LIVES ONCE LIVED

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ETHNOGRAPHY AND SENSE OF PLACE IN THE ABANDONED AND ISOLATED SPACES OF NORTH AMERICA

By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the ways in which abandoned and sparsely populated spaces can begin to offer up their hidden, alternative histories through the process of ethnographic inquiry. My research explains how it is possible to engage with peripheral and often marginalized North American cultures through the anthropological study of affect, space and materiality. Here, I have endeavoured to construct a rich narrative of space, place and human geography that sees the ghost towns of the North American prairies and the isolated fishing communities of Grand Bruit, Newfoundland and Matinicus, Maine as dynamic texts that can be read as both alternative historical inscriptions and as anthropological phenomena that describe a unique aspect of unseen culture. Far from being empty spaces, these locations present deeply engaging deposits of local history and alternate world views. However, if left undocumented, I believe that these spaces will soon be erased from the dominant narratives of culture and historicity, swept away by the winds of resource depletion and rural-to-urban migration. In what follows, I present an opportunity for the reader to join me in unpacking and analysing these rarely understood and oft-neglected histories that are intrinsic to contemporary North American culture and identity.

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This dissertation would not have been possible without the assistance of a great number of people and organizations. From its germ as a few notes written on the back pages of a small red notebook to a completed thesis, I have been helped and inspired by a truly wonderful support network.

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I will be forever indebted to the people and places of Saskatchewan, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Grand Bruit and Matinicus—without them there would be no dissertation. I want to thank everyone who ever stopped their pick-up to chat on the side of the road, took me lobstering at 4AM or welcomed me into their home for a glass of home-made wine and family photos. These are the moments that will remain with me for a long time to come and for that I consider myself unusually fortunate.

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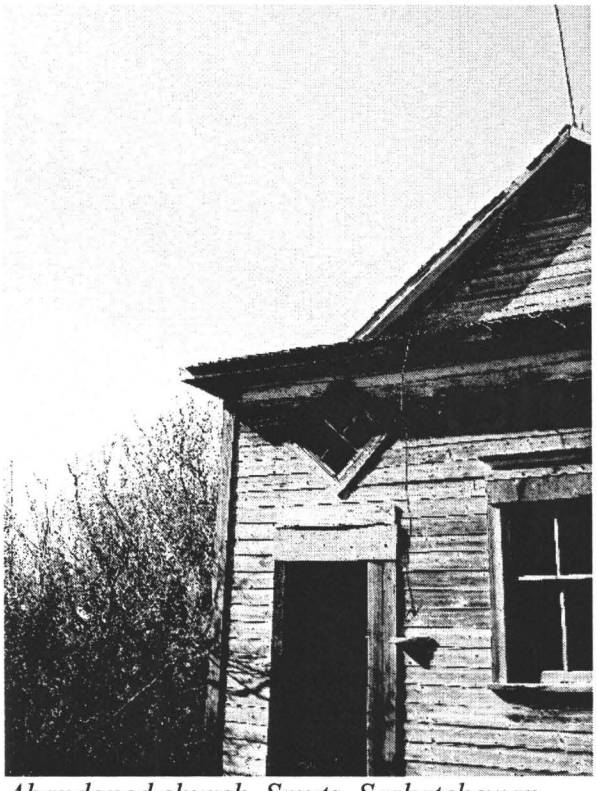
Thank you to everyone who ever believed that I could get this far, you are the reason that I am here.

Before: an ethnographic guide to the realm of the dead



Abandoned church, Smuts, Saskatchewan

> "Before the eighty-fifth birthday of a man well provided for in every respect, I asked myself in a dream what I could give him to cause him real pleasure, and at once answered my own question: a guide to the realm of the dead."
> -Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

A stack of little brown notebooks filled with my days spent among *lives-once-lived*. These books are my guides to the realm of the dead, maps of a world where things have gone missing in the night, of places vacated and of people who are no longer there. This project is a translation of a translation; it's the rewriting of the things I wrote as I sat in diners, motels and Pine-Sol-scented barrooms across the Plains, on boats and in haunted kitchens beside the sea. It's a retelling of the stories I told myself about the places where I saw the ghosts of lives and deaths.

The tires on my rented hatchback slip and slide their way down toward

Scout Lake, Saskatchewan; the October rain makes muddy troughs of the road all the way from the highway up to the general store. Inside there's a bit of everything: work socks, ice cream, cattle feed, fuel, Cheez Whiz, home-made perogies; it's the kind of place that's more of a public service than a business venture. In the front window there's a folding table with four women and a man —all in their early fifties—sitting and drinking coffee from small polystyrene cups. They all stop and stare at me for a moment until I say hello and introduce myself. I ask them if they mind if I sit down and talk, and before long the stories of this place are flowing out in rivers of remembrance.

The last time the census was taken—back in 2006—there were 20 people living here, now there are fewer than 10. As I talk away the afternoon with half of the village's population, a picture of the way this place used to be begins to emerge. The picture of Scout Lake that the remaining residents draw is very different from the place I'm seeing today; their stories are filled with children in their Sunday best, village picnics, shops, banks, laughter and joy, now there are only empty houses and boarded-up shops, another broken sidewalk and more deserted streets.

Belle wears a taupe and yellow ski jacket and blue jeans, her browny-blonde hair falls just above her shoulders with bangs that frame her kind face; she tells me how there used to be dances every weekend in the hall with live music and pot-luck suppers. That's where she met and fell in love with her husband so many years ago. She smiles a long-way-off-kind of smile and twists the thinning wedding band on her finger. "All of the women in the village were such amazing cooks—nobody ever bought anything frozen or pre-packaged, it was all made with love, you know? But now no one has time for that kind of thing, you've gotta work every waking hour just to break even with these grain prices. That's why none of our kids stayed around—too much work for not enough money". Everyone nods in agreement.

We keep on talking well into the evening, all the while people from the surrounding area trickle in to collect their mail, (the general store also serves as the area post office) adding details to the stories of absence that percolate up through our conversation. Julie, the woman who runs the store, asks a skittish farmer in red plaid if he remembers the year that the community centre closed, or if he knows who was working a certain dead farmer's land up over the hill. "The community centre hasn't had anything happening since the 80s" he says, "and I can't say who bought those sections after Doug died and his kids moved away—I think it might be some guy from Assinaboia". The finer details of abandonment. Angela, a woman with cat-eye glasses and a purple quilted jacket, tells me how the death of community has turned so many settlements into ghost towns; "no one has a sense of neighbourliness anymore. Everyone is just worried about

themselves and they don't care about helping each other out. That's what's done it, that's what's killed all of theses towns".

I can read the absence of people from this place in the dusty cans of beans on the shelf in the store and in the mostly empty pigeon holes for mail behind the counter. The faded flyer for a dinner-dance that's tacked to the notice board is from four years ago and it's nearly covered over by ads for auction sales and used farm equipment. I can sense the emptiness in the villagers weary voices, it's like they're only hanging on by the edge of their memories. They've seen everything slowly evaporate until all that remains is a folding card table and a worn out coffee maker in the front window of a dying general store. For them, it's not much of a consolation for the dissolution of their home-place. As I'm driving away, in the withering light of evening, I can see the members of the Scout Lake Coffee Club heading back to their quiet corners of town and I can imagine them counting off the houses that they pass, noting the year that each one went dark for good. Back in the distance, the town's lone street light trembles with halogen glow, trying to keep the ghosts at bay for at least one more night.

This project seeks, in very real terms, to record and analyse the people, places and things that exist in abandoned and isolated spaces across North America. Here, I have tried to document these vanishing cultural spaces in an attempt to preserve their sense of place, to illuminate the flash of history that describes the moment when things get left behind, or when time shifts and warps itself into strange forms. Sometimes these instants get swept away or bypassed in the rush to get from here to there, ignored because of their peripheral nature. This is an ethnography of dirt roads, of towns that don't appear on maps anymore, of places without roads and of another kind of history.

