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Bagging Peaks and Busting Trails: Place-Making in the Canadian Rockies

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Based on ethnographic research conducted during the summer of 2009, I explore affective narratives of landscape and memory created through the activity of backpacking. Using the town of Banff as my 'base-camp', I hiked the surrounding trails, interviewing other Canadians engaged in both the literal and figurative exploration of wilderness through backcountry camping. Arguably, the activity itself is founded upon a problematic modernist (and colonial) separation between nature and culture, and backpackers continue to reify this separation through their idealization of wilderness. However, because hikers engage in a much more tangible and direct way with the landscape than most tourists, they are often simultaneously confronted with places, moments, and actions that do not fit clearly into the paradigm of a pristine wild space. By traversing the landscape, hikers have a sensory encounter with place that possesses far more depth than the panoramas of a typical tourist photograph. Blood, sweat and tears are often shed on these trips, and encounters with snow, hail, rockslides, and wildlife transform the experience. Hiking thus acts as a more complex form of 'place-making' than usually discussed in critiques of tourism, and yields insights into the ways in which Canadians imagine and engage with their 'wild backyard'.

Banff's mystique relies on its characterization as a space empty of society, as a pristine wilderness, and yet it is also layered with social signification as a place: home, recreation ground, ancestral territory. Geographers, historians, and anthropologists from William Cronon(1995) to Bruce Braun(2002) have written prolifically on the `trouble with wilderness` to paraphrase the title of Cronon`s famous article and the problematic colonial concept of terra nullius that idealizations of wilderness seem to imitate. For the pursuit of wilderness to be successful, nature must be demarcated

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as external to society. It must be characterized as “a place where one goes—the site of resources, a stage for recreation, a source for spiritual renewal, and a scene for aesthetic reflection” (Braun 2002: ix). As Cronon notes, for the nature-lover, “wilderness is the natural unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influence of our artificial lives” (Cronon 1995: 80). I have critiqued the neo-colonialist and neoliberal implications of such an idealization of wilderness elsewhere (Harding 2010). What I am more interested in in this paper is an exploration of the personal and affective narratives of place which intertwine with these larger discourses of wild nature, and allow such an obviously problematic paradigm to be continuously reinforced.

Escobar argues for the recognition “that place, body, and environment integrate with each other; that places gather things, thought, and memories in particular configurations; and that place, more an event than a thing, is characterized by openness rather than a unitary self-identity” (Escobar 2001: 143). Place-making is a hybrid process where the physical, sensorial, and social interact to create multiple conceptions of place. Escobar points out that “the enduring connectedness of people with the land results from an active engagement with it; rather than a reflection of ‘tradition’” (Escobar 2001:146). It is erroneous, and entails an entrance into the dangerous and murky waters of essentialist thought, to assume that connections to place and land are formed only by those people categorized as indigenous (a categorization that, for all its strategic value as a potential vehicle for empowerment for marginalized peoples, is socially constructed and therefore far from absolute). Place-making is a shifting process, and who engages in it and to what extent, changes hands from colonizer to colonized, from indigenous person to settler, for varying reasons and in diverse contexts. As Rodman has pointed out “places, like voices are local and multiple and a single physical landscape can be multilocal in the sense that it shapes and expresses polysemic meanings for different users” (Rodman 1992: 647). The Canadian Association of Geographers Conference 2011, May 31-June 4 2011, Calgary Alberta

context which my current research concerns is that of Western Canadians signifying and re-signifying ideas of place through physically traversing the territory designated as Banff National Park. In doing so, I do not discount the significance of indigenous people's connection to that same territory, far from it. Gupta and Ferguson note that an important additional question is not just how place-making is undertaken, but who has the power to make places of spaces? (1997: 40) And who does not? The creation of parks and reserves in places like the Rocky Mountain Parks, which have a long history of aboriginal occupation, spatially separate landscapes into bounded entities of wilderness and indigenous territory, with borders and boundaries being drawn and designated by the Canadian government, not the people who inhabit that landscape. It is important to bear in mind that the places I discuss, the trails that I traverse, and the mountains which I and my informants love, hold a significance to aboriginal peoples that is, most often, woefully unacknowledged. But my own research, in this current project, speaks to a different place-making. I've found that hikers and backpackers form deep connections to the landscape, in tandem with, not in spite of, the colonial genealogy of both the people and the ideas involved.

In many ways, it is the act of walking itself that transforms a formally unknown landscape into a socially meaningful one. Landscapes transform and take on new meanings as new mental connections are fostered through the physical act of travel.

Walking gives a very different perspective than driving the same distance. At a hundred kilometres per hour, I see a mountain and then quickly move on to the next one, constantly bombarded by new sights and vistas. During the three days it took us to trudge up to the height of the land, we observed the same set of mountains, sometimes in early morning light, sometimes in the setting sun, always from a slowly changing perspective or angle. By the time we reached the pass, and were treated to a new vista, I felt like I knew those mountains intimately (Nicky Brink in *Forgotten Highways* 2007:35).

