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Chéticamp and Cap-Rouge, Nova Scotia: Divided Landscapes and Fragmented Identities

"When we describe the land—or, more frequently, remember events that occurred at particular points on it — the natural landscape becomes a centre of meaning, and its geographical features are constituted in relation to our experiences on it. The land is not an abstract physical location but a place, charged with personal significance, shaping the images we have of ourselves."

- Marlene Creates, Places of Presence: Newfoundland kin and ancestral land 1989-1991 (1991)

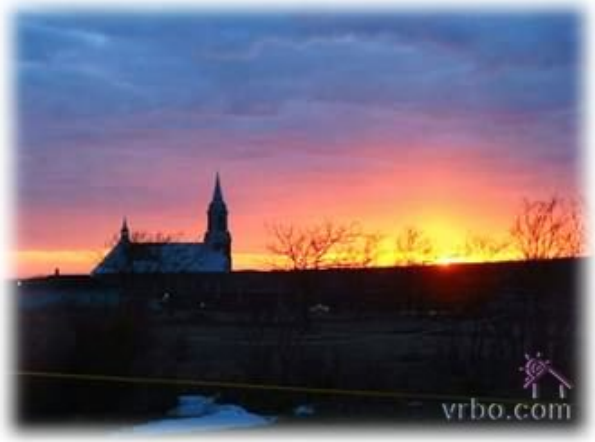
Photo by René Sortie

Avant-Propos

I've spent countless hours watching the sun setting over the ocean by the Cape Breton Highlands. Many times, as I watched, I'd turn to peek at the Highlands and my brain couldn't fully grasp the multitude of hues shining through and in between the rocky crevices, the sublime play of light and shadow in the underbrush, and the sheer beauty of the place. Unlike my father—who worked as a fisher in the spring, a government transportation worker in the summer and a woodsman in the fall and winter—I'm more a product of my time, urbanized and removed from the imminent dangers of Canadian wilderness. Although I returned to my hometown twice to work in the Cape Breton Highlands National Park (CBHNP), I've spent the greater part of my life contemplating nature's wisdom from behind a book cover or computer screen.

I've felt illiterate before my inherited Canadian landscape—in much the same way contemporary ecologists write about how society has come to feel in the face of the unfathomable environmental complexities nature presents us with. The landscape of my home also holds many 'unfathomable complexities', and yet, every chance I get to go watch the sunset in the park I begin to feel reconnected to the vibrating heart of my ancestors and of my native landscape.

The Village of Chéticamp at Sunset



Source: Vacation Rentals by Owner Website

Place Biography Goals

The first goal of this essay is to introduce how Chéticamp, Cap-Rouge and the Cape Breton Highlands National Park are connected through a geographical and settlement lens. A second goal is to apply the lens of historical and place literacy to draw attention to the complex ways in which interpretations of historical, geographical and cultural landscapes are implicated in the production of ethnicized constructs[1] within a larger national identity. My third goal, reflected by the genre of the assignment (place biography), is to share my personal story with the landscape in order to argue its merit in the discourse of fragmented identities within national identity.

