

An Emphatic Geography: Notes on the Ethical Itinerary of Landscape

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Abstract: The year 2007 marked the beginning of the fourth International Polar Year, another frenzy of big science and circumpolar interest in questions of sovereignty, climate change, resources, and so on. At the same time, in the domain of the humanities, there are a host of re-elaborations of the very discourses of nordicity that seek to bring to light a North that is no longer merely an empty space and passage to elsewhere; rather, it is a North that has become a site and a figure, and a caution and a limit—a problem, in other words. My text proceeds from the unstable ground of this refigured nordicity. In the summer of 2005, I went North to the Mackenzie River basin with the typewritten field journals of Harold Innis. The young Innis had made the same trip in the summer of 1924, and my initial interest was an attempt to retrace his steps and to reflect on the place of North (as margin) in the development of his ideas at that time. Where his abiding concern had been production, innovation, and social relations, my own interest concerned method, writing, and landscape. Nonetheless, as I travelled up the length of the “River of Disappointment,” as Mackenzie called it, a methodological dialogue emerged.

Keywords: Harold Adams Innis; Northern Canada; Mackenzie River; Great Bear Lake; Landscape; Uranium

Résumé : L'année 2007 a marqué le début de la quatrième Année polaire internationale, événement marquant pour l'élite des sciences, suscitant un intérêt pour la souveraineté circumpolaire, le changement climatique, les ressources, et ainsi de suite. En même temps, dans les lettres, il s'élabore une multitude de discours sur la nordicité où l'on cherche à mettre à jour un Nord qui ne serait qu'espace vide ou lieu de passage; aujourd'hui, le Nord passe au premier plan, devenant avertissement et limite—à certains égards, un problème. Mon texte jette ses fondements sur le sol instable de cette nordicité reconfigurée. Pendant l'été 2005, je suis allé vers le nord, jusqu'au bassin du fleuve Mackenzie, y emmenant le journal dactylographié d'Harold Innis qu'il avait rédigé sur le terrain. En effet, le jeune Innis avait entrepris le même voyage pendant l'été 1924, et ma motivation initiale consistait à suivre ses traces et à réfléchir sur la position (marginale) du Nord dans le développement de ses pensées à l'époque. Là

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Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 33 (2008) 171-191

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où son souci principal avait été la production, l'innovation et les relations sociales, mes propres intérêts ont plutôt porté sur la méthode, l'écriture et le paysage. Néanmoins, tout comme je remontais le « fleuve de la Déception », tel que Mackenzie l'avait appelé, un dialogue méthodologique a émergé.

Mots clés : Harold Adams Innis; Nord canadien; Fleuve Mackenzie; Grand lac de l'Ours; Paysage; Uranium

In my journal there is a note that reads, “[A]n emphatic geography creates the language for its own expression.” I do not recall having written this, nor am I certain that I know what it means. But as a small and marginal gift, it perhaps offers nonetheless an occasion for thinking about the language of landscape, about site and about place. For now, the landscape that I am concerned with is in the North of Canada—a North understood, that is, as place, as idea, and as limit.

Great Bear Lake, July 30, 2003

To start at the beginning is of course not an odd thing. Not really. As though one had a choice to begin elsewhere. As though a later object could somehow reach back and make one's having begun into other than what it was, into something else.

So to write now the beginning of this, let's say, story, in no way poses itself as an historical proposition. It is, rather, an example of how it is that history itself reaches forward to organize the present. The now, as Benjamin might put it (meaning of course the actual site of history). This is the secret complicity between the past and the present.

Yesterday this all began with a trail of tears, with Indians and potatoes, and Irish famine activists. Today, however, today is different. Today it all begins on the Lake. A proper name. Great Bear Lake. Sahtu, for the Dene. The Bear.

Yesterday I was reminded about what I knew four years ago. And what I knew then was that the Highway of the Atom was a story about ethical theory. It was a story about the aporias of responsibility. It was a story, foremost about the infinite character of responsibility. And today, this recollection is still there, I still know this to be true, but today I am in a different place. I am on the Lake. By which I mean of course Great Bear Lake, home of Canada's atomic modernity. Mile zero of the Highway of the Atom, where the wind blows with a fierce intensity, falling down the ancient hills, pouring onto the lake to lift the water's surface. Into waves. Today it begins here, because it really began there. And, like a long wave, it signals through the route to its significant points. One could call this communication; following its itinerary to its scheduled stops, to its intersections.

This shall be the metaphor for today: the wave. It makes sense really. For on the lake it is all about scale. Which is to say, it's all about an amplitude, and a frequency. The lake and the waves. A present, and its projec-

tion. The wave. The wave goodbye. The sound wave. The sine wave and the sign wave. An amplitude. A frequency. Something is struck, put into motion, a kind of vibration. A sympathy, in other words. Like the magic where things once in contact remain connected, somehow, when they are apart. An affinity, a sympathy, mimesis. And, like the other magic, the sympathy can sometimes be about the similar too. Another kind of sympathy; for I am like you. This time it is an intimacy of form, or at least of formal qualities. A wave is a self-similar structure of sympathetic origin. The wave good-bye. The hand that touched the cheek, reaching out in a parting contact, remaining warm from the touch, resembles itself as a parting frequency, and amplitude. This, my sorrow, again and again.



Photo Credit: Hunter/NWT Archives, N-1998-015:0275.

I wrote this as I was beginning an eastward route across Great Bear Lake, from Deline to Port Radium, in the summer of 2003. It seems strange to me now. Much of my “data” looks like this; almost involuntary, like tears, someone said.

