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THE ROAD TO HERE: PLACING COMMUNITY WITHIN WESTERN CANADA'S RESOURCE LANDSCAPE

EAMON MACMAHON, MICHAEL GRANZOW & KEVIN JONES

Résumé

Le paysage de l'ouest canadien a été grandement façonné au niveau économique, culturel et social par son rapport à l'extraction des ressources. Dans ce court essai, l'œuvre photographique du photographe canadien Eamon Mac Mahon est employé afin d'explorer la façon dont les changements dans le bassin de ressources de l'ouest ont reconfiguré les relations entre les communautés et leur environnement. Les images de Mac Mahon soulignent la tension entre l'économie changeante et le concept de communauté en comparant les pensées nostalgiques et idéalisées des communautés éloignées, expliquées par l'extraction de ressources, avec les réseaux d'infrastructures mondiaux. Lu comme palimpsestes de lieux, nous estimons que l'ensemble des photographies de Mac Mahon suggère une ambivalence importante, perturbant les interprétations traditionnelles d'expansion et de récession. Dans un contexte de bouleversement et de changement continu, nous interprétons les photographies de Mac Mahon comme témoin du changement dans les relations entre les communautés de l'ouest canadien et leur environnement.

Abstract

The western-Canadian landscape has been deeply shaped by its intimate economic, cultural, and social ties to resource extraction. In this short essay we use the photography of Canadian photographer Eamon Mac Mahon to explore how the West's shifting resource landscape has reconfigured relationships between community and place. Contrasting nostalgic and idealized visions of remote place-based resource communities with scenes of globally linked infrastructure networks, Mac Mahon's photographs highlight tensions between shifting economies and ideas of community. Read as palimpsests of place, we argue that, when considered together, Mac Mahon's photographs offer an important ambivalence, unsettling straightforward readings of boom and bust. In a context of continual upheaval and change, we read Mac Mahon's photographs as signposts on the road to emergent constellations of place and community in the Canadian West.

In this short essay we explore understandings of place, community, and landscape within the context of western Canada's resource economy. We are particularly interested in resource towns, settlements commonly characterized as boom-and-bust towns within narratives of development and nation-building. The photography of Eamon Mac Mahon provides a lens into these contexts. We address four of Mac Mahon's photographs, chosen from a much wider portfolio,¹ that demarcate tensions in development narratives of boom-and-bust towns and speak to uncertainties within our own evolving perspectives.² As researchers we have approached this project as a unique opportunity to read Mac Mahon's photos as a series of prompts that help us go beyond expected readings of boom and bust and open up interesting discussions around place and community within the western Canadian resource landscape.

Despite trends of deindustrialization, globalization, and economic diversification, the Canadian economy remains significantly oriented towards natural-resource extraction (Natural Resources Canada). This is especially the case in the West, where the Alberta tar sands are a centerpiece of regional and national economic growth. Since OPEC's 2014 decision not to restrict oil production and with the recent economic downturn, the price of oil has fallen drastically to less than 30 dollars per barrel, taking thousands of jobs and the Canadian dollar down with it. The effects of the downturn are particularly strong in Fort McMurray, the urban service area of the tar sands. As one local business owner described in a recent newspaper article, "it's like the place has gone dead" (*The Globe and Mail*). This is only the most recent moment in a long drama of boom and bust that extends beyond oil to logging, mining, and fishing, and that has defined much of Canada's history, culture, and geography.

Imagining Resource Communities

The resource town holds a strong place in the Canadian social imaginary. Resource communities are often seen as socially cohesive, supported by honest work, and virtuous in their proximity to nature. They are perceived as *resourceful*, not simply resource dependent. As Elizabeth Furniss argues in her study of small-town British Columbia, the cultural narratives of these places evoke rhetorics that place rural communities in opposition to urban experiences and promote frontier histories and identities rooted in the modernist experience of colonial expansion and the westward march of progress in North America (83-85).

Intimately connected to the myth of the resource town, the haunting image of the ghost town is equally a part of the western Canadian landscape. The resource town appears immutable when viewed from the perspective of Canadian nationalism, but is equally fragile in its capricious relationship with resource economies governed by markets, demands, and values that exist across networks sprawling far from the frontier. Busts are routine and carry with them a sense of loss that reflects something more than the experience of individual communities. They attract wider social curiosity and the stories and images that document their decline are equally essential to frontier narratives. As a dominant spatialisation of bust, the ghost town performs complex and selected narratives of Canadian experience and presents a particular placing of community within the natural world.

We treat these photos, not as authoritative or realist depictions, but as important constructions—poetic fragments or palimpsests that shed light on the nature of place in western Canada's resource landscape.