What before may have appeared as a blank, green space on a map, an area designated as a bounded bubble of 'wilderness,' changes into landscape dotted with significance as one labours across it. This

may seem an obvious point, that is, that travelling to an area transforms it from the unfamiliar and the 'blank' space to a significant, personally experienced place. However, consider the context of most modern travel. Solnit points out that: "Many people nowadays live in a series of interiors –home, car gym, office, shops – disconnected from each other. On foot everything stays connected, for while walking one occupies the spaces between those interiors in the same way one occupies those interiors. One lives in the whole world rather than in interiors built up against it" (Solnit 2000: 9) Motoring through an area at 100 km an hour, the landscape takes on a monotony which perpetuates the idea of it as a 'wilderness' or 'a jungle' or a 'plain.' Peaks, waterfalls, lakes, rivers, fly by, over and over, with little individuation between. In contrast, when one walks through the same area, each landmark becomes significant. "Walking is a mode of making the world as well as being in it...Walking shares with making and working that crucial element off engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world" (Solnit 2000: 29).

The backcountry in the Rocky Mountain Parks is, for the most part, the domain of the walker, an attribute enforced by law rather than topography as in the past. In a society dominated by the automobile and a landscape divided up via motor vehicle access routes, the Banff backcountry is a definite anomaly in Western Canada. In the reduction of scale that comes with travelling on foot through a landscape (i.e. 20km a day rather than 200km), an intimate association with the land is produced that challenges the characterization of certain areas as impenetrable, monotonous, and 'wild' space. As Nicky Brink puts it:

Like most people, knowing where I am and how to get to where I want to go is something I take for granted. In the backcountry, even with detailed maps and a global positioning system, I never know exactly where I am. More precisely, despite having a fairly good idea of where I am according to the map, I never know what lies between me and my destination. The trail might deteriorate, the river might be flooded, a bear might block the path" (Nicky Brink in *Forgotten Highways* 2007: 35).

Hiking is a form of travel in which often one must adapt oneself to a landscape and its challenges, and

give up a certain degree of control. The uncertainty is part of the 'risk factor' which is, for many hikers, part of the activities appeal.

An important aspect of the concept of place is its groundedness in topography (Dirlik 2001: 22). This does not indicate a return to geographical determinism, but rather recognition that "different places have different things to offer humans to work with and live in, and this has everything to do with how humans construct places. Places are thus co-productions between people and the environment" (Escobar 2008: 42). As Raffles notes in his study of the Igarape Guariba, "in many rural places, much of the locational identity is tied up with the immediate environmental context. There are stories people tell over and over again that reinforce a personal connection to critical moments of group action involving the landscape" (Raffles 2000:12). The type of labour enacted on a place, and the narratives that arise from this, are significantly influenced by the physical geography and ecology of the environment. It is often knowledge of the specific challenges of a certain environment, and the ways to overcome those challenges, that are recounted in place-making narratives.

One young man I interviewed spoke of his enduring attachment to Three Isle Lake, a backcountry destination south of Banff in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park. It was the location of his first backpacking trip, undertaken with his father and his best friend. Terrible weather, inexperience, and poor equipment made that trip difficult and rather miserable, he confessed. But it also helped him realize both his own strength and the strength of his bond with his father. He returns to Three Isle Lake every summer, because it reminds him of his Dad and both the good times and the bad they experienced together. He does not travel to this place to get away from society, but rather to re-enforce an important social bond through the memory of a shared experience which is directly associated with a specific place. For my informant the topography of the Three Isle Lake trail is now infused with social signification, and is far from an empty space, but rather a place that has become highlighted in his

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imaginative geography. For him, Three Isle Lake is not a dot on a map of wilderness (ridden with warnings of 'bear territory' like medieval maps with 'here be monsters'), but rather a hybrid place where the trail to the mountain lake has merged with his own social memories.

According to Basso, it is a "fact that familiar places are experienced as inherently meaningful, their significance and value being found to reside in (and, it may seem, to emanate from) the form and arrangement of their observable characteristics" (Basso 1996: 108). For my informant Three Isle Lake was made significant through both his increased familiarity of the area by traversing it many times, but also by his association of it with social experiences. Places act, in Basso's terms, as natural 'reflectors', and they "provide points from which to look out on life, to grasp one's position in the order of things, to contemplate events from somewhere in particular" (Basso 1996:109). The Rockies are imbued with meanings which I, and my informants, infuse into them, with different limestone spires acting as beacons, guiding us toward certain social memories, reminding us of associated personal and social values, and stirring up emotions that resonate deeply within us.