And what makes these field notes of interest to me is that they are all occasioned by a kind of contact—a place, a text, a story, a landscape. They are all a record of a kind of encounter. They are about having been somewhere. A lake, a mine, a town, a river, an archive, a ruin. It does not really matter; these are just the things that constitute a particular repertoire of events. They can be seen in kinship not only with “theory” (understood conventionally), but with “story.” They are also and therefore pieces of testimony. Yet this is a long way from clarifying things. As witness, I am too late. The witness is always too late—and perhaps for this reason testimony can never clearly articulate what it is. “There is no testimony,” wrote Derrida, “that does not at least structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury—that is to say, the possibility of literature” (Derrida, 2000, pp. 29-30). This of course is to take away none of the force from testimony, but rather to place it in a zone of undecidabil-

ity. For on the other side, “if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive,” he continued, “it would lose its function as testimony” (p. 30). That is, in order to be testimony, it must be haunted.

Grey Goose Inn, Deline, Great Bear Lake, July 25, 2003

On preparations: How do you prepare for this field work of words? What is the appropriate gear? Two days from now, I begin. Benjamin cautioned against beginning any project without the proper instruments at hand. What then are the proper instruments for exploring a route such as the Highway of the Atom? What preparations must one make? I have no idea. Not really. I have: a full set of maps at various appropriate scales, a Geiger counter, a shot gun, a digital recorder, a GPS, a compass, a solar cell, a laptop, two cameras, a fishing rod, a loved one, and a knife. . . . This may well be much too literal.

My impressionistic journeys to the North of Canada have sought to identify residues and other forms of leakage. Stains on the land, on the territorial archive. Some of the leakage is “real,” by which we might mean material, at least in the case of the stain down the Highway of the Atom, measurable in terms of half-lives: boats, barges, building materials, mine tailings, and so on. But some of the leakage does not quite have this kind of materiality, statistical or otherwise. This sort of leakage might be narrative, or memorial, or archival, or indeed might have the character of a deferred action through some traumatic mechanism—not too difficult to imagine (van Wyck, 2002). I approach this work not as a history of disaster—this would either beg the question or eclipse it—but rather, history as disaster. A history that consumes itself, its remembrance, its witnesses, and its evidence. Ghosts there are (not cinders or pictures). Until quite recently the Dene of Great Bear Lake, and many others along the Highway, knew nothing of radioactivity.¹ Why would they? How would one even translate such a concept? In Inuktitut language, I am told, the concept of half-life translates as “half-human.” Today—that is, by now—many other translations have been invented, some conceptual and linguistic, and some decidedly material and corporeal.

In my recent trip to the North, my travelling companion was also a ghost of sorts: Harold A. Innis. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Innis travelled North on a number of occasions to conduct field work aimed at understanding the productive relations between margin and centre, with a particular and abiding interest in the role played by geography in the course of empire; for Innis, it was precisely the emphatic quality of geography that issued an imperative that one must understand the local in order to think more broadly of the cultural. In any case, one needs company in this kind of work.

In what follows, the reader will find some fragments, pieces, reflections on a place and a time from which I am, and remain, a bewildered stranger. A term of neither grandiosity nor self-negation, bewilderment, to become bewildered (and I would insist, I think, on the processual over the static, so perhaps “becoming-bewildered” is more like it), is of course not the same as being lost, although it is related. In fact there is a certain and interesting lack of symmetry between the two

terms. Lost, being lost, seems much more comfortable with the categorical; you either *are* lost or are not. Whereas it makes less sense, intuitively at least, to speak of becoming lost, unless we are being particularly metaphorical in our usage. This bewilderment to which I refer, and I will stop just short of calling it a critical bewilderment—at the risk of suffocation under the mass of terms—is a kind of movement of going astray, of confronting an ambiguously located wilderness, perhaps inside, perhaps outside, or both. It is to be unsettled, off the path, but not unmoored completely (this would be precisely the fantasy of “going native” (e.g., Torgovnick, 1990). Accordingly, what follows should be read not as complete ideas, or even as arguments, but rather as instances of my uncertainty.

Writing—landscape—North

The methodological posture that would describe this work would not gesture toward a hermeneutics of the image; rather, it is a mode that “paints more than it digs,” as Barthes put it (1979, p. 14). This is far more interesting, it seems to me, reminding us perhaps of the productive intimacy between image and memory (e.g., Yates, 1966). Barthes continued: “The semiologist is, in short, an artist (the word as I use it here neither glorifies nor disdains; it refers only to a typology)” (Barthes, 1979, p. 14). And the task, as he figured it, is “to play with signs as with a conscious decoy.” The sign “is always immediate . . . like a trigger of the imagination” (p. 14). He goes on to identify the things to which this mode of tentative analysis is, above all, attracted: narratives and portraits, he says, expressions, idioms, passions, and “structures which play simultaneously with an appearance of verisimilitude and with an uncertainty of truth” (p. 14). On this account, semiology plays with the sign “as with a painted veil, or . . . with a fiction,” he tells us (p. 14). All of this is to say that one must remain mindful, always; that to make interpretation is foremost to make something. In other words, this interpretation is always as much about writing as reading. Invention is there from the start. And so is story.

Accordingly, my method here is to place this inquiry into a question of making, that is, of writing—narrative, portraits, expressions, passions, and so on—and, for me at least, to locate this writing in the North.

Going North always seems to require giving an account of why one is there. What one seeks, I think, is a kind of Southern “state of exception,” to the extent that this is possible (Agamben, 2005). Or desirable. A suspension, in other words, of a certain set of Southern institutional regimes, for the Northern traveller always tends to overpack, as it were. North is always in a way an experimental and empirical check on the suspicion that if world and language are in a critical and secret collusion, then seeking a different world might help invent a different and critical language—on the face of it, a clearly utopian project, a project under which too many ships have set sail already. Littered with boats and journals and bodies and poetry, frozen all and desiccated. And people, though not very many, the signs of whose occupation are nonetheless everywhere (if only because they have been there “forever”). The North, “a semiotic tragedy,” writes John Moss, is so freighted, as North, that it is difficult just to be there (1996, p.17). North as idea eclipses North as place (cf. van Herk, 1991; Weibe, 2003). As Robert Kroetsch figured it, “to write, is in some metaphorical sense, to go North. To go