My ethnographic fieldwork for this project involved two main phases/locations—the ghost towns of the High Plains of North America (North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and Saskatchewan) and two isolated fishing communities along the Atlantic coast (Grand Bruit, Newfoundland and Matinicus, Maine). The ghost towns of the Plains presented me with the opportunity to engage with empty or almost empty spaces in my attempt to understand—ethnographically—the sense of place that develops in the absence of people, while the two fishing villages offered me a chance to examine how isolation affects narrative and how time accumulates in *nonsynchronous* (Bloch 1977) ways. In both locations my primary goal was to explore the way in which time, space and materiality develop outside of conventional global flows. Ultimately, my aim with this project has been to outline how the time and space of abandonment and isolation can be written into ethnographic discourse.

My fieldwork is comprised of multiple sites and visits to these locations over the period of three years (2007-2009 inclusive), beginning with a three week

stay on the island of Matinicus (pop. 50) in June of 2007, followed by an eight week driving trip through the High Plains from September to November of that same year. In June 2008, I visited Grand Bruit (pop. 15) for two weeks and made a final trip to Saskatchewan for two weeks in September/October of 2009.

In Chapter 1, I begin by establishing a detailed history of my own engagement with abandoned space and isolation through an exploration of my now abandoned childhood home, an isolated homestead in the forests of Northern Ontario. Here, I outline how my fascination with these spaces developed and how many of the questions that guided my ethnographic research emerged from my childhood experiences and also from a return visit to the farm in the summer of 2008. It is in my engagement with the ruins of my deserted family farm that I first began to understand how material accumulation and abandonment work to develop a sense of place that, for me, reflects the power of loss, nostalgia and memory. Ultimately, this farm functions as a means of investigating the ways in which biography and history become embedded in the materiality of space and place—something that has been a constant theme during the research and writing of this project. Chapter 2 presents my outline for the practice of what I have called *psychoethnography*, a methodology that fuses the randomly generated urban walks of the Situationists with Walter Benjamin's understanding of the flâneur and perception, while incorporating established methods of ethnographic fieldwork to create a new mode of engagement with people, places and things within the study of cultural anthropology. In framing this set of practices, I have endeavoured to illustrate both the theoretical basis and practical applications of *psychoethnography* as a functioning ethnographic methodology. Here, I have used my research in the High Plains and Atlantic fishing villages as testing-grounds for this practice, with the intent of exploring how these methods can be translated across varying geographies and cultures. My key site of translation can be found in the transposition of the urban practices of Benjamin and the Situationists to a rural setting where the methods remain similar while the setting and results are quite different. In this chapter I discuss the melding of the Situationist's notion of psychogeography, Benjamin's figure of the flâneur and ethnography into a composite methodology for examining North America's isolated and abandoned spaces. In this way, the streets of Paris are traded for gravel roads in North Dakota and the shops and cafes where the flâneur lingers and reflects are transformed into decrepit prairie houses and rickety fishing sheds. Chapter 3 focuses on the ethnographic significance of abandonment, absence and affect in the High Plains, examining how time, memory and materiality accumulate in layers of cultural significance, essentially creating a multi-dimensional text that can be read to produce a detailed ethnographic portrait of human absence. This chapter asks how these spaces and their spatio-historic

resonance can be written into being, a theme that occupies a large portion of my research. Chapter 4 remains geographically focused on the Plains, but examines more closely the specific ethnographic findings of my fieldwork by delving more concretely into the history, sense of place and narrativity of these so-called ghost towns and their current and former inhabitants. Using my own experiences of these spaces, local narratives and numerous photographs, I attempt to write (and photograph) these spaces into ethnographic being, thereby presenting them as locations of *lives-once-lived*, as places where human life has evaporated, leaving only it's material and spectral accumulations behind. Notions of *nonsynchronous* (Bloch 1977) time and the accumulation of narrative time also play a key role in this chapter by illustrating the ways in which these abandoned spaces become temporally and ideologically peripheral through the absence of their one-time inhabitants. The final chapter shifts the location of my fieldwork to the Atlantic villages of Matinicus and Grand Bruit and addresses issues of isolation, memory, nostalgia and narrative in the context of an ethnographic study of two isolated island communities. Grand Bruit has proven particularly important in this regard in that it was able to offer a glimpse of a sort of *pre-ghost town* where the villagers were in the process of planning a government-funded emigration that would see the space ultimately abandoned by the summer of 2010. For me, this offered a unique opportunity to observe a town in the last moments of its isolated existence, to witness the beginning of the end of an inhabited space. In both Matinicus and Grand Bruit, narrative is the binding agent that carves a sense of place out of isolation and situates inhabitants in their respective settings. In this chapter I have endeavoured to establish a sense of place that is written into being through narrativity; here, I acted as collector and arranger of stories which I have attempted to cobble into an understanding of the cultural significance of occupying isolated and peripheral spaces.

Together these chapters form what can be described as both a cultural analysis of memory, space and time in isolation/abandonment and as a concrete methodology—a manual of sorts—for the ethnographic study of not only ghost towns and islands, but of virtually any cultural or geographic location in which a would-be psychoethnographer should decide to undertake his or her research. I see this project as a record of a fading cultural form, a kind of field guide to peripheral people and places that I have presented here as a collection of stories, vignettes, photographs and personal experiences that I have accumulated during my fieldwork.

What may, at times, appear to some readers as an ad hoc collection of transient impressions and chance encounters is in fact the end result of a series of careful editorial decisions about which experiences and images would provide the most resonant understanding of how I was attempting to write these worlds into

being. For every story and photograph that ended up in these pages, there are easily ten more that remain in my notebooks and hard-drives, and for each of those there are innumerable others that never left Wyoming or Newfoundland. While the methodology of psychoethnography promotes an openness to all experiences, it is, of course, impossible to incorporate everything that appears to the ethnographer. For this reason, my intent was to select what I felt to be the most ethnographically significant aspects of my chosen fieldsites. For me, the images and stories that ended up in this dissertation are those that seem to shine most brightly and offer the most complete view onto the world of abandoned and isolated spaces.

The photographs and writings that follow are only a beginning, a kind of assemblage of departure points for thinking about how and why we, as ethnographers, imagine and practice our fieldwork. From these nodes—rhizomes—it is possible to trace multiple and varied options for experiencing ethnographic space and time. For me, the ethnography of abandoned and isolated spaces has turned into a project of starting to unwind the tightly woven strands of accumulated time, space, memory and affect. One of the things that I have always found so engaging about anthropology is its ability to incorporate such a multitude of avenues of inquiry, opening up the way for cultural understandings to emerge at a microcosmic level; as each layer of accumulation is uncovered, a new world of sparkling fragments rises to the surface. I believe that careful and affective attention to the individual threads of the cultural fabric of space and place can eventually lead to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the self-as-ethnographer and of one's surroundings. As I see it, one of the ethnographer's primary duties is to examine the details that underlie the functioning of everyday life in their chosen fieldsite.

The ghost towns of the High Plains, where I conducted much of my fieldwork, represent a small fragment of the North American landscape that I feel often goes unnoticed. In thinking back on my time on the Plains, I am reminded of an afternoon spent on an island in Boston's harbour with a group of tourists, wandering around an abandoned fort; a women standing next to me sees my t-shirt with the word "Moosejaw" written on it and asks me if I'm from Saskatchewan. Yes, I say. She tells me that she and her family are from North Dakota and that they've been to Moosejaw, Saskatchewan many times; I tell them that I've been to North Dakota to study their ghost towns. Shocked, she pauses in her walk and says questioningly, "we have ghost towns?". Hundreds, I tell her.