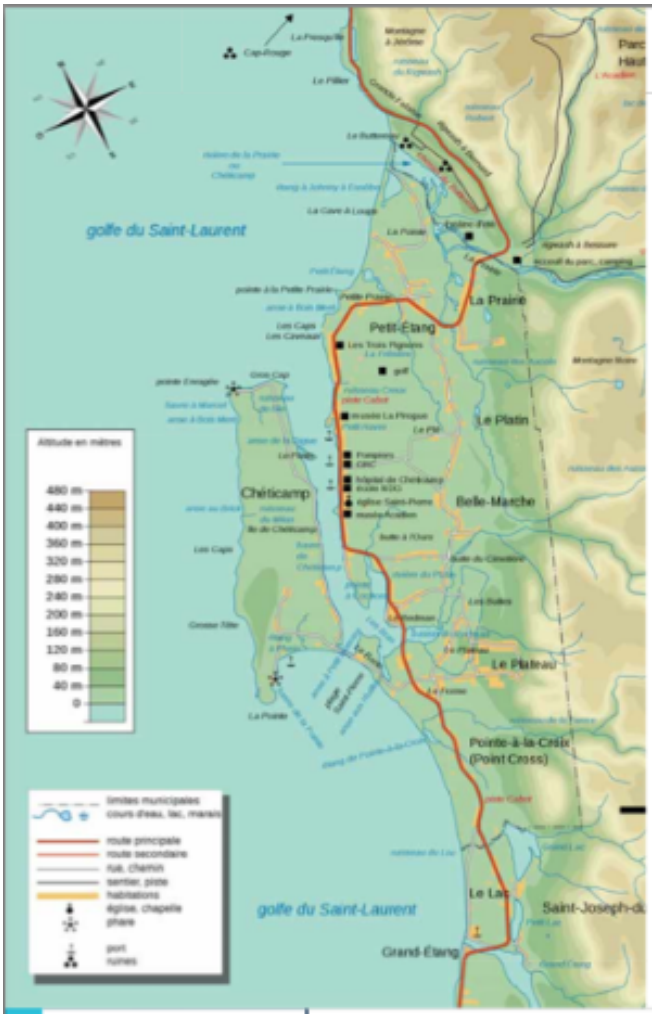
About Chéticamp, Cap-Rouge and the Cape Breton Highlands National Park

Chéticamp is a coastal village settled mainly by French Acadians at the end of the 18th century. Prior to the Acadian settlement, the Mi'kmaq visited the area with some regularity during fishing

[1] I'd like to note to the reader my struggle with the terms 'ethnicized' and 'racialized', both of which recur in the sources cited. I felt that using the term 'ethnicized' might appear weak or that I was glossing over racism. That is not my intention. I only utilized 'ethnicized' for the sake of clarity because the Acadians are not, in fact, a separate race. The 'rationale' used to try to exterminate us was based on our language and culture rather than our skin colour.

and hunting excursions. We credit the Mi'kmaq for the name “Chéticamp” Bretons and Basques also fished along the coast although the first to establish a permanent fishing post (on Chéticamp Island) were the Robins (merchants from the island of Jersey) around 1770.

The geographical area of the village (map below) is dominated by the Cape Breton Highlands rising behind the village and the Gulf of St. Lawrence spreading out before it, with the only interruption being a small peninsula named Chéticamp Island. At the top edge of the map below the arrow are the words 'Cap-Rouge'. This is the place where Acadian lands were expropriated as part of Parks Canada policy in 1940.



Source: **Chéticamp Village: Conceptual Development Plan**

The old road from Cap-Rouge that Acadians used before expropriation

L'ancien chemin de Cap-Rouge.
Source: CBC

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, and courtesy of the information provided by the Canadian Government Travel Bureau in Ottawa, the following description represents the Cape Breton Highlands:

> Cape Breton Highlands, forested upland, northernmost Nova Scotia, Canada, on Cape Breton Island. The highlands, which occupy a large peninsula bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Gulf of St. Lawrence on the west, are the most prominent physical feature of Nova Scotia. Rising abruptly from either coast, they form an undulating plateau that averages 1,200 feet (370 m) above sea level; their maximum elevation, 1,745 feet (532 m), is the highest point in the province. Though uninhabited except along a narrow coastal fringe, the highlands are a popular scenic and recreational area that is partially embraced by Cape Breton Highlands National Park (367 square miles [951 square km]). The scenic Cabot Trail, a highway 185 miles (298 km) long, encircles most of the region.

Although the entry seems physically accurate, it lacks reference to human settlement. So, I researched other on-line encyclopedias that would include human history. In the Canadian Encyclopedia under Cape Breton Highlands National Park I found the following:

> Human History
> This is one of the places claimed as the site of John Cabot's landfall in 1497.
>
> Micmac were living in the area at the time. Portuguese fishermen were the first
>
> Europeans to settle, followed by French and Scottish immigrants. Tradition is

> strong in fishing villages near the park. French is the first language of many residents, reflecting their Acadian heritage, while the use of Gaelic reflects a Highland heritage.