Place, Community, and the Ghost Town

Over the last century, Canada's resource economies have seen a pattern of shifts in space and time that reconfigure how we understand place and community. Relations of place have become stretched and mobile as technological and organizational innovations overcome spatial and temporal barriers—a process originally theorized by human geographers as time-space compression (Harvey 260). These ideas emerged in the latter part of the last century as a way to attend to the spatial, temporal, and phenomenological effects brought about by ever-shifting forms of capital accumulation. Associated with the advancement and speeding up of transportation and communication technologies and the resulting shrinking of global geographies, time-space compression has potentially major implications for how we conceive of the relationship between place and community. In her book *Space, Place, and Gender*, Doreen Massey asks, “[h]ow, in the face of all this movement and intermixing, can we retain any sense of a local place and its particularity? An (idealized) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities is set against the current fragmentation and disruption” (146). Massey's use of parentheses signifies a skepticism towards the supposedly natural relationship between community and place. The decline of place-based resource communities in Canada offers a striking

example of the changing relations between community and place. Once central to the national economy, these places are increasingly rendered impermanent and fragmented as corporations are better able to move around the globe in search of more profitable time-space configurations. It is not that Canada's resource economy is disappearing; rather, we see a radical transformation of a particular spatialisation of extraction that for a moment supported the old resource-town model. Mac Mahon's photographs provide a narrative for this transformation through scenes of ruination and decline, evoking a sense of loss and nostalgia for places left behind. In the following analysis we use a selection of Mac Mahon's photographs to both illustrate and conceptualize shifting place-community relationships in the Canadian West. We treat these photos, not as authoritative or realist depictions, but as important constructions—poetic fragments or palimpsests that shed light on the nature of place in western Canada's resource landscape. Recent developments of the concept of the palimpsest in literary and cultural studies (see Dillon) are particularly helpful in attending to the competing discourses and imagery in Mac Mahon's photographs. Considered as palimpsests of place, the photographs provide an opportunity to consider tensions between shifting economies and communities in the Canadian West.

The depictions of Uranium City and Gunnar Mine in particular illustrate an example of a once-booming community left behind by the uneven flows of capital. In “Yellow Truck” (Fig. 1) we see the ruins of the Gunnar Mine’s sudden and dramatic collapse. An old pickup truck propped up on concrete supports stands over scattered debris. The walls of the building that once enclosed it have crumbled, leaving only a flat concrete foundation. Up on blocks with the hood up, the weatherworn truck appears frozen in time, as if its mechanic left mid-repair. The faded yellow body is camouflaged by encroaching autumn overgrowth, emphasizing what Georg Simmel saw as the dialectical form of the ruin. Caught “between the not-yet and the no-longer” (Simmel 382), ruins represent the struggle between spirit and nature. This ruin-drama has long captured the imagination of writers and artists, most recently finding expression in the proliferation of images of Detroit and other post-industrial landscapes.³ This recent bout of “ruin lust” (Dillon) coincides with a wave of academic interest, as sociologists and cultural studies scholars in particular turn to studying places left behind (DeSilvey and Edensor 2014; Mah 2012; Lorimer and Murray).



Figure 1. *Yellow Truck* - Abandoned truck left at the former Gunnar Mine site near Uranium City, Saskatchewan



Picket Fence, Uranium City, Saskatchewan.

Mac Mahon's "Yellow Truck" draws on the ruin trope, conjuring feelings of loss and abandonment. We do not need to be familiar with the particulars of Gunnar Mine's collapse to be moved by the image. The power of the ruin is primarily allegorical, transcending the parochialism of locality and place to draw on a poetics and politics of destruction and loss. In his ruminations on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, Walter Benjamin sees capitalism as the angel of history, the "single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (257). In this view, modern ruins such as ghost towns become a kind of space of critique, haunting the optimism of innovation, development, and growth and reminding us of what gets lost in the name of progress.

"Yellow Truck" evokes a sense of nostalgia and opens up a space to question the historical processes that continue to shape the western Canadian landscape. For the critical economic geographer, these processes are primarily driven by the needs of capital. In an epoch of continual upheaval and change, the resource town is a microcosm of the capricious and uneven effects of global capitalism (see Smith, Harvey). "Yellow Truck" presents a classic image of the ghost town, a genre of ruins intimately connected to imaginings of small-town life. Signifying the ghost town, "Yellow Truck" produces a nostalgia for the past, evoking an idealized version of formerly naturalized relationships between identity, community, and place. The power of "Yellow Truck" is in the second-order of signification that Barthes (1972) calls myth. It is not the historical reality of the decline of Gunnar Mine that is the primary subject of the photo; rather, the image is constructed to bind with a larger myth of a lost western Canadian landscape of

place-based resource communities. Through this image we long, not for Gunnar Mine, but for "a place called home" (Massey), an imagined refuge from the disorienting and dislocating effects of modern life.⁴