"Do you mean the towns are haunted?", she asks. I tell her that in a way they are haunted, but maybe not in the way she's thinking. Ghost towns, I tell her, are places where most of the people have left, leaving behind the traces of their presence: houses, cars, streets, schools, stoves. I try to make it clear to her that

the ghost towns I study aren't haunted by ghosts, but by the presences—the vacant spaces—of the people who used to live there. For me, a town becomes a ghost town when the majority of its inhabitants have moved away; when abandoned buildings outnumber those that are occupied, a place has turned into a ghost town. She asks me what I wanted to study in these places. "I was hoping to find the stories of people's lives in the the things they left behind and in the memories of the few people that stayed behind", I say as the tour group rounds the end of the small island. "Well that sounds fascinating" she says. "I'm always surprised by how much of people's life stories can be read in everything that they've abandoned", I hear myself say. She nods and smiles with an honest face. Later on, I hear her high, mellow voice a few paces behind me telling her teenaged daughter about how North Dakota has a whole bunch of abandoned towns out in the prairies, and that they're filled with all of the stuff that people left behind.

I make no claims to a complete understanding of these spaces. I can only say that I have been there and that I have experienced these people and spaces from the point of view of an ethnographer. I have collected and catalogued faded and remote spaces, making sketches of their being and shining a temporary light on the process of their erasure. I have done my best to understand their worlds through my own; I have tried to trace the paths of ghosts through an ethnography: ghosts of childhood, of utopias gone sour, of dreamworlds left in ruin. Through a wilderness of broken windows and salt-stained piers, I pursued—and was pursued by—the spirits of a haunted landscape; haunted not by ghouls, but by the human reverberations of one-time and barely-now inhabited space.

The influences and sources of this project are many and varied, coming from the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, cultural geography and literature. I have drawn on such a wide palette of writers in the hope of creating a multi-faceted and dynamic work that sees space and time from several different perspectives and allows for multiple access points. Key among those whose work I have drawn on for this project is Walter Benjamin and his reflections on memory and childhood found in *A Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, as well as his writings on the figure of the flâneur , historical materialism and the idea of the dreamworld. Similarly, W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* has greatly informed both the style and structure of this piece, providing an excellent model for how one might begin to write places and their associated ghosts into being.

The work of Kathleen Stewart has been a significant influence on my way of conceptualizing ethnography and on how I might approach the careful and deliberate unpacking of everyday life as she has so adeptly accomplished in both *Ordinary Affects* and *A Space on the Side of the Road.* Allen Shelton's *Dreamworlds of Alabama* presents a similar trajectory but approaches the notions of ethnographic space and time through a distinctly personal landscape of

memory, place and affect. Both of these authors' works have served as field guides for my journey through the realms of ethnography and affect, providing my research with a model for thinking through and writing a place-based ethnography made up of temporal fragments, splintered memories and emotional disjuncture.

Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* have all offered detailed insights into how I imagine sense of place, haunting and the collective experience of everyday modern existence. Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* and Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* provide useful touchstones for my project's attention to the myriad of embedded details that flow through everyday notions of forgetting, movement and isolation. Caitlin DeSilvey's recent heritage preservation work on an abandoned homestead in Montana examines the ways in which ruins accumulate time in materiality, a view that I found particularly resonant with my own work in the High Plains.

From the field of anthropology, Tim Ingold's *Lines: a brief history* and Marc Auge's *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* serve as direct influences on the methodological and theoretical bases for my work, as have James Clifford (1997), George Marcus (1998) and Arjun Appadurai's (1988) critical understandings of the changing nature of the discipline of anthropology within an in increasingly globalized world. Cultural geographers David Harvey (2006) and J. B. Jackson (1980) furnish this project with local and global perspectives on time and space and the accumulation of meaning in the absence of human agents.

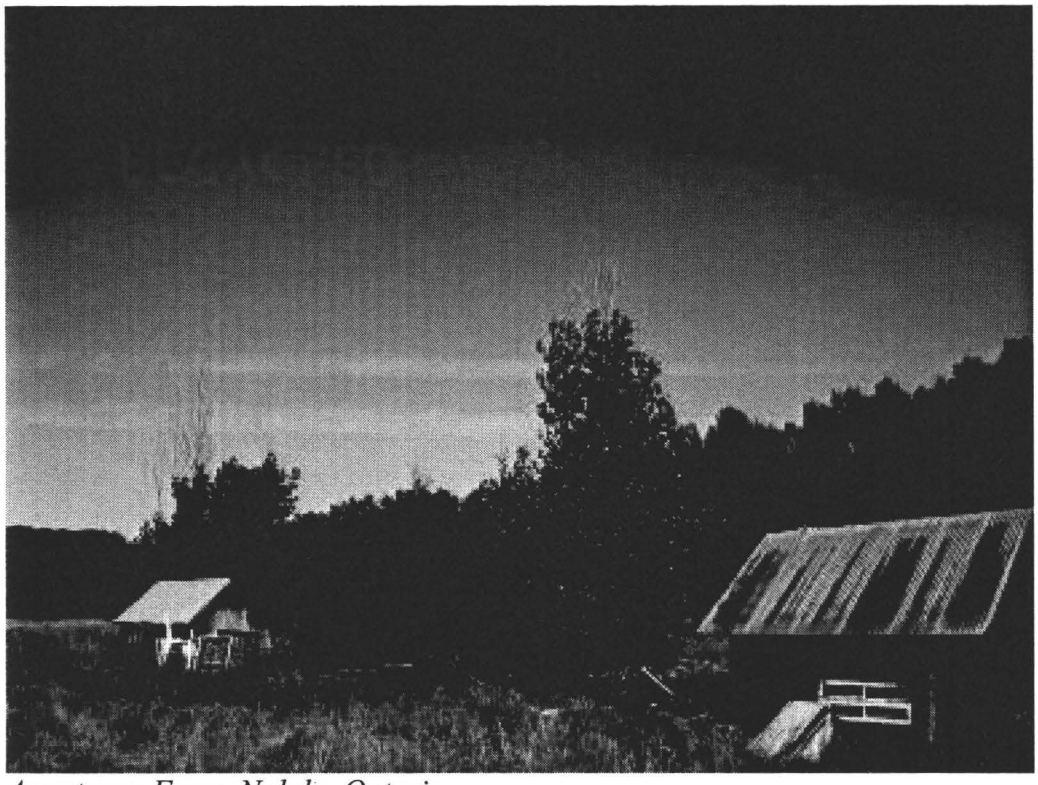
Finally, my dissertation advisor, Petra Rethmann (2008) and her most recent work on nostalgia and memory have greatly influenced the way that I approach ethnographic fieldwork and writing. Her attention to the interconnectivity of time, space and cultural critique has served as a great inspiration for how I engage with ethnographic subjects and their associated spaces. Her constant guidance and critique of my works-in-progress has led me to become a much more focused and reflexive ethnographer.

Following Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, this work is not necessarily a critical study of ghost towns and islands, but more of a series of reflections on what it means to travel in the world of ethnography, always looking, sometimes finding. It is a meditation on time, memory, and haunting, but most importantly it is a kind of instruction manual for experiencing senses of place in marginal space. This project is an open-source field manual to the realm of the dead, to the echoes left in the wake of departure. Nothing here is ever truly complete; there are always tears, pulls and breakages in the fabric, short-circuits

that get re-routed. And while I do offer many critical reflections on the spaces that I've visited and the people that I've spoken with, at its core, this work is about finding new ways of looking at and writing about space as well as the practice of ethnography within that space.

These are some of the things that have happened. Here is a list of paths I've taken, maps scribbled down on the backs of diner cheques. In the end, this is —and can only ever be—what Bourdieu (in Rabinow 2007:163) calls "a work of construction of a representation of social reality". Here, then, is my architecture of abandonment, my cartography of isolation and my formulas for getting lost.