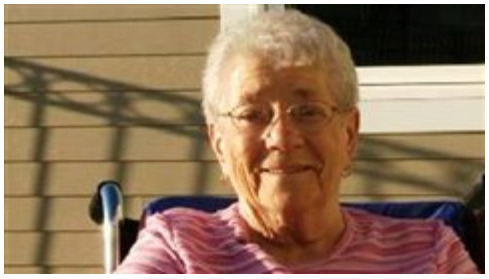
As I began to feel an excruciatingly vulnerable malaise, I turned to Google. Initial searches (in English) turned up no information about the Acadians from Chéticamp who were expropriated from the park, but it took one second to locate that information when I Googled the exact same research words in French. It reminded me of the battle fought and won by different generals on the Plains of Abraham seemingly dependent on who was teaching about the event.

> "Every collective memory unfolds within a spacial framework"
> - Halbwachs, Maurice

In the end, I found myself buried under overwhelming amounts of sources and staring at a critical part of my own identity. That's because one of the greatest achievements of national parks is that, whether we like it or not, they are national icons that create meaning. Both Canadians and visitors regard them as national symbols that fall under the same iconography as the maple leaf, the beaver, hockey and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. And despite their production as a tourist landscape, there is a constant interplay between landscape as commodity and landscape as reality. Moreover, National Parks reflect more than just state agency ideology; they reflect something about ourselves that we usually want to believe – and something that I've wanted to believe, an aspect I'll explore further in my concluding remarks.

A recent, significant source that related to the identity fragmentation I felt regarding expropriation was a media article from an August 2011 CBC Radio-Canada interview called *À la mémoire des expropriés de Cap-Rouge (In the Memory of the Expropriated from Cap-Rouge)*.

The article reported on an interview with Évelyne Larade (a former resident of Cap-Rouge) about a new trail opening in the park that commemorates the expropriation of Acadians from Cap-Rouge. Larade was 14 years old at the time. She spoke of those who had to leave and how the older generation (her father) was reminded of the Deportation. According to Larade whose father was compensated $1800 to leave (used mostly to cover the expenses of moving his house across the water to nearby Chéticamp Island), the new trail which features interpretive panels depicting the community that used to live there is far more significant than a measly sum of money which was no consolation for the loss of your home.



Évelyne Larade. Source: CBC

Although the trail wasn't open for public 'consumption', I visited the construction of the trail twice (a perk of having worked at the park). I can't render a complete analysis, but my initial reaction, like Larade's, was that it marked a positive step in healing some of the tension between the park and the community. It doesn't erase the contradiction in parks production—which, ironically has almost been considered emancipatory since in front of nature humans were on a relatively level playing field—but it's a start.

I should note that the Canada National Parks Act, amended in 2000, prohibits the use of expropriation to establish or expand national parks. Also, in 2011, coinciding with the establishment of the new trail, Parks Canada announced that permanent passes would be available for expropriated families and their descendants in 2012. (Parks Canada website)

The Canadian psyche nurtures the belief that just beyond the country's cities and towns exists a wild area that makes Canada a better country simply because such wilderness exists.

- Canadian Ecological Integrity Panel

The significance of government policy on identity

The creation of the Cape Breton Highlands National Park (CBHNP) and the policy driving the expropriation of the Acadians living at Cap-Rouge only confirms that constructs of national identities are given different shapes according the contexts, places and languages from which they emerge.

Canada like all nations is after all a mental construct, an 'imagined community' as Benedict Anderson called it. (1983, pp. 15f.) As such our national identity is a special form of social identity, which throughout our lives evolves, transforms, dismantles and rebuilds itself as a result of learning. National identity is thus malleable, at times ambivalent and notably, very fragile.

The rugged, northern wilderness of the CBHNP is proof of these shifts. A park once contributing to differentiating between Canada and its "civilized" British parent became tasked with the identity of a landscape that could be experienced. That landscape would be protected at all cost, even human cost. Wilderness was so important to cultural nationalism that it trumped the culture of the humans that inhabited the space. Both before and during the discourse of social justice for those families, there were discourses of ecological integrity is only one of "a series of changing articulations between nature and nation in the Canadian park imaginary." (Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, p. 163)

I began to work for Parks Canada in the Cape Breton Highlands National Park in 1999 the year after Heritage Minister Sheila Copps established the Panel on Ecological Integrity. The panel was mandated to "assess the strengths and weaknesses of Parks Canada's approach to the maintenance

of ecological integrity in Canada's national parks and, based on this assessment, provide advice and recommend how best to ensure that ecological integrity is maintained across the system" (Parks Canada, 2000 Appendix A1).