North is, in some metaphorical sense, to write" (1995, p. 14). Of course, this does not leave much on the outside of writing (except for North) or North (except for writing), although the page itself becomes a portal to the infinity of Arctic space. But his point is that one goes North at the moment where the word "is in the process of extending itself onto the blankness of the page" (p. 14). So here writing not only invents North as site, but evacuates it in the same gesture, in advance of itself as blankness. Stefansson did roughly the same thing some 60 years earlier, when he concluded his *Northward Course of Empire* (1922) with the observation that it is simply a good fortune "that we still have our frontier land in which pioneers may struggle and build, where they may dream their dreams of empire, and eventually write upon pages now blank the story of those realized dreams" (Stefansson & Gísli, 2001, p. 73). Always writing the North, but in Kroetsch's case, even with the cultural transactions of "deep story" that run through his works (due perhaps to his early close reading of *The Golden Bough*), there is the sense that the romantic, mythic mode of a national Canadian nordicity is always somehow staged to undo itself in the same breath (cf. Neuman & Wilson, 1982). This, for example, would be Grace's reading of him in relation to the canon of Canadian Northern writing (Grace, 2001).

But I wish to put to one side the seductions of these lyricists of deep nordicity, as we might call these particular writers of mythopoetic Canadianness; they write too well. Let us just say that to go North is complex. It is a strange cartography for the southerner. A different logic of place, with different striations than South. A smoother space in a way, but not only that. And if you happen to approach the North as a European, as a southerner, as a practitioner, as an academic, it is quite easy to just get lost. In fact, it is just quite easy to get lost (Empire's fantasy, after all). And here I am not being metaphorical. Field work invents a kind of fiction—this is perhaps its particular haunting—a fiction that always writes against itself as a kind of testimony. Yet there is a tendency to want to forget this, and to still end up getting lost. I have begun to think of all this in terms of an indexical imaginary, but I will come to this. The landscape of North, or that fraction of it that I happen to have seen, is difficult for the stranger; this would be its excess, its emphasis, its capacity to show. And of course in this tricky terrain, metaphors abound, always. Accordingly, care is required.²

As Lyotard figured it, there is a landscape "whenever the mind is transported from one sensible matter to another, but retains the sensorial organization appropriate to the first, or at least a memory of it. The earth seen from the moon for a terrestrial. The country for the townsman; the city for the farmer. Estrangement (*dépaysement*) would appear to be a precondition for landscape" (Lyotard, 1991, p. 183).

How, he wonders, "could we capture the breadth of the wind that sweeps the mind into the void when the landscape arrives, if not in the texture of the written word?" (p. 188). Good question. . . . "[A] landscape is a mark, and it (but not the mark it makes and leaves) should be thought of, not as an inscription, but as the erasure of a support" (p. 189).

And indeed the very operation of metaphor is key here, for it is through its workings that we are invited to invent. Metaphor not simply as the laboratory of



Photo Credit: Peter C. van Wyck. Porthole 12. Arctic Red River, Mackenzie River, 2005.

the humanities, but metaphors as “the ravens of language,” as McKay put it in a stirring passage about de Man (McKay, 2001). This idea of the creative and inventive play of metaphor here stands against a dreary and debased notion of semiotic servitude whereby one speaks “only by picking up what loiters around in speech”; a kind of hunter-gatherer model of language (Barthes, 1979, p. 15). Far from it. On de Man’s account, it is not about ontology, about things as they are—not even close—but rather about authority, things as they are decreed to be. Nothing, in principle, separates the naming of one thing from another (de Man, 1978). For de Man, this is to see ordinary language as a zone of “wild figurations” (p. 19). And this unruly wild[er]ness in language is traversed by tropes. Tropes, de Man tells us, are travellers. Metaphors, the travellers of language—tourists, perhaps, visitors, or smugglers (another kind of tourism). To be clear, wilderness too is a trope, a traveller, and a raven in the metaphysics of Euro-American geography, but it has its proper place. On the Lake and the River though, a tourist always knows too much and not enough.

Black River, August 3, 2005

As I write this, I am on the Mackenzie River, steaming south at 5 knots toward the Arctic Circle. It will take 11 days to travel from the Mackenzie delta on the Beaufort Sea and up the Mackenzie to Hay River on Great Slave Lake. I am on a passenger boat, the Norweta, owned by a Dene man and an Inuit woman; an Indian and an Eskimo as they call themselves—“still at war,” they point out. I am a northern tourist; skilled, but perhaps useless. The other passengers on board are a strange collection of the “interested elderly” engaged mostly in forms of geographic free association. “Have you been to the Falklands?” I am asked.

In 1924, the young Harold Innis also made a visit to the Mackenzie River basin. He was to undertake numerous field trips throughout this period, visiting the

Canadian margins (e.g., Lake Athabasca, the Yukon, James Bay, Labrador). And, as was his procedure, he made copious field notes—typed, the Mackenzie notes run to some 90 pages—detailing selectively his northward journey (Innis, 1924).

After a long train ride, he began his river journey on the Peace River and made his way to Lake Athabasca. Then he travelled on the Slave River to Great Slave Lake, spending some time in Fort Resolution, then across Great Slave to the mouth of the Mackenzie (oddly, no mention of the congregation of cruciform white pelicans) and down the Mackenzie River to Aklavik, the now decommissioned head of the Mackenzie delta. “Certainly,” he wrote, “there is no river in Canada, the home of the canoe, better adapted for canoeing than the Mackenzie River and its tributary, the Peace” (Innis, 1925, p. 151).³ It can be paddled by canoe with only two or three breaks, he figured. Innis, it turns out, was not actually in a canoe on the Mackenzie River. His short published piece on his Northern trip makes no mention of this fact. Like me, he was just a Northern tourist, a passenger on a boat (in his case, the *Liard River*)⁴. . . . Innis and I: migrant workers, itinerant labourers, *les coureurs du stylo*. His omission, though, the phantom canoe evoked in his field notes and hedged in his publications, added a certain gravitas to his travels and gives a clue to his ideas about North.