Days of Miracle and Wonder: a personal geography of abandoned space



Armstrong Farm, Nolalu, Ontario

> "All we can do is trace our own images of the world as we have inscribed them onto walls - as stuffed ducks and quilted barns."
> -Kathleen Stewart, "Nostalgia—a polemic"

From where I'm standing along the driveway I can see the shallow indent of a stream that runs between two low hills, and beyond that, a large field bordered by low, scrubby spruce. A slack, rusted barbed-wire fence winds back and forth across the ridge. A forest of endless poplar trunks and tattered birch bark. A worn-out pick-up truck with a mismatched passenger-side door and flat tires rests at the edge of a bumpy road through the woods. The garden that I could, at one time, see from the kitchen window is overgrown and its flower beds have been broken up by wild roots. My father is rummaging through a box of tools, looking for the right wrench in a clanging sea of metal. A conversation we

had while driving through the Badlands of South Dakota as I stared out the window at an alien landscape filled with ghosts and strange topographies[1]. A photo of my sisters and me riding our bikes down the gravel drive with our mother—twenty-five years ago.

For my family, this chunk of land out in the Northern Ontario wild represents a complex suite of emotions and memories, feelings embedded in materiality. For me it's the feeling of a lost home coupled with a nostalgia for a place that no longer exists, untouchable and always absent. Talking with my sisters on the phone one night last summer, they tell me that they feel the same—saddened by the loss of our childhood home and unsure of how things will turn out. We wonder if we'll be able to keep the farm in the family, or whether we might have to sell it off to pay the back taxes. My mother misses the farm, she tells me one Sunday afternoon during our weekly telephone conversation, but she'll never be able to go back. For my mother there are too many difficult memories out there, and this is why she's decided to let go as much as she could and sign the property over to my father after the divorce. My father loves this place, maybe more than any of us, but the memories of evaporated happiness and prosperity weigh him down and he wonders how long he'll be able to stay out there alone.

As I wander through the wreckage of my family's youth, I start to see the accumulated layers of our time out here, but they're not well-preserved in hope chests or photo albums, these artifacts swirl around my feet, they lie in mildewed layers in leaky storage sheds and crumble in my hands when I try and yank them out from under a piece of rotten wood. In the garage I see the old pickle jars with their lids nailed to the roof, filled with screws, bolts, washers and other mechanical ephemera; I remember launching pebbles from a green plastic slingshot and breaking those jars, their ragged edges still frozen, as if I'd just knocked them down twenty seconds, or twenty years ago. This place ripples with memories, flashes that leap out and sting my remembrance in its softest, fleshiest parts. Endless piles of plywood, chipboard, fencing, windows, doors, bricks, drywall, tar paper, fibreglass insulation, ceramic tile and every other building material imaginable that my father hoarded for over twenty years, always intent on reusing these bits and pieces to create some mythical house that never seemed to materialize. A copper thumbtack pinned to the kitchen-cum-workshop wall

1 The Badlands are unlike any terrain I have ever seen: towering spires of chalky earth, weird little rivulets that follow the humps of beige dirt, ravines and miniature canyons that open up onto vast plains as flat as gymnasium floors. The ghosts are the spectres of my father's life in this state, stories about a youth spent roaming the pine forests of the Black Hills with his brothers. The topography is strange because this is the first time that I'm seeing this space, but for my father it's his childhood home. Familiar and strange intertwine just outside the car as my father provides a commentary to this unknown place.

holds a sheaf of water-stained drawings of houses that my father drew. I remember him poring over these blue ink sketches late into the night at the kitchen table, after everyone else had gone to sleep, sometimes by kerosene lamplight, sometimes by the single fluorescent tube light that hung above the kitchen sink. For my father there was always something else, there was always something that had to change in order for us to be happy; I think this is why we first came to this place, to seek solace from what my father saw as the evils of the world of conspicuous consumption and excess[2].

In a shed full of gardening tools, a torn white plastic shopping bag reveals hundreds of seed packets destined for a garden that was never planted. Stacks of grade-school artworks with tempera paint blood dried and mixed in their corners. Everywhere I turn the views have changed, no window or doorway holds the same image; like the artworks they've all decayed into weird versions, asphyxiated by grass and rubble. Books on homesteading, wilderness living and animal husbandry lean in musty, spotted rows like frozen dominoes, forgotten instruction manuals for resistance. Abandoned dreams.

Beginnings

In the following chapter I explore the personal resonance of my childhood spent on an isolated homestead in the forests of Northern Ontario. In unpacking the multiple layers of accumulated memory, haunting and nostalgia that I hold for this place, I outline the genesis of my continued fascination with—and pursuit of —the cultural significance of abandonment and isolation by asking how it might come to be written into ethnographic being. This embedded significance, for me, emerges from a careful attention to the stories that are often told in the unseen/invisible dimensions of space and place: mounds of household detritus, anecdotes told by remaining residents about those who have moved on and died, the spaces left vacant by a home's former occupants. Using my ruined home as a departure point, I have endeavoured to turn the biographies of myself and others into ethnography. Here, it is important for me to understand my own personal relationship to these spaces and their associated resonance before I can accurately represent the people and places of my chosen fieldsites. In this way, my goal is to follow my own experiences with ruins, loss, nostalgia and memory and to translate them into the basis for an ethnographic examination of the ghost towns of the High Plains and the island communities of the Atlantic coast. Ultimately, my intent has been to write abandonment and isolation into ethnographic being while at the same time producing a travelogue of the personal experiences that

2 He never told me this directly, but his politics are written in his disdain for urban life and the way the city seems to breed consumption. He values freedom and spaciousness most of all, and these things are present in abundance on the farm.

have formed my understanding of these ghost towns and islands, as well as the ruined farmstead of my childhood.

This particular examination of the material and spatial qualities of memory develops out of perspectives that I gained after two years of ethnographic fieldwork among some of North America's best examples of abandonment and isolation[3]. Following my fieldwork in these locations, I felt as though I was able to examine the space of my family's abandoned farm from a slight remove; from a distance, I began to understand why I had always been drawn to isolated and abandoned space. It became clear to me that my attraction to abandoned and isolated spaces developed out of a need to understand how others might read the empty spaces of my family farm, how a story could be written into a place and how that narrative could be drawn out into an ethnography. With this attention to the ruins of my childhood home-place, I seek to provide a meditation on spatial memory and geographic longing that will serve as a vital jumping-off point for the following chapters. It also speaks to the ways in which the practice of ethnography is often based in personal journeys of discovery that are designed to answer the ethnographer's questions about their particular place in the world as well as the culture onto which they have focused their anthropological lens.

The process of writing a place into being—especially an abandoned place —requires a specialized approach whereby the emotions, tactility, visuality and locality of a given space must be synthesized into a meaningful narrative, often without the aid of direct human interaction. Many of the spaces that I encountered during my fieldwork were uninhabited and I was often left to perform a kind of historical reconstruction whereby I developed narratives of the spaces through examinations of their materiality, sensorial environments and my own pre-existent filters of experience, history and nostalgia. In spaces without people, one can only delve so deeply into their past. Many of these spaces are beyond the reach of history as it is documented in North America, and rarely, if ever, surface in the literature, leaving only a sense of place that in some ways is aHistorical because its history has been erased with the disappearance of its population. Similarly, there is no public record of my family's life on the farm, and anyone coming across it in the middle of the forest would have only his or her impressions to guide their reading of the place. Hence, this type of ethnography draws heavily on personal memories and nostalgias for its analysis; for this reason, it seems appropriate that, before proceeding, I include a brief outline of the personal histories and narratives that brought me to my current research project.

Like Benjamin's (1999, 2006) desire to preserve the significance of a

3 The post-agricultural ghost-towns of the High Plains and the isolated fishing villages of Grand Bruit, Newfoundland and Matinicus, Maine.

passing era by isolating and recording various childhood memories, I also reflect on some of the fleeting moments and ideals from my childhood that have followed me through my life and quietly inserted themselves into my everyday life. As with Benjamin's (2006) writing on the significance of early memory and experience, my childhood remembrances have provided me with a model for what would eventually become the focus of this ethnographic inquiry into the cultural significance of isolation and abandonment.