Among its findings I found it interesting that ecological integrity required more than better scientific tools, but that given Park Canada's view that "ecosystems should evolve in the absence of most human intervention" - active management practices, "where there are reasonable grounds," according to the Panel, "in order to compensate for past actions" (1:9). Aboriginal relationships to park landscapes termed "naturalized knowledge and values" were considered key and so were updated interpretive programs.

When I consider my national identity, its form merges my own memories with words and images I've been taught, like vastness of the land, isolation, solitudes, and so on. On the other hand, the mental constructs of national identity that generally come to mind are of shared conceptions and perceptions, of similar emotional disposition, attitudes and behaviours. These shared traits are internalized through socialization, especially via the three major influences of education, politics and media. In addition, I think of national identity as relating to common culture, of notions and attitudes that we have of other national communities, of their/my micro culture within the lens of our macro culture, and of their unique history within Canadian history.

Constructing a Common History

Narratives about nations, including Canada, portray concepts of history that identify historical events deemed relevant for its citizens. These events establish chronological and causal relations that underpin the way forward for any nation.

In the case of national identity, it is critical then that we, as Canadians, examine our solidarity

within our own 'collectives' as well as the exclusion of 'others' from our constructed collective or collectives. Canadians in 2012 do not carry the same national identity they did a hundred years ago. Official, political or ceremonial discourses that attempt to gloss over, obscure or justify discriminatory practices are in direct conflict with the continued rebuilding of a Canadian persona that is as proud of its nation as we were taught to feel about Lester Pearson and the blue berets who exemplified a nation of peace-builders. The discourse I grew up with was a construct of Canada as a tolerant, multicultural country, and a country of polite citizens. I quickly realized when I began studying history and then teaching history that the limits of this idealization were apparent in our history which marks the experience and barriers of non-white, Acadian and aboriginal peoples. And within these groups, women and children faced additional barriers in Canadian society.

Canada is also recognized both for its stunning natural beauty. Official Canadian national culture celebrates both facets, often in very contradictory ways. Yet rarely do we ask whose histories are called upon to understand Canada as a "natural" space. Nor do we ask whose histories are excluded when Canada is imagined in such idealized, naturalized terms."

Regional Identity and Consciousness: A Fragmented Part of National Identity

The key objective of this essay was to assess the significance of the cultural landscape of Chéticamp and the southern edge of the Cape Breton Highlands as a place of national identity, cultural construction, unity and fragmentation. My final argument, in honour of my ancestors who believed in storytelling:

At the intersection of identity and history around the time of Confederation, I find my narrative,

myself, marginalized, fractured and fragmented. I am an Acadian Woman and from my maternal grandmother, the blood and history of my aboriginal brothers and sisters courses through my veins. What then, where then, is my Canadian identity?

When I first started teaching history in high school, I didn't think the surviving children of the Holocaust or Rwanda had anything to do with me. But, the more I observed the internalized history reflected in the eyes of my students and the more I read, the edges of those survivor stories began to blur, then bleed and seep into my own sense of history, and eventually they began to settle inside my own (national) identity.

This did not happen without the hands of history reaching inside my core and slicing a silent and frozen part of me. As it wedged free, I was reminded of that grinding sound in the Spring when the ice floes in the Chéticamp Harbour would start breaking up. Nature's fervour cracked a silent turquoise wake of violence once mistaken for love. There in the landscape of an isolated western Cape Breton settlement is where I find my most salient memories and thus my identity.

It's true that many tourists come to Chéticamp, but they come during the summer and fall. I would like to introduce them to that sound of grinding ice, to a wind that cuts you to the quick and to those mournful blasts from an old fog horn—to imagine all the unrequited lovers throughout history (Gabriels and Evangelines) raising their voices from the cracks in the ice, ocean spilling, wells of grief and stolen innocence calling out to one another.

The most common dictionary definitions of the word history include variations on "narrative of past events, account, tale, story..," I believe the narrative of fragmented identities together with a place where the first national park of Atlantic Canada that cradles it makes Chéticamp, Cap-rouge and the Cape Breton Highlands National Park deserving of a significant place in Canada's story.

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