Innis had gone North to explore the Canadian margins at the very moment that the North was, as it is today, a Canadian cultural preoccupation, a cardinal point *du jour*.⁵ A voyageur of sorts, and a voyeur, certainly (part Stefansson, part *Call of the Wild*—a screening of which he had attended in Toronto in the weeks prior to his trip [Evenden, 1999]). He was collecting instances and evidence of productive economic and social exchange in the North. He would gather first-hand data concerning the material practices of trade, and he would work on ideas about the North as a site of “national self-realization” (Evenden, 1999, p. 165). With a growing suspicion, I think, of centralized repositories of “metropolitan” knowledge—archives, universities, scholarly journals, and so on—he felt that to understand adequately the relations between resources, geography (particularly rivers), and colonial space generally, one needed to start from the ground, the territorial archive. That is, to determine the relations between spatial organization, technologies of transportation and communication, and economic growth, one must do field work, “dirt research,” as he put it tellingly (Creighton, 1978; Watson, 2006, p. 40).

Mackenzie River, August 3, 2005

“The river,” wrote Innis, “is a very important determining factor in the direction of economic development” (cited in Evenden, 1999, p. 170). The river was the primordial fact of North. “The river holds sway,” he wrote. “Since the rivers are the Highways,” he added, “the buildings of the missions, the trading companies and the police, each with a separate landing, are strung along the banks. These posts have length but no depth” (Innis, 1925, p. 152). No depth, just a semblance. He saw the river as the ideal precinct for the canoe. The river presupposes a canoe to paddle it. If there was a determinism at work in the Innis of this period (and it certainly was not the naive determinism that he has often—and carelessly—been accused of), this may be a clue. However, we may see

it differently; that is, perhaps it is the canoe that presupposes. A plausible inversion. But we might rather say that both the river and the canoe are produced in their use. A pragmatics of flow, matter and use. Practice, in other words. I come to think that Innis really saw it in this manner. In any case, the river has certain practical and theoretical difficulties for the would-be navigator; for instance, which river? The surface of the Mackenzie is in a constant motion of current. The undersurface shifts from year to year, from month to month—no meanders in the Mackenzie; the sedimentary archive is a dynamic and active repository, a territorial archive—so one really cannot navigate the same river even once, much less twice. Not here. One's competence consists at least in part in knowing this.

It was about this time that Innis began to assume the role of a public intellectual of sorts; his excursions to the margins were of great interest in the South. He gave talks in church basements and public schools, to Girl Guides and trade shows, a furriers' convention, Rotary Clubs, and the Brotherhood of the United Church of Davenport Road.

Innis' idea of North, his nordicity, was in many respects quite conventional. North as a dangerous, mysterious, and potentially productive margin, a hinterland of Canada. The men of the fur trade—and they were men as far as his notes are concerned—were pre-industrial, solitary frontiersmen. Not surprising, really. North for the Torontonians of his time was more or less the direction and distance of Muskoka, or at the limit, Temagami, or even Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park with its wilderness-virtue camps for the affluent offspring of Toronto's Rosedale. In any case, it is precisely this mode of colonial metonymy that both invents and ceaselessly ratifies figures of North from the equally imaginary site of Southern Ontario.⁶ That this imaginary for the Southern Canadian is articulated principally around a concept of "wilderness" makes little difference; wilderness here is but a genre within the degree zero of nordicity.

At the time he visited the Mackenzie, Innis was compiling material for what would become two separate volumes on the fur trade period. The first was his 1927, *The Fur Trade of Canada* published by Oxford University Press in Toronto. Lamentably out-of-print, this work brought the fur trade out of the space of an imaginary past and placed it squarely into the present as a dynamic, reciprocal and ongoing force shaping Canadian (and European) development. Three years later, he published his opus, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, with Yale University Press. Tracking the fur trade between 1497 and 1929, sketching a vast and complex back-story to his previous volume, it is here that Innis' sweeping and encyclopedic historical method came into view.

The concept of "the staple" had become a powerful and portable template that allowed him to understand the relation between economies of the margin and central cultural forms; empire and the cultural logics of hinterland(s). "Each staple," he wrote, "in its turn left its stamp" (Innis, 1930, p. 5)—a pithy line that I take up elsewhere (van Wyck, 2002).

The staples of interest to me—uranium and radium—could hardly have been unknown to Innis in 1924, but I can find no evidence that they were of interest to

him, although he did observe presciently that a mine is an “economic explosive” (see Innis, 1920, p. 42). And neither were they unknown to the Government of Canada (e.g., Leitch, 1935; Timm, 1933), but they had yet to leave their particular stamp upon the North and elsewhere. It was six years after his Mackenzie trip that the world’s largest deposit of radioactive pitchblende, the “mineral museum,” as it came to be called (cf. Spence, 1935), was staked by Gilbert Labine and his snow-blind sidekick Charlie St. Paul on Great Bear Lake, setting into motion a network of effects that reverberate still. It strikes me that the radium and uranium, *qua* staples, mark a radical moment in the economic and cultural development of the North (and perhaps as well in the very conceptual development of “the staple”). Indeed, these staples are different. Parasitic in a way, operating both anachronistically, through the re-animation of the fur-trade river system (the portage, the York boat, the river boat, the barge, and so on), and through a succession of contemporary transportation and communicative systems (rail, air, road . . . wireless, telegraph, telephone), effectively activating various phases of Canadian economic, technological, and cultural development.

For Innis, the penumbra of the staple, the technologies surrounding its setting and development—these are the field of the stamp, its imprint. For Innis, the staple exists within this field of development. For me, the penumbra of the staple is enlarged to encompass the future as well, creating strange loops where the fur-trade route bleeds into the Manhattan Project, for example. Or, when the Dene (who continue to suffer this history) travel to Japan to apologize for their role (their labour, their land, their unwitting complicity) in the destruction of Japanese cities, things get complicated—temporally and ethically.