In *Berlin Childhood* there is a pervasive sense of nostalgia and lament that reflects a kind of elegy for people and places that no longer exist, a kind of loving obituary of time and place. And while both Berlin and my family farm still remain, they do not exist as they did in the time and space of childhood for Benjamin and myself, respectively. To preserve these spaces in memory is to offer them up as points of consideration and comparison, as frozen memories that act as a mirror for more contemporary discussions of the nature of time and memory. Here, nostalgia, haunting and history can be unravelled through careful analysis and the drawing of connections between mnemonic fragments. For example, the sensation that I experience upon walking into an abandoned house in the ghost town of Bents, Saskatchewan, reflects my feelings of returning to the ruined house where I grew up; in Bents I wanted to know the story of this place's collapse; in my own childhood home, I traced the detailed story of desertion that led me here, reflecting on how I ended up in either place. In Northern Ontario and in Saskatchewan, I wondered exactly what it was that caused places to become abandoned and how I might begin to read and write this sensation into ethnographic being. Similarly, in the isolated community of Grand Bruit, Newfoundland I began to understand the condition of wilful separation from the dominant flows of global time and space through the lens of my father's desire to extract himself and his family from the congestion and compression of the urban world from which he had come. In this way, while I am definitely not an islander living in isolation, nor a one-time occupant of a ghost town, I can begin to place myself in the reflexive state of mind that is necessary to understand the conditions of abandonment and isolation from an ethnographic perspective. In this way, Benjamin serves as a kind of ethnographer of the self when he reflects on his youth in Berlin, addressing memory and the construction of history through his own experiences with it.

In *Berlin Childhood* Benjamin often appears to be attempting to remove himself from the melancholic weight of nostalgia and, by isolating and inscribing these spaces of memory, to be given the opportunity to escape the gravity of his own history. He is, in a sense, collecting and cataloguing his memories and locking them away in a cabinet where they can no longer run wild in the vast expanses of memory. I too feel this pull to return to the imaginary spaces of

remembrance, those nostalgia-filled spaces of childhood; in my writing I have tried to limit my nostalgias and memories to this chapter in order to see them as the genesis of my engagement with isolation and abandonment and to not allow them to overshadow the histories and memories of the people and places that I encountered during my two years of research.

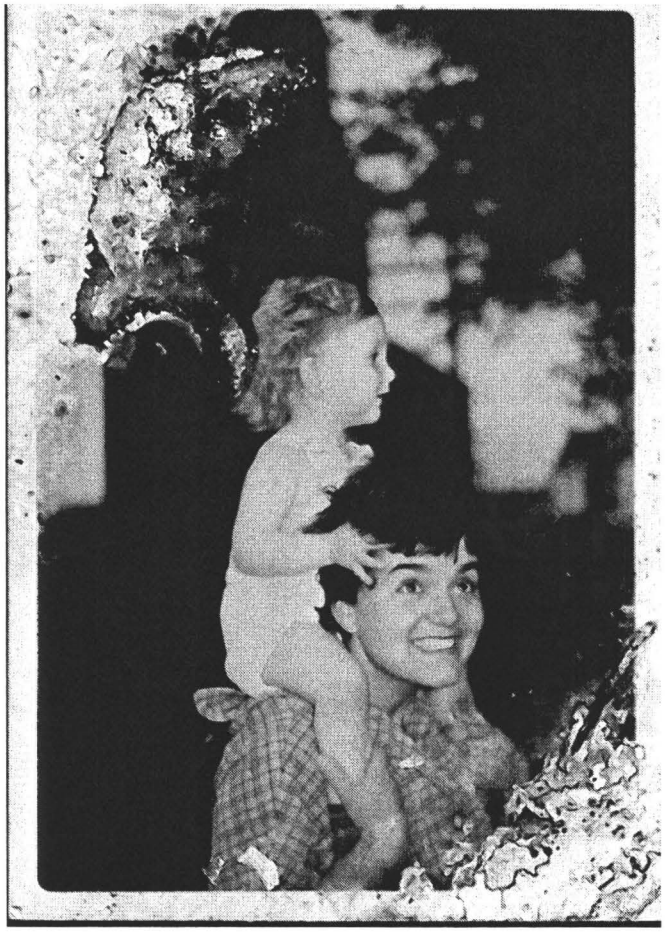
Taking my cues from the reflexive writings on memory and history contained in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (2006), Allen Shelton's *Dreamworlds of Alabama* (2007) and Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2008), I provide these remembrances of my past not only as anecdotes, but also as a means of describing how this particular project has developed out of personal histories, tangled nostalgias and a desire for the organizing force of narrativity. I have attempted to filter these experiences through an ethnographic lens that allows for a re-imagining of home-place both as a departure/arrival point and as a series of interconnected lines of experience (Ingold 2007) in a search for the form and function of isolation and abandonment throughout North America.

Tiny Drawings

In my work, like that of many other anthropologists, the practice of ethnography often forms itself around a collection of images or snapshots of time and place, a set of signs that populates a specific cultural landscape (see Stewart 1996, 2008; Augé 2002; Taussig 2004). My little brown books of fieldnotes are like a collection of tiny drawings of the people and places that I've visited; they're like a series of small electrical wires, connecting particles of memories to one another; they're a map to how and why I remember the paths I've taken. Like German author W. G. Sebald's aphoristic narrative of a walk along the east coast of England that he describes in *Rings of Saturn* (1999), my ethnographic path is inhabited by remembrances for things from different points in my life that act as touchstones that help recall past thoughts and experiences. For Sebald, each encounter with a person or place in his writing acts as a kind of mnemonic device through which various reminiscences, observations and analyses occur. From a conversation with a gardener that leads into a discussion of World War II, to a stay at a seaside hotel that morphs into a history of herring fishing off the English coast in the 19th century, Sebald's narrative is one of interconnected lines of meaning and of moving through the space of memory as being a distinctly experiential act. Similarly, as I move through my chosen subject-space (abandoned and isolated places) certain people, places and things act as access points to my own history and memories, and through these openings, they lead me to new ways of understanding abandoned and isolated spaces ethnographically. In looking for the stories that lie hidden beneath piles of splintered clap-board and in empty farmhouse closets, I utilize both my own remembrance and my training as

an ethnographer to piece together the impact of *lives-once-lived* and the stories that seep up through the cracks in the floorboards. For Sebald, his description of the changing colours of the dead herring (1999:58) becomes an allegory for the connection of physical states of being and the passage of time; in Sebald's story and in my own, the world and its associated *things* change shape alongside the movement of time, misshapen memories warped across time and space.

Like Benjamin, Sebald sees the memory-images that he has written into being as moments of arrested time, they are the signposts that lead to ways of thinking about space as a container for memory and experience. Of standing on a wind-swept beach beside the ocean, Sebald has written that "doubtless it is only a matter of time before…the appearance of the entire area changes. But that day, as I sat on the tranquil shore, it was possible to believe one was gazing into eternity" (1999:59). It is in these isolated slivers of memory that one is able to focus most clearly on the effects of time and place on memory. Similarly, my analysis and way of writing these places into being is informed by my internal geography, by my accumulated and layered history and by the associated nostalgias that haunt the spaces and times of memory. An abandoned village on the Saskatchewan prairie appears to me as a historical inscription of *lives-once-lived* in heartbreak and struggle, hope and happiness. When there is no one left to speak, the remains must speak for their absentee owners; I read the history that has been left for me, making narratives from what lies in place. For others, this town is a reminder of the hard times and faded hope that might best be forgotten. The broken-down trucks in the overgrown yards of Wheelock, North Dakota tell me a story of holding on and always trying to squeeze a few more miles out of a machine; they remind me of my father lying under a similar vehicle in a subzero winter, trying to fix some worn out cable or cracked pump so that we could go into the city for groceries, my sisters and I waiting patiently by the window, hoping to hear the engine turn over. This image in turn calls forth notions of perseverance and resilience and, in so doing, asks questions about what it takes/took to live in this kind of isolated space.