Walking transforms the body into matter *in* place. The physical work of travelling across a landscape connects a place through the feet to the mind. There is a bodily sensory engagement where one feels the movement of wind, the warmth of the sun, the damp smell of the boggy fen and the cold trickle of wet as water seeps into your boot from the creek that babbles in laughter at your attempts to try to cross it while staying dry. The awareness of both place and one's physical connection to it is strengthened, which in turn creates a mental connection to place. A hiker is forced to engage with the landscape in a way that forces the physicality of the fact that they are in a specific place to come to the forefront of their lived experience:

When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back; the more one comes to know them, the more one seeds them with the invisible crop of memories and associations that will be waiting for you when you come back, while new places offer up new thoughts, new

possibilities. Exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains” (Solnit 2000: 13).

Schama observes that “landscape is a work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock...Landscapes are culture before they are nature”(Schama 1995:7)). As one walks off the highway into the ‘bush,’ a sense of history, of walking in someone else’s footsteps, becomes present. Whether one knows the history of that particular trail or not, a sense that someone built this, for reasons unknown or known, because a place was significant enough to them for trees to be cut and stones to be moved to create a trail to it. “Part of what makes roads, trails, and paths so unique as built structures is that they cannot be perceived as a whole all at once by a sedentary. They unfold in time as one travels along them, just as a story does as one listens or reads” (Solnit 2000: 72)

Many backpacking trails follow older routes. Unlike the new trails, which have as their goal a scenic ‘payday’ (in the words of one hiker) or alpine view at the end of long forest trudges, these trails often follow the valleys and the lowest passes through the Rockies. This was brought up in a discussion I had with a group of female backpackers while on the Rockwall Trail. The Rockwall Trail through Kootenay National Park is considered to be one of the most difficult trails in the Canadian Rockies, due to its rollercoaster nature. It ascends and descends three alpine passes, making for a gruelling 3-5 day backpack. While staying at Tumbling Pass campground, the half-way point on the trail, I discussed the seeming illogic of a trail that purposefully seems to take the route with the most elevation gain and loss. We asked: “Who picks a trail that goes over these super high passes?” And one of my fellow hikers immediately answered: “white men, aboriginals follow the valleys” (Informant 5, Tumbling Creek, August 2009). It was immediately recognizable to this experienced hiker and her companions that this was a ‘new’ trail, built for scenic appeal, not an ‘old’ trail, a route chosen for its relatively easy access across the limestone spine of the Great Divide. Different reasons for hiking, different narratives of travel, and different positions of privilege within current and historical structures of power were

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apparent to her just from how the trail and with it, her body, moved over the landscape.

Brink and Bowen argue that “traversing these trails today is done in much the same manner as it was centuries ago –primarily on foot with heavy packs, with little better defence against mosquitoes or the elements” (2007:4). I’m not sure I fully agree. Lightweight equipment, food dehydrators, Gore-Tex, gangs of trail crew armed with chainsaws and trail signs, GPS technology and helicopter surveillance have reduced some of the risks and travails of mountain travel. However, the actual means of transportation, that is, one’s own two feet, has not changed, and thus I think to a certain extent Brink and Bown have a good point. They also point out that “many of the backcountry campsites are situated on the same patches of land that hosted native hunters and explorers for thousands of years – a good camping spot then is still a good camping spot now, and for the same reasons” (Brink & Bown 2007:4). Furthermore, the trail system itself, although almost fully mapped and monitored by Parks Canada, does to a large extent follow the same routes which have been used for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Each step one takes through the Rocky Mountains is thus not one of discovery, but of re-enactment.

It is not only social histories that connect people to landscapes, but also individual his(or hers) stories. Although some backpackers get a kick out of the fact that they are traversing a path once taken by early fur traders, for most this is not what makes this social memory is not enough to establish a connection to a landscape (we can’t all be history geeks). Rather, personal moments are connected with landscapes, so that certain features act as a mnemonic device for individual histories. Nearly all hikers whom I spoke to who were ‘local’ (from Western Canada) had their favourite spots, for varying reasons, and most had a story to go along with it. These ‘local’ backpackers return again and again to the same trails. One woman I spoke with laughingly recounted how her non-hiking friends didn’t understand why she returned to the same places every summer and said “well, you’ve been there.” But

for her, the trail, like a person, was slightly different each time they met, with changes in weather or mood, season or age. In the words of one local author and hiker, “the trail was like an old friend” (Lea 2002:62).

More than a search for an idealized wilderness, for many of the hikers I interviewed backpacking was a form of not only recreation, but also, paraphrasing Anna Tsing (2005), of re-creation of the self, of memories and of places. It was an re-enactment of social and personal histories, which, within the context of colonialism are sometimes troublesome and problematic, but also enlightening. What I am interested in exploring here, and expanding on in my future research is not only the 'trouble with wilderness' but also why people, continue to trouble themselves with wilderness. Despite all the critiques, the colonialism, the capitalism of the tourist industry, there's a mysterious 'something' that keeps even those of us who are the most cognisant of these problematics returning to the same trails, the same camping spots and the same 'wildernesses' again and again. This is a preliminary attempt to investigate that 'something'.

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