(As it turns out, this particular stamp is profoundly indelible. Six years ago, uranium was worth about \$9 per pound. Last summer it approached \$140. Do the arithmetic—it is all happening again. It is estimated that only 50% of the global uranium fuel requirements are met by existing uranium mining production, the remainder coming from decommissioned military sources; this shortfall is driving the boom. Alberta Star, a Canadian mining and exploration firm—owned, incredibly, by the brother of author Douglas Coupland—has, with the blessing of the Dene (or some of them), recommenced uranium exploration on Great Bear Lake and blanket-staked the entire area. Thus, to the strange loops mentioned above we may add the staging of a traumatic return of the nuclear, capable of re-entering the market defensively through a back door, opened in part by the exceedingly short half-life of public memory and ironically (read: perversely) fuelled (so to speak) by such public spectacles as Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*. As I write this, the Government of Canada has recently announced its commitment to nuclear energy as part of the nation’s energy future, and Al Gore, together with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, was last year’s recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.⁷)

Field notes in the margins

So what is a margin, anyway? Quips Jody Berland: “[I]t’s where you write your notes” (Berland, 2000, p. 283). Right.

I had wanted to find myself in a kind of dialogue with my absent other, Innis, through his notes. Since his trip was motivated by an urge to understand place and



Photo Credit: Peter C. van Wyck. Motor Dump. Cameron Bay, Great Bear Lake, 2003.

relation, it seemed promising. In advance, I had felt in agreement with him on important principles. First, that space was not merely the milieu upon which the events of history unfold, but both space and such events are produced and generative in relation to concrete social practice. This also seemed promising. And second, that cultural margins are a necessary, and in any case rewarding, site for understanding dominant historical and cultural forms. That is, for all its difficulties, field work is necessary, fraught and fruitful. Innis' field notes, though, attest mainly to his gleaning practice—he makes lists; he notes exchanges and prices and trapping techniques; he takes measurements, makes sketches, counts boats and barges—all toward the production of a descriptive thickness. He sought the dirt on the place.

But perhaps what interested me most, naïvely I suppose, was that we both found ourselves on the same river, at the same time of year, taking notes. Writing in the margins. Trying to make sense of things. Yet what I found in the Northern notes of Innis was a theorist who refused to theorize. I am not the first to make the observation that Innis had too little to say about methodology.⁸ The river for Innis was an opening, a corridor to a kind of Southern induction.

Cobalt-bloom and copper-green—A note on the uncanny, July 30, 2003

At Port Radium, there is an abandoned tennis court. It stands atop the sheer granite cliffs right at the point where they plunge into the blue unfathomable depths of Great Bear Lake. This court, this ruin, is surfaced in a remarkable concrete made in part from pulverized uranium mine tailings. It overlooks another ruin: the decommissioned—that is, bulldozed and abandoned—uranium mine.⁹ Homo ludens meets Homo

faber. It is difficult to convey the strangeness of standing here, listening to a Geiger-counter rendering sonorous the material history of this place; 1200, 1400, 1550 microRems per hour. Translating the abstract invisibility of energetic matter seeking its own repose, struggling toward the mute lifelessness of lead. [From my notes I can tell that I stood mid-court and searched briefly for a line about love and danger.] To stand here is quite literally to glimpse the uncanny of landscape, "the proximity of the remote" (Gordon, 1997, p. 52), the oikos haunted by its history.

Is this, I wonder, the emphatic geography I had imagined?

Anyway, this was hardly a discovery on my part. It had been noted in numerous radiological surveys and in anecdotal reports from those who had visited the area. In advance, I knew exactly where to find it. One must climb the bulldozed talus slope at the southwest corner of the mine site. I knew that from there I would see a panorama of lake to the west, to the south, and to the northwest. I would see the only remaining structure on the property—the former RCMP cabin, dating from the late 1930s. To the east, the opening to Echo Bay, several kilometres from the former town site of Cameron Bay, a wild-west radium boomtown in the 30s, where Irene Spry spent a summer pretending to be Harold Innis; where Zip and Zoom, two diasporic sex-trade refugees from the Yukon gold rush lived and worked; where pitchblende was smuggled and mineral claims traded. All of this I knew before I arrived. Yet the very notion of preparation, the question of its sufficiency, or scope, was not the problem here. It was not a problem of description; it is not that one thing cannot describe another—indeed, this may be all that one thing *can do*. Rather, it is about a bodily encounter, a moment, an event. And whatever else an event may turn out to be—in all of our interminable hand-wringing about such things—it is simply not something that can be experienced in advance of itself.

The encounter or event I refer to is lost in the very moment of recognition and reconciliation, where archive precedes landscape, where the testimony precedes the witness. A moment of seemingly reversed causality. That odd sensation of visiting a region that is already imprinted symbolically (archivally, discursively, textually, practically) in one's awareness, in one's work. I know what happened here! I recognize this place. Some would call this fact-checking. But this lacks precision. And imagination. It can just as easily be seen as the troubling of indexicality, a near approximation of the indexical imaginary.

The index tells us that it is okay to be a "realist" in polite company and in the woods. It has no truck with mimesis, that cheap trick of the cinema and the cave. No unconscious operating beyond the limit of detection as the secret guarantor.¹⁰ The index seduces with the sensation of competence. Surely this is one of the extra-textual, seductive pleasures of doing field work to begin with.

Yet there is something unsettling about all of this. To be in the field is not about the factual confirmation, arbitration, and correction of the textual. It is about an encounter—the mark is always produced in the encounter—where the territory asserts a non-conformity with its varied representations, where indices betray. Suspension. False memory, bad data, forgetting. And yet even a misalignment is identifiable as such only in relation to alignment itself. Misrecognition is

a kind of recognition, and it can ultimately be referred to error; always a manner of adjustment, re-calculation, and correction. The trouble, though, pertains to the hard bits, the pieces that resist, that fail to fail, so to speak. Knots of bewilderment, these are sites—keeping-places, perhaps—marked by a radical non-registration of the ontic and the epistemic. It is an open question. A problem is produced in-between a knowledge and a place, a witness and a landscape, a chorographic procedure (to which I will return). It is neither the confirmation of knowing (the positivism of method), nor the pretence of error (right, again!), but the abyss and the silence of no language game, no tacit abridgement in advance. Invention. Abduction. Writing and reading. It is not that one searches for ciphers of the real—this is merely what one ends up with, even while a complacent sense of indexicality is palpable. A cipher is not the thing you cannot understand because of its complexity, ambiguity, or incomprehensibility. A cipher is that which you think you ought to understand precisely because it appears to be *about* understanding, or beyond it . . . the obvious. It goes without saying.