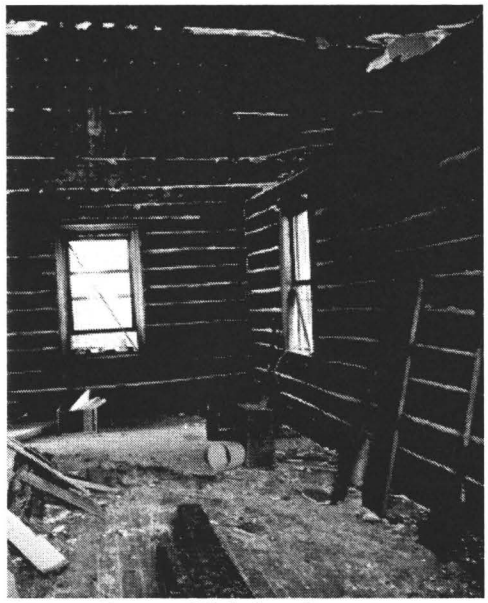


Justin and Aunt Joan, Summer 1979 (discarded photograph recovered from the farm in 2008)

My history informs my footsteps; it tells me where to walk and determines the way that I experience the time and space of abandonment and isolation. History becomes the structure that I hang my perception on, it is the screen on which I cast my experience. As anthropologists, we build our collected images and remembrances into meaningful inscriptions; we translate our image-experiences into concrete texts (ethnographies) that allow ourselves and others to engage with alternate ways of understanding the world. This phenomenon is what Bourdieu (1977:72) has called "the externalization of internality", that is, the transcribing of personal ethnographic experience (fieldwork) and memory into concrete and engaging texts, of translating modes of thought and action across the spaces of cultural experience. Throughout my fieldwork, I have endeavoured to write my experiences and accumulated affect into being, to translate the

hauntological (Derrida 2006) geography of place and to catalogue the individual kinds of haunted dreamworlds that often exist on the periphery of global flows of time and space.

Returning, Again



Living Room, Nolalu, Ontario

After spending the better part of a year travelling throughout North America documenting abandoned and isolated spaces, I returned to my family's uninhabited farmstead west of Thunder Bay, Ontario to meet up with my father and spend a couple of weeks cleaning out storage sheds, salvaging building materials and mowing overgrown lawns. My two sisters were occupied with the everyday responsibilities of work and family, and my mother had decided not to return to the farm after she and my father divorced. I had stopped for a visit on my way back from Saskatchewan en route to New York, and had agreed to help my father with whatever plans he might have for the derelict farmhouse and the rest of the abandoned property.

As the days passed and I moved through these spaces, talking with my father for hours on end, I began to realize that my fascination with abandonment and isolation was rooted in—and routed through—this place and in my experiences of growing up here. I started to see how the way that I now conceptualize an anthropology of isolation emerges out of a childhood spent in relative seclusion on this farm, and how my interest in the processes and

outcomes of abandonment develops out of seeing this place emptied of its people, from asking questions about lives-once-lived as it fades away.

Hints and Allegations

This was not the first time that I'd been back to the farm since my parents left. I'd visited a few summers earlier on a different cross-country drive. Not really sure of what I'd find, I remember feeling overwhelmed and confused as I rounded the final bend in the road and saw an overgrown and ruined space that looked very different than it had in my mind. I remember being disoriented. The space was the same but the sense of place that I'd remembered had been erased, leaving only a ghostly trace of my former life here. A few splintered memories in the form of a couple of rusted bicycles that my sisters and I used to ride the five kilometres to the tiny general store and scattered pages from my grade school workbook on the solar system reminded me that I'd once occupied this space. A constellation of *left-behind* and *no-longer.*

Armstrong Farm, Nolalu, Ontario

In a suitcase I found a ticket stub for a flight from Denver to San Diego and an envelope of photographs: the ocean, seabirds in flight, palm trees, a stone wall at the edge of the beach on a cloudy day. I assumed that my father was the one who'd taken these photos. I wondered why he went to California and what he did there. My father had become one of the innumerable missing pieces that I'd seen countless times rustling on kitchen tables and bedroom floors in empty towns and villages all across the High Plains: children's books piled in a damp corner of a disused schoolhouse in North Dakota; an uneaten can of soup in a doorless cabinet in Saskatchewan; a phone booth in Wyoming without a phone, covered with numbers scrawled in pen and scratched into plastic; an abandoned blue truck in a field of wheat in South Dakota.

For me the farm and its abandoned things represent the ruins of the past, a past that sits somewhat incomplete, filled with unanswered questions about what happened between the time I moved away from home in 1996 and now. This place also embodies a sense of a lost home. I feel a little jealous when my wife and I visit her parents in the house she grew up in, still intact, lived in; I don't have this anymore, the presence of people and life has been erased from this place. And there's a sense of nostalgia that always creeps in when I think about the old log cabin and the buzz of a rusty Honda lawn mower, the kind that wasn't self-propelled and had to be pushed, struggling over lumps and dips in the yard. Nostalgia for a place that exists as a utopian dream gets caught in the flywheel of *what-ifs* and *could-have-beens* as I see them written in do-it-yourself projects like the tumbled down windmill, the cracked-in-half yogurt-maker and the feral mint population that's overrunning the old garden plot. I get nostalgic when I see the mouldy kid's clothes that we used to wear and when I uncover a sun-bleached birthday card from my parents that they gave me on my ninth birthday. I get a similar feeling out on the Plains, in other people's empty bedrooms with other cards from other birthdays that remind me that there's always a sense of loss hiding somewhere in abandonment.

Coming Back Into The Country

I'm thirty and it's August of 2007. I'm walking down the drive again, alone and with a different sense of this place now that I'm older and taller. The spruce trees that we'd planted along the road as seedlings have grown to over six meters, blocking out the view to the field where we used to keep the horse. Knee-high weeds tie up the road, but under my feet I can still hear the faint and familiar crackle of hard-packed gravel, reminding me of the one kilometre walk to and from the place where the school bus used to drop us off. Nature has begun to re-inscribe itself on this once-inhabited place. Just like the other abandoned places I visited, the road has become river of grass, undriven and wild.

I think back to the family of mice that I found in an abandoned farmhouse in North Dakota, how the absence of people made a space for their animal lives, about how cultural *dwelling* often resists natural *being* (Ingold 2002). In a way, the abandonment of spaces and objects is a return to nature, a termination of a contract. Perhaps abandonment is simply the erasure of living, human culture from space, a return of ownership to the wild.

The Sound of Birch Trees in August

My father, August 2008

> "Everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things."
> -Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*

Now, at the end of the road, all I hear is the sound of birch and aspen leaves flickering in the wind. No domestic animal or human sounds; no records playing in the workshop that my father once used to make his stained-glass windows. The first winter that nobody lived out here the pipes burst and flooded the workshop, now there's a grey-black patch of rotten wood that covers most of the floor. I remember walking over to the brightly lit cottage where my father used to work on his lamps and windows in the evenings: old, warbly folk records spinning on the turntable, a little Ashley wood-stove roaring away and my father's untamed hair illuminated from below by a light-table that he used to cut the pieces of stained-glass. That version of my father is just a ghost now.

As I look around, I see all of the buildings and lawns emptied of humanness and a sudden uncanny nostalgia washes over me. It is the feeling of simultaneously being at home and feeling displaced; the familiar and the strange converge in this space and in the way that I see the farm on this early August afternoon. My nostalgia for this place is tempered with a haunted uncertainty because, here, I am at home and homeless; my childhood home is in ruin, but the space is somehow still marked out as a kind of *home* in my mind. Freud's (2003) essay on the uncanny describes this feeling as one of being a disconcerting combination of familiarity and revulsion; it is a hybrid of conflicting emotional responses to a given phenomenon. Freud (2003) writes that "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and familiar", a notion that resonates deeply with my experiences of encountering both my own abandoned space and the abandoned spaces of others. It is a feeling of nostalgia and recognition that is coloured by an eerie and uncomfortable out-of-place strangeness.

