

# PLACE BECOMING OTHERWISE

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There is nothing more unsettling than the continual movement of something that seems fixed.

Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*

Permanence is a special effect of fluidics.

Marcus Doel, *Poststructuralist Geographies*

**I**T IS THE EARLY 1970s. With my parents and two brothers, we wind along the narrow road that hugs the hills above Nicola Lake. Our destination – Monck Park – lies among the Ponderosa pines, sagebrush, and bunch grass that grow along the lake’s northwest shores. It has become a summer ritual – the large family car, a small canvas trailer, three rambunctious boys in the back seat. Our journey traces a line of flight across the BC Interior, a week-long trip that takes us from Calgary, through various federal and provincial parks, and finally to the Fraser Valley, where our grandparents live in communities that are beginning to feel the first effects of exurban development. As we drive west from Calgary I imagine myself turning down the unmarked gravel roads that branch off periodically at odd angles, my mind conjuring up images of remote headwaters, patches of snow still lingering in unnamed alpine passes. If we are further west, driving along the Thompson River perhaps, the imagined passes are replaced by pools of cold water, hidden at the remote ends of hot canyons. The BC Interior was a landscape of a thousand fantasies. Monck Park was the site for some of these, associated in my mind with rattlesnakes and black widow spiders, the result of stories told by a park naturalist,

whose evening accounts of lurking danger were eagerly taken up by impressionable young campers.

Some thirty years later I again find myself beating a path along Nicola Lake. I am on a journey of a different sort, thrown in with an odd collection of academics – historians, anthropologists, linguists, geographers. Our conversation turns from archives and workshops to politics and novels. We pass the turnoff to Monck Park with little comment, much as we would a gas bar or grocery store. We are pre-occupied with other aspects of the landscape – cemeteries where the names of early settlers are still faintly visible on crumbling tombstones; old churches, hotels, and ranch houses, some restored, others grey and weathered; Indian reserves, with schools, administrative offices, and sweat lodges that suggest a complex postcolonial geography of land, power, and identity. As we head towards our destination – the Quilchena Hotel, built in 1908 – I think back to my family’s summer rituals. Our itinerary had been eccentric, hop scotching across the BC Interior from park to park, scrupulously avoiding cities and towns, passing without comment the standardized housing of Indian reserves and the old ranches, churches, and graveyards that dotted the landscape. “Revelstoke,” “Kamloops,” “Vernon,” “Cache Creek”: these were names for gas stations and public washrooms, not destinations in their own right. Nothing compelled us to explore their business districts, tree-lined residential streets, or ubiquitous trailer parks. The historical markers located beside the highway rarely interested us: *viewpoints* took priority.<sup>1</sup> It was there that we stopped, stretched our legs, snapped photos. We had most certainly passed the old hotel on our way to Monck Park, but, when recently asked, no family members could remember it.

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Two trips, two different ways of encountering landscapes. Viewed from the present, my childhood family vacations appear somewhat peculiar. Our destination those days had been “nature itself,” that impossible thing that we have since learned to place in scare-quotes, savvy to its discursive, psychic, and material construction. Today, in an age of stem cell research and Nature Company stores, when nature is everywhere “enterprised up,” those 1970s road trips now seem firmly

<sup>1</sup> When we travelled *east* from Calgary the hierarchy was reversed: viewpoints were passed by and historical sites visited.