This is the problem with indices, is it not? On the one hand, they demand a form of knowledge. One must know that the flash of lightning shares an existential bond with the clap of thunder that follows. But on the other hand, this is only one way of describing things.

The agitated clicking of my Geiger counter as I circle the ancient tennis court in Port Radium surfaced in radioactive concrete is a sign. Clearly, I am in no doubt that there is a semiological relation between the radiation and the clicking. This must be an index. The child who places her hand on the door of the still-warm oven is engaging in a piece of semiotic learning. She is about to learn the sureness of the index. A *tekmerion*, a sure sign.¹¹ And she is also about to invent an idiom. Henceforth the warmth of the oven will signal its object clearly with the ontic commemoration of pain. The first time, though . . . the first time one is free, in a sense, from that knowledge that ties things together. Thereafter, things can never be the same again. The indexical imaginary is precisely the fantasy that one is, in this sense, free. The archive asserts its tyranny through the fantastic seductions of metonymy.

Yet as with *tekmeria* generally, certainty, necessity, we would say, is predicated upon knowledge—a public knowledge, a manner of ratified belief, and a knowledge that is precisely at issue. The *tekmerion* reaches its limit in making an “irrefutable” claim, in telling us that something is the case. Not why. It makes no explanation. This cancer is malignant. That oven is hot. This tennis court is hot. But it can make no explanation; this is but the retroactive projection of a knowledge unsure of its grounds. It is demonstrative first, and then, and therefore, persuasive. Here there really is no “why.” Until there is certainty, there is no *tekmerion*; it is, as Barthes put it, “suspended” (Barthes, 1988, p. 61). And this suspension of the *tekmerion* may well be a matter of cultural investment. Consider for example the dispute between neo-Darwinism and young-earth creationism concerning fossils, emphatic trickster objects for sure. While the fossil record is strong indexical evidence (*tekmerion*) of deep history from an evolutionary point of view, for the young-earth creationists, it is merely evidence of a Noachian catastrophe some 6,000 years ago. Landscape and differend are aligned closely.

The *tekmerion* on the one hand, and the index in suspension on the other. It is hard to tell the difference. The indexical imaginary exists amid this ambiguity when one confers upon the sign in suspension a capacity to reveal a truth.¹² It is in the very instant of this ambiguity that one may become lost.

Arctic Circle—August 1, 2005

Forests are such a luxury of the Southern imagination. Cruciform and phantastic, lush, intoxicated. The diminutive waifs in the North; however, those objects of Purdy's scorn, these are the real trees, and not out of any Darwinian extremity. Settlers all, stunted, they wait for better times. Coniferous models of the messianism of the North. A gambit that appears to be paying off in the warm return of climatic change, one notes. Waiting. John Moss says something like, North is the metaphysics of geography. Perhaps this is why we are still so neurotic when it comes to thinking about it. Is it just our lingering suspicions about metaphysics? Or metaphors? Lichens, as with these "northern dwarfs," have a more than passing affinity with duration. They can wait. This is also the tragic ambiguity of distance. Isn't it? Too far, and too long. One we can manage, the time, that is. The other we cannot. One is approached with a shout or a shot, the other with a lament or by tears. But the two, once confused, have a particular affinity, precisely, for tragedy. Too far and too long. Duration is of course not the exclusive province of lichens and trees. Duration (both kinds, at least) is also the domain of the stories—not history—belonging to the peoples of the North, and elsewhere. Those of us of European extraction (odd word, that) may find it strange that one might speak of having been around forever. In the same place. Very long and very close. But "we" don't do this. And all this says, or all I am trying to say, is that we have before us a problem.

The antiquarian distinctions between modes of worldly representations—that is, between *topos*, *choros*, and *geos*—arose out of "three very different ways of conceptualizing space and place, three different ways of gaining knowledge of them, and three different ways of representing that knowledge" (Curry, 2002, p. 503). It would be quite incorrect to assume a simple scalar relation between these terms, as though they describe a movement from the very large (*geos*) to the very small (*topos*). Of these three, chorography has all but disappeared in the conceptual and discursive re-shuffling of these terms.

One path of derivation here is to follow the *chora* itself. The *chora*, which Derrida enlivens from Plato's *Timaeus*—as a kind of third mode between being and becoming—shares a similar but not identical derivation (see Derrida & Eisenman, 1997). Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) was perhaps the first major work of theorization of the *chora*. Also working from a reading of the *Timaeus*, Kristeva "borrows" the term *chora* as something pre-positional, non-axiomatic, non-representational, neither model nor copy, as that which "precedes and underlies figuration" and is "analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm" (p. 26); that is, repeatable and separable. And it is this rhythmic space (i.e., articulation)—modelled as analogous to the unconscious of the

Freudian subject—as the semiotic *chora* that suggests a very tricky kind of place. Not at all a determined place, which would be a *topos*, but a manner of *spacing* in which things may come to take place. As a pre-ontological site that is yet somehow a receptacle, its relation to the nominable itself is of course paradoxical, as she notes. Of particular interest here, however, is the idea of *chora* as “a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as an absence of an object” (p. 26), suggestive not of a Lacanian real, but rather of a productive locus of invention.