This miniature vortex of affective time-space is what Kathleen Stewart (1988:227) has called "the nostalgia of and for local, nameable places" that function as "simultaneous images in the arenas of life-style, spectacle, and loss". Here, Freud's uncanny and Stewart's nostalgia combine to create a tear in local/personal time-space resulting in a state of affective disjuncture whereby memory and the present appear to be slightly misaligned. The old kitchen in the house has become a workroom; a large table-saw sits where we used to eat dinner, a thin layer of sawdust covers everything. A waterlogged box of vinyl LPs rests near a broken record player on the counter. For a while my father tried to rebuild this place, but after a few months of isolation he couldn't manage and left the farm for the winter, heading first to Colorado and then on to Mexico. And now I'm here, standing amongst the left-overs, in the eerie quiet with torn-up memories fluttering around my head.

Fred Davis (1979:102) describes the feeling of mnemonic discontinuity as that of becoming "aware of a rent in the larger existential fabric of our being-in-the-world, where formerly we perceived a whole", whereby nostalgia seeks to perform a kind of patch job on the holes that emerge in our imaginary past. When confronted with breaks in this narrative, we are forced to confront the fragility of time and space in our memories. If we are not directly exposed to the rupture of memory, it continues along the same linear, unbroken trajectory. As I walk between the buildings and gardens of my former home, I can see the decay that remained hidden in my memory during my ten years of absence. In part, to write this place into being is to perform this repair on my memory, to re-establish broken circuits, and following Stewart (1988:229) I begin to see how "nostalgia becomes the very lighthouse waving us back to shore—the one point on the

landscape that gives hope of direction". Here, my aim is to use nostalgia as a guide, as a means of directing myself toward a larger critique of how abandonment and isolation function as modes of being-in-the-world.

Home/Place

The farm is an isolated point of land. It sits at the end of narrow dirt track that leads off a gravel road that winds its way down to the asphalt of Highway 588. In many ways, it's an island of specific history and of a particular set of memories of my family and of our twenty-some years in the countryside. Standing in the waist-high grass of the one-time front yard, I wonder how others might read this place and how their own projections and imaginations might shape the space differently. Along these lines, Kathleen Stewart (1988:227) argues that "[n]ostalgia, like the economy it runs with, is everywhere. But it is a cultural practice, not a given content; its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the context—it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present", an idea that speaks to the subjectivity and fluidity of nostalgia(s) and the ability for remembrance to colour ways of seeing and sensing time and space.

My psychological and geographic landscapes (like those of Sebald and Benjamin) are populated by different times and places, each of them informing and informed by my present position in time and space. This particular island of the present—the farm—is haunted by the " forms, meanings, and effects" of my experience. The nostalgia that I may have felt upon visiting this place three years ago, before I had undertaken my research on abandoned and isolated space, was different than the nostalgia that I feel today, or the nostalgia that I will experience when I return to the farm in thirty or forty years. Of course, I am not unique in this experience; everyone understands and reflects on their own time and place through different lenses. But, for me, this is what ethnography is, in some sense —the description of a particular time and place through a specific lens (or set of lenses). The subjective production of memory overlays space in a way that does not discriminate; each encounter with place and time is informed by personal memories and experiences. In essence, the ethnographer becomes a type of temporary resident as he or she spreads out their own memory blanket and tries to read between the wrinkles and folds. On this notion of subjectivity in memory, de Certeau (1988) writes that "memory produces in a place that does not belong to it. It receives its form and its implantation from external circumstances, even if it furnishes the content (the missing detail)", in this way, ethnographic fieldsites appear as partially completed texts onto which we, as ethnographers, inscribe our own memories, emotions and biases. Ultimately, our subjects and our analysis are always-already what Clifford (1986:7) has called "partial truths" that are "inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete", leaving the ethnographer with

the complex work of excavating and organizing meanings from the accumulated layers of half-truths. Rather than something that takes away from the process of ethnography, I believe that this condition of incomplete texts is exactly what makes anthropology such a dynamic and malleable practice.

In writing on the abandoned ghost towns of the High Plains and the isolated island communities of Grand Bruit, Newfoundland and Matinicus, Maine, this deserted farm from my childhood appears as a significant and logical starting point for an ethnography that winds its way across frayed and blurred narratives, dead-end roads, empty houses, wordless evenings and the sound of nothing but wind. In Maine, people can often be heard telling someone who has just asked for directions that they *can't get there from here*, and while this may be true in Maine, I believe that here, in the space of ethnography, one can always get there from here—as long as we don't mind enduring a few cuts and scrapes along the way.

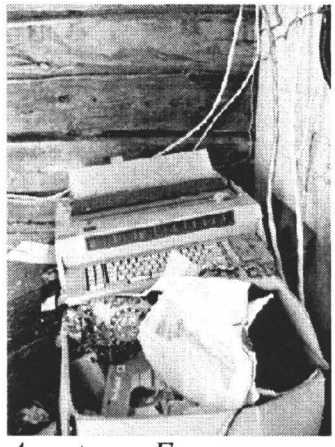
Darkness on the Edge of Town

Now, at the end of my fieldwork, I'm less concerned with deciphering the hidden codes of leaving and emptiness and I instead turn to an examination of the series of events that brought me to where I now stand and how I might begin to write these accumulated times and spaces into ethnographic being. Here, I begin to question how time and place are constructed within anthropological discourse and how we, as ethnographers, might start to break apart the fibres that comprise the spatial-cultural-temporal fabric that is often the focus of our discipline. How, for example, can a sense of place, with all of its associated memories, histories and nostalgias be inscribed into an ethnographic record? How does the biographical become the ethnographic? How do these qualities emerge from the practice of fieldwork, and what kind of fieldwork produces these sorts of impressions?

Michael Jackson (1995) has described the process of unpacking the time and space of experience as a "palimpsest of moments in time [that] may also be conceived of spatially. Every story told is a break in the journey"(157). Here, I imagine the story of my fieldwork as something that can be seen as a series of accumulated temporal fragments that work to create a detailed picture of an anthropologist's ethnographic trajectory, of the process of coming to understand what it means to do fieldwork and to write the stories of people, places and things. For Jackson, the significance of the story does not always reside in the destination and its analysis; sometimes the stories contained *within* the journey itself become the most resonant and meaningful. The following chapters act as a retracing of my steps, of the thousands of kilometres that I covered in search of what is now so plainly spread out in front of me. The empty buildings and creeping forest are what I was always destined to return to. What interests me now is how I might

begin to describe the process of coming to know a place and its cultural and personal significance through narrative and memory.

On Being Lost



Armstrong Farm,
Nolalu, Ontario

And now, at the end of the driveway, I'm kind of home, but I'm also a bit lost. Lost in the sense that very little about this place has remained the same, so much has changed shape; I feel a bit unsettled in this once familiar place. My old bedroom houses stacks of unpaid land tax bills, scratched-out ledgers and receipts for bailer twine and hydraulic fluid; in my sister's room a blue jay perches on the window ledge, just beyond the torn mesh of a screen once used for keeping out mosquitos. The garden has been overtaken with weeds and the low-spot in the lawn has become a marshy bog. Everywhere I look, the stories that I remember being attached to certain buildings, places on the property and times of day become skewed by their decay. The old red barn where my sisters and I used to play hide-and-seek now lies in a dejected clump of splintered wood. The little cottage at the edge of the property where my grandparents used to stay when they visited us, is now filled with rusty garden implements and retired power tools; seeing it like this makes it harder to remember what it was like when they were still a part of this place. The old logging road that runs behind our place up to the municipal sideroad is littered with intruding saplings and dead-fallen trees, marks of years of having been unused. We called this path through the woods The Back Lane and we'd always plead with my father to use it as an alternate driveway whenever we'd pass it on the way home from the garbage dump. Even the beat-up Ford pick-up we used to drive is now without windows, resting quietly under a

small patch of willow trees behind the house. Everything is here, but its form has been altered to such an extent as to frame it as a rupture in my history, an ever-widening hole in my memory banks. Rebecca Solnit (2005:25) sums up this notion of uncomfortable nostalgia quite effectively when she claims that "[y]ou already know what seems unknown; you have been here before, but only when you were someone else"; for me, the trick in all of this is to find that person I was before and ask them how to reassemble all the fragments of a life-once-lived. Out in the abandoned and isolated places of my research—in the places I thought I didn't know—I was searching for the same person, looking for answers to what had already happened.