Figure 2. *JJ's Cabin* - Traces of Everyday life in Uranium City



In contrast to the more archetypical ghost-town scene of “Yellow Truck,” “JJ’s Cabin” (Fig. 2) hints at the afterlife of resource communities. Traces of social life are visible; an almost-empty liquor bottle, an overflowing ashtray, and a beer can lay strewn across a coffee table. In her book *Industrial Ruination, Community and Place*, Alice Mah foregrounds the messiness and contingency of the everyday lives of those who continue to live in contexts of decline and ruin. While influenced by critical geography, Mah argues that “the distinctiveness and complexity of landscapes and legacies of industrial ruination cannot be accounted for by the binaries of success and failure, creation and destruction, or consumption and devastation” (8). Mac Mahon’s photograph makes visible the edges of this distinctiveness and complexity. The scattered signs of everyday life illuminated in “JJ’s Cabin” tell of a persisting community. Indeed, the heavy tools of the political economists and critical geographers might easily miss the quiet communities that persist, struggle, and even prosper in ruins such as Uranium City. While the local mining industry is long gone, Uranium City is a ghost town that continues to support a small community of about 200 people.⁵ In addition, less obvious communities might exist at a distance, through shared experiences and memories, as the interactive web documentary *Welcome to Pine Point* (Shoebridge and Simons) beautifully depicts.

“JJ’s Cabin” compliments Mah’s idea of “industrial ruination as lived process” (131), pointing us to cultural geographies of bust and the continued presence of place-based community. Framing western Canadian resource landscapes in this way unsettles purely symbolic readings of ruins, emphasizing the ways these places and communities are continually practiced and lived.



Figure 3. *Eagle Plains* - Semi-truck along the Demster Highway, Yukon

Unsettling the Resource Landscape

The semi-truck is an ever-present object within the Canadian North, racing across vast landscapes, connecting far flung places, and carrying with them the momentum of economic activity. For many motorists the oversized vehicles are a bane, either slogging uphill or racing over roads of all (and in all) conditions to fulfill delivery schedules and get their drivers paid. For frontier resource communities, the trucks have been the essential means of bringing in all manner of products for local consumption while also hauling resource wealth away. Mac Mahon's "Eagle Plains" (Fig. 3) captures a truck during a momentary stop, between destinations but already caked with mud from long hours on the Dempster's gravel roadway. The truck, its vibrant colour and inevitable momentum, contrast against a backdrop of a northern wilderness shrouded by fog and rain.

We might readily read "Eagle Plains" as indicative of the frontier, with roads probing into the wilderness at the edge of Canadian expansion. Such narratives relate common themes not only of colonial progress but also of the separation of nature from society and civilization. Yet the familiarity of the scene and the ubiquity of this experience suggest alternate readings as well. Resource town may be geographically distant, but they are usually highly integrated, connected not only by vast networks of roads and highways, but by complex networks of supply and demand with interlinkages around the world.

Resource extraction in Canada has always been a global enterprise, from the Hudson's Bay Company to the current tar-sand operations of northern Alberta. Resource towns are not outposts, but rather hubs within complex social and economic networks. In the context of such complexity we cannot easily configure the rhetorical boundaries between wilderness and society, periphery and centre, and rural and urban (see Brenner). Through this photo of an everyday situation, "Eagle Plains" challenges the viewer to explore tensions between the trope of the isolated, frontier resource town and the advancing forms of mobility that make these places possible.



Figure 4. *Cut Lines* - Aerial view of seismic cutting through boreal forest near Edson, Alberta.

In “Cut Lines” Mac Mahon provides a second articulation of the mobility of resources and the mutability of frontier dualisms. The photo relates the juxtaposition of the straight cut-lines of industrial oil and gas development against the sinuous flow of a creek. We can read the photo as environmental critique, drawing attention to the routine risk (see Perrow) of pipeline failure and looming ecological disaster or highlighting the ways in which linear development transects landscapes, creating barriers for the movement of wildlife. Moreover, in relation to histories of boom and bust, the photo also prompts thinking about pipeline economies or, more specifically, the mobility of those economies, as well as the relative configuration of resource communities and development.

Dominant economic discourse promote pipelines as the source of economic sustainability and growth for western Canada. The Calgary-based energy company Enbridge argues that the Northern Gateway pipeline will provide benefits, not only for Alberta, but for resource communities in British Columbia as well. In the face of opposition from resource communities, Enbridge's proclaims promises of jobs, tax revenues, and increased property values.⁶ It is not that such benefits would be unappreciated, but rather that communities have met such promises with a lack of trust and skepticism. Who gets paid and how much for accommodating the risks of an accident within

BC's highly valued river and marine ecosystems? How can communities leverage tax dollars directly from development as opposed to the central purse of the Provincial Government? What kinds of jobs will be provided, for how long? How do the benefits of development remain within communities, as opposed to being transported elsewhere? We have repeatedly heard these types of questions in our research conversations across northern BC.