The other line of derivation follows chorography as a practice or art. There was a particular place for chorography as a qualitative mode of picturing the world, an attempt to “capture a more subjective dimension of spatiality in specific rather than in generic terms” (Ulmer, 1994, p. 39). Ptolemy is said to have compared this practice with a kind of painting. Contemporary readings of chorography take this into the domain of the rhetoric of invention, as a mode of generating method from theory (Ulmer, 1994). An interesting inversion, from which one might derive a unique method of approach that could be called a “topistics”; that is, a mode of theory that retro-navigates an idea of place as inseparable from experience (Walter, 1988).¹³ In a word, *theoria*:

Theoria did not mean the kind of vision that is restricted to sight. The Greek word for exclusively optic perception is *opsis*. The term *theoria* implied a complex but organic mode of active observation originally—a perceptual system that included asking questions, listening to stories and local myths, and feeling as well as hearing and seeing. (Walter, 1988, p. 18)

For Gregory Ulmer, chorography, also a mode of *theoria*, is “a rhetoric of invention concerned with the history of ‘place’ in relation to memory” (Ulmer, 1994, p. 39). The writer will “store and retrieve information from premises or places formulated not as abstract containers,” he writes, “as in the tradition of *topos*; that is, a ‘collection of commonplaces’ for the purposes of argument,” a place where a plurality of oratorical reasonings coincide (Barthes, 1988, p. 64), but as means of writing and reading a stamp or imprint. It is tactile and subjective, decidedly non-Aristotelian, and aims at something between description and explanation. One proceeds with ideas and feeling and citation, not with a compass (a distinctly unreliable instrument in northern latitudes anyway).¹⁴ Chorography is a kind of memory art for engagement with place or region. To Yates’ *ars memoriae*, it posits an art of the practice of place. Its apparent similarity to choreography is but a happy coincidence. And so, one might add, is the relation between *theoria* and *therapeia*; that is, the *therapeia* of place means “close attendance” or “caring” (Walter, 1988, p. 20).

To *write with the paradigm* is the method proposed by Ulmer (1994). We could call this a monstrous writing, or a teratological writing, as Barthes had it, a kind of contamination (Barthes, 1967). The oppositions and differences characteristic of the paradigm (“the mnemonic treasure,” that which “normally” remains unified *in absentia*) are rendered monstrous (Barthes says transgressive) when they come to be expressed syntagmatically (that is, *in praesentia*) (Barthes, 1967). To move the paradigmatic onto the syntagmatic is to move speech closer to a metaphoric order through the “removal of a kind of structural censorship,” not unlike that of dreams (Barthes, 1967, p. 60).

Tulita (Fort Norman), August 6, 2005

Innis is not good company. It is too easy to come to a dispute with him, to see his selectivity as an all-too-conventional optic of an indifferent euro-ethnography. A southern politics of northern exclusion permutes into a historio-economic vision of a North morally and economically bound up in the formation of Canada. His vision though, precisely, is a problem. He seems not to like Indians, women, or Jews. However invaluable Indians were to his understanding of the dynamics of the fur trade, of colonial development, and the formation of "Canada," they were not reliable witnesses for his territorial ethnography (quite literally a mode of Nation-writing). "Half breeds," apparently yes, but not the Indians. "Caribou-eaters," he calls them. Or the Eskimos, the "Huskies." Evenden, I recall, is much more damning in his reading of Innis' race and gender issues; I simply find myself bewildered. This is in the background of my thinking today.

More importantly, I have been invited to a wedding—the entire village of Tulita will attend. Today is the day that the church celebrates the transfiguration of Christ, apparently. It also happens to be the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. The priest comments on both of these things as a way to make a call for peace. The groom is 82 years old and dying from cancer. During the 1950s he had worked for Eldorado on the Great Bear River handling bags of uranium ore. This total and bizarre connection remains unspoken. A strange nexus.

I am weary of reading Innis' notes, trying to invent the author as an interlocutor. Such is the transference of reading. This has turned into a point of departure for me: Innis was there as a reader; he did his real writing elsewhere.

Tsiigehtchic (Arctic Red River), August 6, 2005

*We arrive mid-day. Fourteen eagles sunning themselves at the mouth of the river. I think it was fourteen (notwithstanding Borges' *Argumentum Ornithologicum*). I can find no fish being smoked. No bales tied and waiting for transport to Aklavik (all that Innis saw on his visit). It is hot. There is an inviting pond on the large delta area at the confluence of the Red and Mackenzie rivers. High above stands the village. Walking through town, I stop and speak with an old woman who is standing near the church. I ask her about swimming in this pond. "No," she says, and then tells me a long story. Following one of the innumerable battles between the Gwitch'in and the Inuit, scores of Inuit were thrown into the lake, the wounded to drown, and all the bodies were just left in the lake. Ever since this time, she said, the eagles wait for the bodies to rise, but all that emerge are ghosts. The lake is full of ghosts, too full, so there is just no room to swim. She uses a Slavey word to describe when this happened; I think it means the really long-ago time. Too many ghosts.*

This is it really. This is what Innis cannot see. What he has no eyes to see. These puncta, these ghosts. “Civilization spoils Indians for hunting,” he said. The studium that animates his practice can only ever let him experience, “in reverse” perhaps, his own culture (Barthes, 1981, p. 28). The emptiness of the landscape does not belie a human presence. This human presence is simply not available to that (Southern) eye. He sees empty with a telos of filling, whereas one might have seen or heard something else. A grave, a story, a ghost. But not easily. (Odd, given his deep commitment to cultures of orality.) Chamberlin expresses the upshot of this problem clearly: “It is an assumption that understanding sophisticated oral traditions comes naturally to the sympathetic ear. It doesn’t. Just as we learn to read, so we learn how to listen; and this learning does not come naturally” (Chamberlin, 2003, p. 54). More than a sympathetic ear (or eye) is required.

To conclude then, I ask myself questions that I can only hope to answer. What then might be the chorographic procedures for writing this landscape? What manner of writing is appropriate to an emphatic landscape, such that it is both ethically engaged and alive to the proximity of the remote? How to be in the field without recourse to the metaphors of colonial exploration, including of course the very idea of an empty landscape. How to narrate a place and a time as stranger. How to manage the indexical seductions of the institutional archive and the metropolitan knowledge it fosters while remaining alive to the productive possibilities of the accident (“the unfathomable threads of causality” [Derrida, in Ulmer (1994, p. 201) citing Kipnis, citing Derrida) as a methodological axiom.

