productions in urban spaces. A rebuttal to this ideology is best expressed in the historiographical framework on urban and rural distinctions posited by Julie Tomiak et al. who write that the “city is not simply an island of settler becoming;” the urban space frequently used to solidify settler understandings of the land is not as isolated or absolute as it may seem.[[22]](#footnote-22) Central to the argument developed by this collective is the need to abolish the “visual imperialism” that claims cities as non-Indigenous spaces, when in actuality cities are sites of Indigenous resistance as seen from the American Indian Movement (AIM), Idle No More, and camp pekiwewin more recently.[[23]](#footnote-23) Indigenous historian Jennifer Adese demonstrates using their phrase “visual imperialism” how gradually under systems of settler governance, visual displays of indigeneity have been confined exclusively to particular sites such as museums.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The (un)willingness of civic agencies to acknowledge the “locus of Indigenous resistance” that takes place in cities like Edmonton, following an analysis of public history production by Indigenous historian Dwayne Donald, speaks to a colonial legacy of knowledge dissemination that hierarchizes cultural centres of Euro-Canadian production.[[25]](#footnote-25) For Donald, the production of historical memory in spaces of settler colonialism is informed by the same markers that determine an individuals experience under colonialism: “race, language, culture, and gender” whereby the intersections of oppression also determine a groups exclusion from the written history of spaces.[[26]](#footnote-26) By adhering to pioneering settler narratives that dominate the landscape of historical consciousness in the prairies, Donald posits the goals of the nation are realized via the “frontier capitalism” myth which forms part of an ahistorical consciousness that justifies ongoing extractive economies to the detriment of those excluded from these spaces.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Additional myths that also feed into the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from their territories under settler colonialism have been explored by the historian William Cronon. Cronon establishes that the myth of *terra nullius*, or empty earth, is central to the ability of the settler state to justify its presence and dominance of space.[[28]](#footnote-28) Of course, if this myth of unfettered wilderness were exposed, it would become impossible for the state to justify its absolute authority over land use. An historical land use study prepared for the City of Edmonton in 2004 on behalf of Commonwealth Historic Resource Management Ltd. combines the praxis of heritage resource planners, historians, archeologists, and geophysicists. The study made similar conclusions about the fallacy of *terra nullius* mythology when applied to the space historically occupied by the ever-shifting Fort Edmonton, which was never best described as “wilderness” at any point in time that settlers came into contact with the region.[[29]](#footnote-29) The pattern of erasing the histories of Indigenous Peoples’ land use prior to contact explains this discrepancy. Another myth also identified by Cronon that fills in the gaps of the *terra nullius* myth is that of the ‘vanishing race’ which posits that indigeneity is disappearing, and that when indigeneity is encountered, it is ‘on the way out’ as opposed to a signifier of Indigenous participation.[[30]](#footnote-30) These myths are not based in truth. Their prevalence in historical discourse and settler storytelling “[distorts] the actual lives and histories of peoples who remain fully present… despite the failure of historical narratives to notice their ongoing presence.”[[31]](#footnote-31) The effects are seen in communities of Indigenous Peoples that are homeless and who nuance these historical myths as one reason behind their inability to feel connected with their traditional lands.[[32]](#footnote-32) Historical representation matters. The mentioned myths have been successful in their ongoing role in the establishment of the Canadian settler consciousness to the point that they are able to perpetuate themselves systematically. There are a series of inter-connected relationships stemming from the dispossession of lands, one-sided historical narratives, and contemporary cycles of homelessness.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Some of the more tangible historical realities about how Indigenous Peoples in Canada disproportionately fall into structural cycles of homelessness are further explored by Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) historian Gabrielle Lindstrom and Yale D. Belanger in an effort to make a distinction between Indigenous homelessness in contrast to Indigenous mobility.[[34]](#footnote-34) The identified factors of contemporary Indigenous homelessness are intricately tied to the historical actions of the state, which include the *Indian Act* as well as family dissolution and genocidal initiatives like residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the Child Welfare system.[[35]](#footnote-35) The Métis scholar Jesse Thistle positions Indigenous homelessness and its historical trends into systems of ongoing genocide perpetuated by the state as a destabilization tactic against Indigenous livelihoods.[[36]](#footnote-36) According to Thistle, who incorporates the idea of “rootlessness” by the scholar Julie Christensen to describe the ways in which Indigenous Peoples can be disconnected from their cultural and kinship connections to reproduce cycles of homelessness, “it took the increasing numbers of vulnerable settler women, children and veterans on Canadian city streets to shed light on the largely unexamined and out-of-control issue of Indigenous homelessness.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Something that needs to be addressed is the reality that it is not exclusively Indigenous Peoples that are homeless. Thistle raises this point by citing that “scholars have argued that capitalist states like Canada produce negative spaces – ‘the streets’ – to warehouse their oppressed, poor and underprivileged” making clear that, due to the ongoing actions of the colonial state that has endeavoured to disappear Indigenous Peoples, disproportionality these communities struggle with the negative effects stemming from cycles of homelessness.[[38]](#footnote-38) One facet of these negative outcomes is the criminalization of basic survival activities for people that are homeless.[[39]](#footnote-39) Homeward Trust, in collaboration with Blue Quills First Nations College and IRM Research, researched Indigenous homelessness within the City of Edmonton in 2015. The research demonstrates that the most common interactions people experiencing homelessness have with government agencies are with law enforcement, such as police.[[40]](#footnote-40) The report goes on to establish that the criminalization and subsequent rough treatment of individuals that are homeless, and particularly those that are Indigenous, stems partially from the poor understanding of settler society regarding Canadian history versus mythology.[[41]](#footnote-41) Because there is a lack of understanding about the structures that reproduce cycles of Indigenous homelessness, there is an “illusion of self-control” where pervasive ideas about individual failings and poor character obscure the realities of ongoing colonialism that operate at peak efficiency under neoliberalism.[[42]](#footnote-42)