rooted in the specific conditions of a Canadian postwar modernity.<sup>2</sup> They were in part an effect of the great demographic shifts that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, as my parents and countless others migrated to the city and took up decidedly “urban” lives. In part they were made possible through the invention and commodification of “leisure” and the so-called democratization of travel, which allowed “vacationing” to be extended to the middle and working classes.<sup>3</sup> Our family holidays also occurred at a time when suburbanization was in full swing and when the state was pumping millions of dollars into an extensive system of parks, recreation sites, and paved roads that whisked the urban middle classes away from spheres of production to sites of “recreation,” away from “urban problems” to the sanctity and purity of the countryside. And, of course, they occurred during a time of resurgent romanticism, which followed hard on the heels of the technological optimism of the 1950s. Expressed in “outdoor education” programs, back-to-the-land hobby farms, nature documentaries, *Canadian Geographic*, and numerous hiking magazines, this “return” to nature was far from innocent, for it had the effect of reterritorializing places like the BC Interior, constituting them as sites of fantasy and desire, and as a series of commodified scenes. To borrow from Alexander Wilson, our family was immersed in a “culture of nature” that was common sense to many Canadian families at the time. Our journeys, and the imaginative geographies that sustained them, were at once commonplace and odd.

But what of the second journey? Was our itinerary – with its mix of old estates, churches, cemeteries, and Native reserves – any less fantastic? On the south shores of Nicola Lake we had been charmed by the Victorian elegance of the Quilchena Hotel, intrigued by its evocations of a time when polo fields stood alongside ranch buildings and white linen cloth covered dining-room tables. Were we any less susceptible to nostalgia? Any less seduced by the notion of an *authentic* landscape, a golden age, one that had not yet been destroyed by an encroaching modernity (or, the most recent catch-all phrase, “globalization”)? We knew better, or at least thought we did. We knew, for

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of nature “enterprised up,” see Marilyn Strathern, *Reproducing the Future: Essays on Anthropology, Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> The advent of “mass” tourism is discussed in James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature and the Ways to “Culture,” 1800-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990), and Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken, 1976).

instance, that this was an elaborate set-up, right down to the clearly “staged” historical photographs that covered the dining-room walls. Savvy critics, we knew how to identify imperial nostalgia when we saw it, congratulating ourselves on seeing the ruse behind the appearances. Behind the hotel, however, a cluster of out-buildings drew our attention. Built with simple lines, they conveyed none of the simulated authenticity of the hotel. No effort had gone into selling these buildings as signs of an earlier golden age. Weathered grey by wind and rain, they appeared to blend effortlessly into the surrounding landscape, as if they had always been there, as if the landscape had quietly called them forth, its physiographic form uncannily anticipating their future arrival. In the soft evening light they seemed a sort of *organic* architecture, something that had grown *from the land itself*, a form brought into being by early settlers who had known the land *appropriately*. It only made sense: Nicola Valley, after all, was a “stark,” “unforgiving” landscape – wide open spaces, big skies, fast-moving storms, relentless dry winds, withering sun – a place dominated by natural forces that seemed to shape all life within it. Appropriate then that the lines were simple, the colours muted. Here, away from the fast-food restaurants, golf courses, and suburban developments of Merritt, away from architectural forms so clearly “imported” from elsewhere, it was easy to imagine that we had found the true Nicola – a realm that somehow held meanings more integral, more eternal, more *real*.

It was only with some effort that we rejected notions of an earlier, holistic existence when people had somehow lived in a more “organic” relation to the land. On reflection it was possible to see that our attraction to these buildings had simply been the symptom of nostalgic longings for a past that had never really existed, a kind of mourning that grieved the loss of an imagined time when links between self, community, and land seemed more immediate, less influenced by “outside” forces. These buildings, we realized, were not unique: they had simply been thrown up in an *earlier* moment of globalization, made possible by circuits of capital that linked Nicola with Vancouver, Toronto with London, by commodity chains that connected cattle and bunch grass on the Thompson plateau with dinner tables in Winnipeg and restaurants in New York.<sup>4</sup> On reflection, it was possible to recognize that these buildings were not throwbacks

<sup>4</sup> It is essential to underline that these networks often excluded nearby actors – in this case Nlaka’pamux individuals and communities – even as they stretched to include distant places.

to a period *before* the displacements of modernity but products of the very modernity that, in our momentary lapse into nostalgia, we had sought to elude. From the milled lumber to the steel nails that held these structures together, this cluster of buildings at Quilchena had been part of a network of people, ideas, capital, and technologies that stretched across space, much like the networks that define our lives today.<sup>5</sup> From the distant coal mines, foundries, and factories that produced the nails and the tools, to the railroads, telephones, and other communications that facilitated the movement of people and materials, the appearance of these simple, modest, buildings could be explained only by tracing a web of actors that was already, back then, global in scale.