These uncertainties are indicative of wider skepticism about the future of resource communities and the viability of possible future booms. The mobility of resources, labour, and capital challenge the permanence of community and our understanding of northern communities. Work camps replace neighbourhoods, labour moves in and out fluidly, and resource jobs become temporary service jobs—all of which is exacerbated as secondary processing moves further and further afield. Thus Mac Mahon's photo series not only points to pipeline politics, but signifies a shift in the ways in which communities relate to landscape and resources. The images depict a landscape in which locality is becoming less permanent and local benefits of resource wealth ever more tenuous.

(Re)placing Boom and Bust

Mac Mahon's photographs evoke an ambivalence that undermines any straightforward narrative with which to interpret the shifting resource landscape of western Canada. This ambivalence is constructed through a juxtaposition of archetypical scenes of bounded ruin (Figs. 1, 2) with images of mobility, interconnection, and flow (Figs. 2, 3). Considered a ruin as political allegory (see Benjamin), the ghost town signifies both the annihilation of community by capital and a longing for a firmly rooted sense of self, community, and place. However, as we have attempted to illustrate, Mac Mahon's depictions of infrastructures of mobility immediately complicate a romanticized view of ruins, pulling us out of the realm of myth and into the actually existing and uneven relations of place and community. In this way, the photographs act as palimpsests of place that unsettle linear narratives of the corresponding decline of resource towns and community, offering a far messier and contradictory picture of western Canada's shifting resource landscape. Resource towns have always been enmeshed in regional, national, and global relations of production, and the last several decades have seen an extending and intensifying of such relations so as to render the myth of the isolated, authentic mining town increasingly implausible.

Barrel Dump, Northern Saskatchewan



As Henri Lefebvre (1970) pointed out almost half a century ago, even seemingly peripheral and rural locales are often (and increasingly) deeply enmeshed in the urban fabric. For Lefebvre, “[t]his expression, ‘urban fabric,’ does not narrowly define the built world of cities but all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country. In this sense, a vacation home, a highway, a supermarket in the countryside are all part of the urban fabric” (4)—a sentiment true of the hundreds of industrial resource operations scattered across the western Canadian hinterland. Technological advancements in materials and transportation have contributed to the proliferation of fly-in/fly-out work camps (Storey)—highly provisional places that, while geographically remote and surrounded by wilderness, are hyper-connected on regional, national, and international scales. As the perfect spatialisation of boom and bust, the work camp fully embraces mobility, impermanence, and precarity in pursuit of the most efficient modes of capital accumulation. When economic conditions turn unfavourable, camps can be quickly and easily dismantled and relocated to more desirable locales. Beyond their mobility, modern resource camps are permeated by corporeal, imaginative, and virtual mobilities (see Urry). A far cry from the relatively remote resource camps of the previous century, modern camps are serviced by airports, connected to high-speed internet, and sometimes even include luxury amenities.

Considered in light of Lefebvre’s ideas of the urban as well as more recent discussions around planetary urbanism (Brenner and Schmid), Mac Mahon’s depictions of resource ruins and the afterlives of remote communities seem less about a nostalgia for the past than a meditation on the future of the western Canadian resource landscape and a re-imagining of the relationship between community and place. As Svetlana Boym notes, “[t]he ruins of modernity as viewed from a 21st-century perspective point at possible futures that never came to be” (1). As flexible transportation networks, extraction methods, and communication technologies erode the myth of the western resource frontier, we are ushered into the Anthropocene—a geological era defined by human beings’ impact on the Earth. By unsettling static understandings of place and community, Mac Mahon’s photographs offer a starting point to interrogate and re-imagine these ideas across ever-widening scales in relation to Canada’s continued reliance on resource extraction.

Notes

¹ For a look at Mac Mahon’s broader catalogue of photographs visit his website: <http://www.eamonmacmahon.com>

² Over the past year both authors have been part of a team of interdisciplinary scholars who have been exploring governance innovations in response to the challenges of boom-and-bust communities in both British Columbia and Alberta. This research, including a series of qualitative research engagements spanning both provinces, provides a backdrop for many of the thoughts elicited in this essay. Further information about this research can be found at <http://www.crsc.ualberta.ca/en/What%20We%20Do/GoverningBoomBustCommunities.aspx>

³ A prominent example of this aestheticization of the decline of Detroit is Marchand and Meffre’s “Ruins of Detroit” (<http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit>).

⁴ Rather than framing this nostalgia as regressive or anti-modern, we might consider it a fundamental aspect of modernism—part of the “struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world” (Berman 6).

⁵ <http://www.mds.gov.sk.ca/apps/Pub/MDS/muniDetails.aspx?cat=5&mun=2810%3E>

⁶ See <http://www.gatewayfacts.ca/Benefits/Benefits-To-BC.aspx>

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