To analogize this theoretical framework, the social theorist Robert Rosenberger writes on the politicization of space as a technology that forces people that are homeless out of public space and consciousness, positing that “it is not just one uncomfortable bench, but a larger effort to set forth systematically in policy, and [incorporate] into design, to coerce [sic] the unhoused out of public space.”[[43]](#footnote-43) This analogy can be used to contextualize the imagined individual failings that obscure structural patterns of homelessness, as well as broader understandings of the function of discomfort and criminalization as part of an individuals routine if they are homeless. Bylaws that legislate sleeping in tents in public parks, public urination, and public intoxication can be understood directly as methodologies of the colonial state to criminalize the activities of people that are homeless.[[44]](#footnote-44) Since settler biases codify the behaviours of people that are homeless as criminal, this carceral racism mixed with the ‘social dislocation’ of Indigenous kinship networks due to the assimilative impulses of the state, feeds into the structural issue of Indigenous over-incarceration. The same over-representation in the population that is homeless prefaces the identical inclination towards over-representation of Indigenous Peoples within the settler state’s carceral systems.[[45]](#footnote-45) For the scholar Joan Sangster, it is the same premise of intersectional oppressions “based on gender, race, and economic marginality” that create the power relations that define how certain individuals will experience colonialism based off of identifying factors like race, culture, and ethnicity.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Moving forward, scholarship demonstrates that the colonial state needs to be decentered from the process of both responding to problems surrounding Indigenous homelessness as well as from its pedestal as the exclusive author of public history in order for solutions that center Indigenous ways of being to solve the problems facing Indigenous communities.[[47]](#footnote-47) For Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson, it is only when the peoples that settler culture has spoken for speak for themselves that hegemonic historical and anthropological narratives can be challenged.[[48]](#footnote-48) Thus, the refusal to participate in these institutions that dominate the historical consciousness of a place is an act of Indigenous sovereignty against ongoing oppression.[[49]](#footnote-49) The Indigenous poet Marilyn Dumont expressed these ideas succinctly:

without economic leverage, Indigenous history is dependent on the awareness and goodwill of an industry that has the power to further wipe it out with the very instruments that colonized Edmonton.[[50]](#footnote-50)

These two positions reflect the immediacy of historical reclamation as part and parcel of the solution to the more tangible, yet often ‘invisible’, social ill of settler society that permits all types of peoples to live in squalor, but especially Indigenous Peoples.