What was striking about our engagement with this corner of the Nicola Valley landscape, however, was the kind of “forgetting” that was required for us to imagine, even for a moment, such an idyllic, organic relation to the land, much like the forgetting that had been necessary, some thirty years earlier, for my family to imagine “nature itself” as a distinct realm external to society. We had forgotten what we knew implicitly in other areas of our busy urban lives: that places are events, not fixed identities. We had forgotten that the everyday landscapes we live in are not discrete “things” but bundles of relations; not pre-given essences subsequently *dis-placed* by flows of people, ideas, capital, and technologies that impinge upon their integrity from the “outside” but, rather, phenomena that are constituted in and through such flows. The “outside” of place is always already “inside.” It is there in the tools and the nails, in the movement of capital and commodities, in the dreams of distant actors, in the folding of time and space. It can be no other way. Places *take place*, they *happen*, they cannot exist apart from the flows that constitute them, that call them into existence. The weathered buildings that for a passing moment had seemed so appropriate, so *organic*, had merely been part of an earlier territorialization of place, and a fleeting one at that. Signs of change were everywhere, even as the past was displayed on the hotel’s walls. The polo fields of old, once so carefully levelled, had been uprooted and reshaped, contoured into small ponds, hills, and sand traps for golfers from the nearby town of Merritt. Wind surfers now skim across the surface of Lake Nicola, tracing paths that have little relation to earlier forms of transportation. At the lake’s western end, near the

<sup>5</sup> I borrow the metaphor of network from Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

former site of Nicola, acres of black netting announce new cartographies of body, space, and nature, as thousands of health-conscious yet sleep-deprived consumers in Vancouver, San Francisco, and New York seek out advanced capitalism's paradigmatic root – ginseng – a tonic for tired minds and bodies. Beside route 5A a highway sign signals the shifting discursive/economic terrain: “Natural beef, Ginseng – 2km.”

To be sure, nostalgia has a place in these landscapes, or, perhaps more accurately, it becomes part of the way that “place” is produced. Only metres from the sign announcing “Natural beef, Ginseng,” another industry packages the past, magically giving the names and images of old settlers, ranches, and Christian missions a ghostly afterlife on T-shirts, coffee mugs, and postcards. Nearby, gravel roads lead to guest ranches and fishing camps, mobilizing historical narratives of exploration, homesteading, and European mobility that are played out a second time in the realm of leisure and fantasy. “Victorian elegance,” “cowboy charm,” “turn-of-the-century Romance,” “the genuine west”: the slogans call out from brochures in a Merritt café, promising visitors a re-immersion in a time when settlers were White, men were rugged, and Indians were disappearing.<sup>6</sup> Today, one-tenth of the town's residents are Punjabi.<sup>7</sup> To the east, members of the Douglas Lake Indian Band, far from gone, pore over maps, tracing cartographies that do not fit within the sovereign territorial claims of the Canadian state, re-membling “place” otherwise. Outside their village 500-kilovolt power lines stretch across the landscape, translating the energy of the Columbia River north of Revelstoke into a flow of electrons coursing through the power-hungry cities of Vancouver, Seattle, and San Jose, part of an immense power grid that ties the “west” into a single totality.<sup>8</sup> Hundreds of miles away the faltering dot.com revolution continues to draw down water levels in BC reservoirs. In shiny new Silicon Valley offices, engineers, programmers, and technicians huddle in front of computer screens, many of them shuttling between work in the United States and homes in Bangalore or Chennai. In the evenings undocumented Mexican and El Salvadoran immigrants arrive to sweep the floors. At Douglas Lake, power lines crackle and hum.

