

Standing on the Edge: Challenging Boundaries and Power

Place as Text

Niagara Falls commands attention and captures the imagination. This is a “place” that is made for exploration and interpretation. It provides an ideal site for a “place-as-text” investigation of the type that has become one of the signature hallmarks of honors conferences, both regionally and nationally.

Standing on the edge of this unique and awesome place inevitably conjures a sense of wonder about power and about the myriad boundaries that intersect and implicate one another in this remarkable pair of cities, as well as in the larger region which, like them, is named after the Niagara River and its justly famous falls. Architecture, commerce, environmentalism, history, hydro-electric power, nations, politics, tourism and so much more all collide and influence one another here in unusual and fascinating ways. How can we make sense of this place? How can we begin to tackle the challenges of interpreting this place?

We invite participants at this year’s conference to take up the challenge of trying to identify and to interpret the key elements that make this place such a source of wonder.

Strand #1: A Tale of Two Cities? Niagara Falls – New York/Ontario

Passport Required

We invite participants in this strand to explore both Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Niagara Falls, Ontario. While doing so, we encourage you to compare, contrast and interpret any similarities and differences you discover along the way and to consider them in light of some of the topics mentioned above.

Here are some prompts to get you and your fellow participants thinking:

- What has become of the original peoples who called this place home? Are they missing altogether, or have some adapted to the changes that have occurred over the centuries since European and later immigrant groups began to arrive? If they have adapted, have they fared well or poorly? In what ways?
- How have the falls had an impact on commerce and the environment within this region? Are attitudes, plans and policies in these areas changing at all or just adapting to pursue new ways of chasing old goals? Who has vested interests in the status quo and who has vested interests in genuine change? What will the Niagara Falls region be like in 10, 20, or 50 years?
- The Niagara River and Niagara Falls form a physical boundary that both separates and connects two nation states: Canada and the United States. How have Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Niagara Falls, Ontario, regarded the falls and attempted to exploit the falls? If there are differences, how has this effected the development and the current state and status of the two cities? How do residents of each city regard their neighbors across the border? Do differences between these two cities reflect larger cultural or political differences between Canada and the United States?

Strand #2: Niagara Power Project Power Vista, Devil’s Hole, and The Underground Railroad Exhibit at the Castellani Art Gallery

Admission is Free to all Sites

Niagara Falls’ beauty and unbridled power evoke awe and often a drive to conquer, whether by its notorious daredevils who aim to test fate or its engineers who desire to tap into its potential for electric power. Here, many have also sought and defended, often violently, their freedom. Participants in this strand are invited to consider several ideas, including: the dream of Nikola Tesla and others to harness the power of the Niagara

River; the Seneca's reverence for the land they believed to be imbued with spiritual richness and their revolt against British rule; as well as the role this place played in the struggle against racism and the fight to abolish slavery in the United States.

Here are some prompts to get you and your fellow participants thinking:

- How does the Niagara Power Project Power Vista, situated in the midst of the natural beauty of the Niagara River Gorge, speak to the relationship of humans and nature? Is this relationship desirable, healthy or viable in the long run?
- The legend of Devil's Hole has been passed down for generations among the Seneca Indians and tells of an evil spirit that dwells in the huge cavern in the cliff of the gorge, known as the "Cave of the Evil Spirit." Over time it has stood as a warning to Indians to live in harmony. It is also believed to explain the ruin of LaSalle who journeyed into the cave. Most notoriously, this was the site of the Devil's Hole massacre in 1763. How is this place significant for the Seneca nation today? Has its significance changed with the passing of time?
- How does the Castellani Art Gallery Underground Railroad Exhibit reflect and perhaps attempt to assuage the tensions of the history it addresses? Is it successful?
- How does this place aim to balance the drive to map history and to chart the future?

Strand #3: Old Fort Niagara and the Village of Lewiston

Old Fort Niagara has a \$12 entrance fee with discounts for groups of 12 or more

Old Fort Niagara has dominated the entrance to the Niagara River for over 300 years. It played an important role in the struggles of France, Great Britain, and the United States to control the Great Lakes region of North America. It has shaped the destinies of the Iroquois and Canada. Similarly, Lewiston is historically significant for its geography and its relation to Niagara Falls in the early commercial development of the Great Lakes region, its role in the "Forgotten War" of 1812, and its position as the final stop of the Underground Railroad for escaping slaves seeking freedom in Canada. Today, it is a small village.

Here are some prompts to get you and your fellow participants thinking:

- Place is not merely scenery. It is more than a backdrop to what "takes" place. Place involves and implicates culture, heritage, identity and so much more – regardless of whether it provides comfort, exile or something else. Who and what has "taken" place here? How has this place influenced the lives of individuals, communities and nations?
- How does this place condition or direct our understanding of "our" past, as well as that of "others" – especially regarding questions of ethnic, personal and national identity?
- How does this place ground itself in history and the past while still striving to carve out a new identity for itself in the 21st century?
- Does this place (still) define "us"? If so, how? Is this a good thing? Why or why not?

Strand #4: Creative Workshop: Exploring Niagara Falls State Park through Art

This Place as Text offering is a day-long research and creative workshop. Students and faculty will transverse the Niagara Falls State Park observing and identifying early spring flora and fauna and then documenting the environment in poetry, photography, drawing, and painting. These creative works will be exhibited throughout the conference center during the Saturday paper sessions.

Participants will need to bring their own writing, photographic and art supplies. Lunch is on their own. The cost of this activity is \$7. This fee covers the cost of printing and mounting works for the exhibition. Participants will also be required to assist in hanging the works for the exhibition.

Here are some prompts to get you and your fellow participants thinking:

- Observe where the man-made artifacts of the park intersect with the green space and edges of the waterfall; how does the density of the green space change at the edge of the park and at the edge of the water?
- Frederick Law Olmstead was the landscape designer for the Niagara Falls State Park. After walking the park, can you comprehend his design concept? What vistas evoke any emotion? What man-made artifacts enhanced your experience? Distracted from it? Why?
- What are the predominate colors you observe in the landscape? How does the color inform us of the park's habitat? The time of year? Soil composition? Humidity? And so on.

Strand #5: Service-Learning: Engaging Niagara Falls

(AS OF 2/26/14, THIS IS FILLED. YOU MAY REQUEST TO BE ON THE WAITLIST.)

Want to give back to the City while exploring its history through the stories of your fellow volunteers and non-profit leaders?

This year's NRHC conference will offer a Place as Text option that will allow students to connect with a local non-profit organization and utilize community service as a pathway to exploring and interpreting the city of Niagara Falls.

Partnering with both the **United Way of Greater Niagara** and the **Niagara Area Habitat for Humanity**, students will complete a hands-on service-learning project and work with local volunteers and community members during their Place as Text experience.

In anthropology a Participant-Observer is a researcher who extends beyond naturalistic observation and takes on the role of the studied; for example, living in a commune, being homeless, etc. How does the role of the service-learner match that of the participant-observer? How does service-learning inform your interpretation of the Place as Text?

This year's Place-as-Text opportunity promises to be one of the best yet, and, as the organizers, we look forward to what I am sure will be some amazing observations and insights into this awe-inspiring place. We look forward to seeing you in Niagara Falls in April!