How does one come to write with the paradigm; that is, all that remains unified in its absence?

Acknowledgments

This was written during my time as a visiting fellow at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture at Concordia University. None of it would have been possible without the ongoing financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Notes

1. “We would travel across the lake and watch them unload the [uranium ore] bags . . . lots of people handled the ore bags but it must have been dangerous so now people are talking more about uranium. In those days we never thought about the danger of uranium” (Canada-Deline Uranium Table, 2005, p. 114). This particular history—of the Dene, uranium, landscape, and cultural memory—is the subject of a monograph now in preparation (van Wyck, in preparation). See also Deline Dene Band Uranium Committee, 1998; Deline Uranium Team, 2005.
2. It is clear that we will not alter Canada by jettisoning our ideas of the North (Grace, 2001), any more than we will by changing the name of the Mackenzie to Deh Cho, or of Frobisher to Iqaluit. A trick of toponymy aimed more perhaps at reducing the burden of residual and Southern post-colonial guilt. An apology by other means. And in any case, paying a debt is not the same thing as making an apology.
3. As Jonathan Bordo suggested to me, it is therefore interesting that Innis should invoke the beaver and not the canoe as the organizing and introductory figure for his work in *The Fur Trade in Canada*. See Innis, 1930.
4. I take my cue here from W. J. T. Mitchell: “[T]he tourist is one of the most hypertheorized figures in contemporary cultural studies. The tourist has been staged as nomad, detective, seer and prophet, cultural theorist and ignoramus. . . . I like to think of my own form of tourism as that of the . . . migrant worker who brings nothing but some skills developed elsewhere, skills that may or may not be useful” (2000, p. 194).

5. His trip was in the lead-up to the second International Polar Year (IPY) in 1932 (a multinational, collaborative scientific frenzy of Northern and polar research). Consequently, his fur-trade book landed in a very fertile time. My interest here coincides with the fourth IPY in 2007-2008. As with previous Polar Year initiatives (1882, 1932, 1957), this is a vast initiative. At last count there are over 50 countries involved formally (including, I note, Malaysia) and over 90 participant countries.
6. In her (it takes a village to write a book like this), *Canada and the Idea of North* (2001), Sherrill Grace works this theme and its relations to Creighton's "Laurentian thesis" of nordicity. Renée Hulan takes up similar themes in (Hulan, 1996; Hulan, 2002). And from another point of view, working from image to site, Jonathan Bordo takes this up in his "Jack Pine" essay (1992) and in his monograph in preparation for Rodopi (Bordo, in press) and elsewhere.
7. Thus we see the grounds of an emergent empirical argument—in the form of mean sea-level changes, images of melting glaciers, placeless polar bears, global urban-rural ratios, and rising global temperature—favourably disposed to a renewed interest in and development of nuclear energy. India and China stand as two important constituencies in which converging flows of capital, population pressure, poverty, and politically unstable and/or diminishing fossil fuel resources all point toward a resurgence of the nuclear as a *prudent*, or necessary, choice. For example, Chambers reported that "China is preparing to award an \$8 billion contract to build four reactors in the world's biggest nuclear power construction program. The country plans to build 27 plants to meet a target of raising nuclear energy output fivefold by 2020. India aims to build 17 reactors to triple nuclear power capacity by 2012" (2005).
8. As Andy Wernick put it, "Considering that he wrote as a social scientist, and at that as a critic of the mainstream, he also had remarkably little to say about methodology, or indeed about theoretical considerations of any kind. On even such basic questions as the epistemological status of an historical approach to social science, the effectivity of economic factors, or indeed the precise meaning of key terms like 'monopoly of knowledge', he is virtually mute" (Wernick, 1986, p. 130).
9. From this vantage point, weather permitting, one can survey a staggeringly wide expanse of Great Bear Lake. In 1900, Macintosh Bell and Charles Camsell of the Canadian Geological Survey stood at this place and wrote the oft-quoted, "In the greenstones east of McTavish Bay occur numerous interrupted stringers of calc-spar, containing chalcopyrite and the steep rocky shores which here present themselves to the lake are often stained with cobalt-bloom and copper-green" (Bell, 1901, p. 27).
10. For a recent contribution to scholarship on indexicality and its relations to the trace, see Cyr, 2008.
11. A *tekmerion* is an odd species of sign, a necessary sign. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle put it thus: "Necessary signs are called *tekmeria* . . . when people think that their arguments are irrefutable, they think that they are bringing forward a *tekmerion*, something as it were proved and concluded" (Aristotle, 1926, p. 27).
12. The imaginary, the pre-verbal Lacanian imaginary, we could describe as the pre-symbolic subject's spectral identification and over-estimation. It is a misrecognition of one's coherence and one's power. The attraction of the ego as an other. In this sense, "indexical" imaginary could be described as the sign presumed to be configured as semiologically coherent and as possessed of a "natural" capacity for testimony that it may not in fact possess. It is not specular; it "implies a type of apprehension in which factors such as resemblance and homeomorphism play a decisive role, as is borne out by a sort of coalescence of the signifier and the signified" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 210).
13. Walter derives this particular sense of topistics from a reading of a Platonic *theoria* through the quasi-romantic lens of holistic experience. He uses the "French" expression *nostalgie de la boue* (as "*recherche de la boue perdue*"). (Interestingly, Rosalind Krauss points out that it is in fact not idiomatic French at all, but an Anglophonic term "transposed into the magically resonant frame of a supposedly French turn of phrase" [Krauss, 1991, p. 112].)
14. Walter illustrates this sense of method through a story: "Thales, one of the Seven Sages, while observing the stars fell into a well. A Thracian slave woman laughed at him, saying he wanted to know what happened in the heavens, but failed to observe what was in front of his own feet. In this simple way, she exposed the predicament of a theorist who loses his ground" (1988, p. 21).

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