<sup>6</sup> Settlers weren't all White, of course. See my discussion of Jesus Garcia, below.

<sup>7</sup> A history of Merritt's Indo-Canadian community can be found in the *Nicola Valley Quarterly* 13, 1 (1997).

<sup>8</sup> For a brilliant discussion of the *power* of the Columbia River, and its transformation, see Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

Despite the efforts of resort owners to posit a place “out of time,” this is a fully transnational, even “postmodern” space, one where South Asian engineers and suburban cowboys are situated on a single plane, where the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology rises on the outskirts of Merritt, alive with the promise of a new Nlaka’pamux professional class, while signs along the highway ward off another sort of global flow: foot and mouth disease. DO NOT STOP OR GET OUT OF YOUR VEHICLE IF YOU HAVE BEEN IN EUROPE IN THE LAST 14 DAYS. Everywhere movement; only to the nostalgic does space and time in the valley seem out of joint.

These hybrid, global spaces are not new to the region. What has changed is only the scale and the speed of the flows that constitute it. This has long been a “multicultural” space, to use the rhetoric of contemporary government policy. In 1860 Jesus Garcia was the first settler to drive cattle into the region. Born in Sonoma, Mexico, he was neither the last Latino to settle there nor a marginal actor in the historical transformations of the time (although his marriage to a Native woman ensured that his children would never fully participate in “White” society).<sup>9</sup> Nor was it with the arrival of Europeans that the “solidity” of place began to “melt into air.” Over the past decades oral histories and archaeological research have painted a picture of earlier migrations, earlier struggles over land and identity, the story of an Athapaskan people moving through Thompson territory, harassed by the Okanagan, eventually settling along the shores of Nicola Lake and absorbed into the Thompson majority.<sup>10</sup> Stories of intermarriage, political agreements between tribes, shifting configurations of self, identity, and community: these long predate the “globality” that European settlers thought that they brought to the land, or that we identify in the most recent wave of globalization. Many earlier forms of transnationalism existed in the valley long before Taiwanese capital arrived in the 1990s, long before protesters from Vancouver wore balaclavas on the streets of Genoa, Italy, daring to imagine a different kind of global reality.

Even nature in this place refuses to hold still. Here is found a continuous drama of wind and water, landslides and wildfire. It is a cataclysmic landscape, geologists tell us, born of volcanism and the

<sup>9</sup> The story of Jesus Garcia and his family is documented in Pat Lean, “The Garcia Story,” *Nicola Valley Quarterly* 6, 4 (1984): 2-5, 8.

<sup>10</sup> These stories have long circulated, told to figures such as George Dawson and James Teit. See James Teit, “The Thompson Indians of British Columbia,” in Franz Boas, ed., *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 2. (New York: s.n., 1900).

movement of plates. Two major fault systems lie nearby, one to the east, one to the west, part of a long-lived rift system, which, in Early Tertiary time, determined the extent and distribution of Nicola rocks. Along these faults basins of volcanism and sedimentation formed. Flows of lava shaped the land, reworked later by rivers of ice flowing relentlessly towards the southeast. Traces of ice-dammed lakes can be found in old shorelines, deltas, and lake sediments, abandoned on slopes above Nicola Lake.<sup>11</sup> Today rivers grind through the underlying rock; valley slopes slump, erasing old rail lines and wagon trails. Only some of these earth-moving processes are “natural”: for many years giant machines tore into the hills north of Merritt searching for gold and copper, following deposits laid down millennia earlier, all the while responding to the real-time rhythms of distant commodity markets. In the boom and bust economies of mineral resources the names and pictures of old mines – Craigmont, Dekalb, Lornex, Bethlehem, Afton, Highmont – fill the walls of the Nicola Valley Archives and Museum. Miners stand in front of tunnels, pose with giant drills, carry lunch buckets. Outside the museum’s walls the Nicola Valley Women in Action seek a different kind of reterritorialization, a different remaking of nature and society, contesting the gendering of the space-economies of the valley with its male-dominated resource industries and planning bodies.