Throughout the course of this historiographic report, it has been demonstrated that larger systems of power are responsible for producing histories that in turn reproduce structural inequalities presently.[[51]](#footnote-51) Through the processes of establishing historical authority and perpetuating mythologies, institutions that obscure the systemic nature of social inequality, Indigenous homelessness, or ‘rootlessness’, demonstrate how contemporarily saturated the urbanized settler spaces are in colonial processes. Although camp pekiwewin was far from perfect in its execution, the lack of support that this community initiative received via the municipality ultimately delineates the insecurity and fragility of the settler city as it depends on Indigenous dispossession to exist.[[52]](#footnote-52) The continuation of the homeless crisis that disproportionately affects Indigenous Peoples in one of Canadas coldest capital cities demonstrates the unwillingness of the settler state to provide space for the urban representation of these same populations. The City of Edmonton is content to address its obligations as a Treaty city exclusively in the footnotes, and thus performatively.[[53]](#footnote-53)

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14. Camp pekiwewin closure, 2020, photograph, Rossdale Flats, Edmonton, AB, taken by author. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Vivien Runnels, Elizabeth Hay, Elyse Sevigny and Paddi O´Hara. “The Ethics of Conducting Community-Engaged Homelessness Research,” *Journal of Academic Ethics* 7 (2009): 59. https://doi-org.login.ezproxy. library.ualberta.ca/ 10.1007/s10805-009-9083-2. At times, the words ‘homeless’ and house-less’ are used interchangeably, although they serve slightly different functions. ‘Homeless’ is a word of popular usage and is widely recognized, whereas ‘house-less’ speaks more to a singular facet of the existence of persons that experience this lifestyle of being unhoused. It is always best to position adjectives after nouns in the English language so that descriptive factors do not serve the linguistic function of totalizing someone’s identity based exclusively off their positionality. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jesse A. Thistle, *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada*,(Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2017): 16. [https://www.homelesshub.ca/Indigenous Homelessness](https://www.homelesshub.ca/Indigenous%20Homelessness). Regarding the use of the term ‘Indigenous Peoples’, the function of this umbrella language is to include all persons that identify as Indigenous/Aboriginal, legally designated First Nations, Métis/Michif, and Inuit, as well as individuals that were enfranchised by the state and are thus not necessarily members of groups that can lay claim to Treaty rights. The researcher takes accountability for any errors or generalizations that arise from this choice of language. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Evelyn J. Peters, Mathew Stock, Adrian Werner, and Lawrie Barkwell, “Settler Colonialism and the Dispossession of the Manitoba Métis,” in *Rooster Town: The History of an Ubran Métis Community, 1901-1961*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018): 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Peters et al., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Peters et al., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Miranda Jimmy, “Continuing to RAM Colonization Down our Throats,” *Miranda Jimmy*, July 1, 2019: paragraph 4, <http://mirandajimmy.com/continuing-to-ram-colonization-down-our-throats/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail, “Re-Imagining Rossdale: Pehonan and the Power Plant,” *City Museum Edmonton*, Feb. 10, 2015, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2015/02/10/re-imagining-rossdale-pehonan-and-the-power-plant/>. See Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous* Resistance, (London, Verso: 2019) 189, for a discussion about how “gentrification *is* colonialism.” Emphasis original. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Tomiak et al., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Tomiak et al., 11. For a discussion on Indigeneity, the urban space, and “visual imperialism” see Jennifer Adese, “Behaving Unexpectedly in Unexpected Places: First Nations Artists and the Embodiment of Visual Sovereignty,” in *More Will Sing Their Way to Freedom: Indigenous Resistance and Resurgence*, eds. Elaine Coburn and Emma LaRocque, (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2015): 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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29. Commonwealth, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cronon, vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cronon, vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Belanger and Lindstrom, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
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35. Belanger and Lindstrom, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Thistle, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Thistle, 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Thistle, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Thistle, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Homeward Trust, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Homeward Trust, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Homeward Trust, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Rosenberger, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Rosenberger, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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