If “Nicola” is a proper name, it names a happening, not an essence. As we continued east, descending into the Okanagan, I contemplated the nostalgia that had momentarily shaped our gaze at Quilchena. Our yearnings for the fixity of place, for a place “out of time,” may have been fleeting, but they served to underline the fact that, as members of the editorial board of *BC Studies*, we still travelled through imagined and imaginative geographies: the “Interior” of the province remained very much a landscape of fantasy and desire, no less than it had for me as a child thirty years earlier. As we descended into the Okanagan, the *specificity* of these historical and geographical imaginations became clear. As had been the case for my parents three decades earlier, certain aspects of the landscape held our attention, others we avoided entirely. We may have substituted “history” for “nature” (although the two came together spectacularly on the shores of Sugar Lake), but we skirted vast sections of the Interior that

<sup>11</sup> The geology of the Nicola Group is discussed in V. A. Preto, *Geology of the Nicola Group between Merritt and Princeton*, Bulletin 69 (Victoria: Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources, 1979).



appeared to have no special meaning – the strip malls and trailer parks, donut shops and car dealerships, retirement communities and water slides. All these things signified changes that were easy to decry – “mass culture,” “economic globalization,” “commercialization,” “Americanization” – they signified *dis*-placement, as if something had arrived to disrupt the “truth” of place, as if place *had* a truth. They were quickly passed over in favour of the turn-of-the-century homes of English settlers, early-twentieth-century boarding schools for local gentry, the pastoral grounds of estates, and the ruins of old mining towns. We discussed the lives of early settlers, traced lineages, listened to stories of tragedy and loss. These, we imagined, were vital lives, filled with drama. Somehow they seemed more “British Columbian,” more authentic than the lives lived by the people we passed on the streets of Vernon, Merritt, or Nakusp. Yet, outside the walls of these restored mansions, beyond their heavy wooden beams, landscape paintings, and carefully tended gardens, other dramas swirled around us: the Punjabi family struggling to negotiate lives that bridged two continents; the teenage girl serving Starbucks coffee, glancing through *Lonely Planet* guides during breaks; the young logger, excited about his first job, hitching a ride to a wedding in Surrey; adolescent boys at a skate park, forging masculinities in a world that looks nothing like it did to their fathers; women in a small forestry town, combining their resources to run a restaurant that caters to tourists, finding themselves awkwardly situated with feet in two different worlds; a new breed of agriculturalists, specializing in hydroponic “grow-ops,” giving new meaning to the “hydro province.”

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British Columbia’s Interior, like all places, is always already becoming otherwise. A *chaosmos*, it has no beginnings or ends, only a middle. To speak of the “BC Interior” in terms of flows is not to say that everything is free-flowing. Things endure. Buildings are built, streets paved, paths forged, a sense of “permanence” achieved. But their stability is not an inherent quality of the “place” created, it does not belong to the landscape itself. It is not something that can be recovered, restored, or conserved. Rather, it is an effect of the flows that make certain things for a time seem solid. Solidity is nothing except a certain kind of fluidity: “One does not have some affluvial substance, which may or may not be dissolvable, on the one side, and

some dissolving or corroding fluids on the other," writes the geographer Marcus Doel, "any more than one has a material World over there and an ideal Language over here, or a firm masculinity and a soft femininity ... if there is something, then it is only ever as a confluence, interruption, and coagulation of flows."<sup>12</sup> Speed and slowness, folding and unfolding, place as experimentation: this is the reality of the Interior, the secret held in power lines, trailer parks, and grey, weathered boards.

<sup>12</sup> Marcus Doel, *Poststructuralist Geographies: The Diabolical Art of Spatial Science* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).