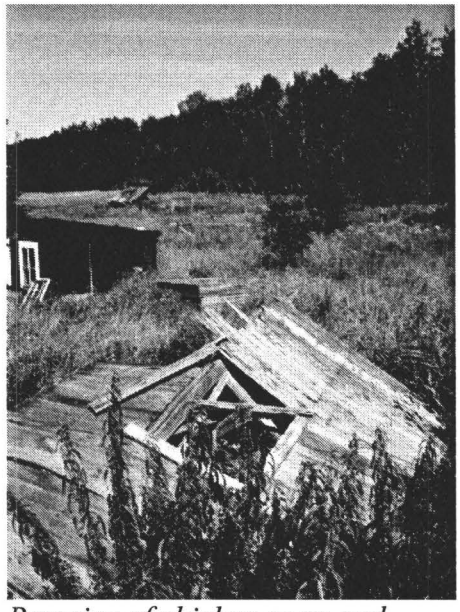
There are few original landmarks left on the farm and those that do persist are broken or faded. I feel at grounded and lost at the same time among the warped world of my one-time home. Still, even though it is unnerving, sometimes to be lost is a valuable experience (Sebald 1999, Solnit 2005). To be lost forces one's hand in the rebuilding and reformatting of memory, it creates openings for critical inspections and affective readings of time and space. To be outside of what is known and comfortable is to refocus one's awareness. In this way, being lost requires one to reassess their location and retrace their steps in order to better understand the process by which they arrived at a particular time and place (Jackson 1995, Ingold 2007).

Revolutionary Waste

It's the beginning of August 2008 and we're out along the driveway piling up the scrap metal that we've pulled out of various outbuildings and from beside the paths that snake their way back and forth across the property: old logging tracks, an abandoned municipal road, land survey lines. We're stacking up industrial garbage, the material remainders and reminders of other times and places that accumulate in space. We're dragging the bent steel frames of mid-century vehicles out of the woods and along with them we're trailing stories of abandoned things in isolated space. My father tells me a story about how he acquired a now-lifeless Mazda RX-3 hatchback from a guy that he worked with at a photography studio in Moose Jaw. The guy—Mark—lived in a one-room apartment above the studio; he handed my father the keys, smoking, shirtless and sitting on mattressless box spring. That car always had a weird smell; I lean over and sniff the upholstery, but there's no more weird Mark smell, just the odour of the decaying leaves on the floor mats. I remember riding up a dirt road in the car's back seat, its pock-marked faux-leather seats squeaking as I shifted my position to compensate for the rough road. I remember its hatchback filled with shards of coloured glass and a home-made grinding wheel that my father used to make his stained-glass windows; I remember the golden dog hair on the back seat

from our long-gone Lab/German Shepherd mix, Hannah. I remember my mother holding my younger sister in her lap in the front seat as we drove down the shore of Lake Superior to spend the Christmas of 1982 with my grandparents in Minnesota. The car is a material part of the story of our life out here, it's a part of the story of how things get left behind in time and place and how they accumulate in deeper and deeper layers of significance. Now, spindly trees grow out of the hole where the Mazda's engine used to be. Moments of all of our lives are written in the collected objects of this Northern Ontario landscape. Allen Shelton (2007) describes this accumulation of personal histories as a "soft arcade", a fluid and spectral passageway of time and remembrance that human beings inhabit and that, in turn, inhabits us. In this space, the arcades of the lives of my family are lined by a smashed-in Ford Fairlane and coils of barbed-wire that used to make deep dark cuts in the legs of runaway horses. These arcades are filled with haunted memories that are unshakeable; they layer themselves on top of one another and are always "relived as day-dreams" (Bachelard 1994:6). Here, in the space of memory, a dwelling is more than a structure and a piece of land, it is also a web of histories and personal resonances.

Maps



Remains of chicken coop and barn, Nolalu, Ontario

It's taken me over two years to reach this point. I'm standing here in the silence of an extended August evening watching the Northern Lights pulse out greens and yellows and I can see where I've been and how I got from here to there. I can also see the paths that weave themselves back and forth across time and place, always ending up where they began. I start to understand what holds people in place and what makes them leave. I remember walking along a dirt road with a farmer's wife in North Dakota and asking her why she wanted to stay out here, in what is often imagined as *the middle of nowhere.* Looking over at me through a pair of slightly oversized dusty glasses, she tells me that it's the quiet and the open space that keep her here. "I can't even imagine what a place like New York would be like—too many people; I've got no interest in that", she says, tugging at her white and blue-flecked over-sized cable-knit sweater. "Last night I saw the moon shine in through my bedroom window at 4 AM, by 6 there were only stars—that's what I love about North Dakota". She met her husband at a laundromat nineteen years ago and hasn't left since; she's rooted in this place. Even as the towns where her friends used to live have been emptied out, she holds on to the prairie for all it's worth. I think back to a farmer in Saskatchewan who told me that the silence and the endless prairie horizon have driven people crazy for years, "too much for some of 'em" he tells me. I can sympathize. Having driven through the Plains for weeks on end, I understand how the sometimes desolate space of the prairie can work its way into a person's mind, how the never-ending wind won't let you sleep and how the stark, wide roadways never seem to arrive anywhere. Sometimes, on those unilinear drives, what I wanted most in the world was a curve in the road—something to remind me that I was actually moving somewhere. On the Plains, the potential for both embeddedness and abandonment seems to be almost hard-wired; some people root themselves in place, while others get caught in the wind and tumble out of sight. There are those who have gone, those who have stayed and those who are always-already leaving. And at the heart of these spaces, there's a story behind every inhabitation and every abandonment, but sometimes those histories are buried too deeply to be excavated in full. Here, *being* is inscribed into the soil, stories are written in the dirt. I see this possibility in the farm. In a place like this, one must either dig their heels in or leave.

Scraps of History

What I know about the history of Nolalu[4] and our farm is made out of a series of knotted and frayed lines of remembrance, bits and pieces that trickled down from the stories that I often heard the old people telling my parents at the

4 Nolalu is the name of the nearest village to the farm; it has about 100 residents, a small store, a restaurant/bar and a community centre.

post office or in the general store at the bottom of the hill. The history of this place is a temporal and narrative patchwork that tends to skip over missing pieces and re-route dead ends. This is a local history that is not written down, it is an oral narrative that is cut-and-pasted from rumours, half-remembered stories and from being in one place for many years. This is an example of Benjamin's (1969) view of an alternate history that can be pulled (redeemed) from the fragments of accumulated time, constructed out of the reassembled pieces that run below the surface of the popular flows of history. There seems to be a limited amount of available space within the canon of History, and all lesser fragments of time and remembrance appear to be relegated to the garbage pile of time that sometimes sits in "a space on the side of the road" (Stewart 1996), waiting for some form of acknowledgement, redemption. Among these discarded story fragments, my family has been written into the landscape, into the network of Nolalu's people, places and things. I remember stopping at the general store on one of my first trips back to the farm after many years of absence and being asked an almost endless stream of questions by the old couple that had run the store for as long as I could remember. Where had I been? Where was my father? Who was taking care of the farm? Did anyone still live out there? Was I coming back to stay? Here, I became the potential for them to fill in the missing pieces of the history of this place, the possibility for a few more fragments redeemed. My family's absence from this place had not only been physical, but also historical; our being-away had created unknown holes in the local narrative history. Now these people wanted to patch their quilted history with my presence. Histories of these kinds of stitched-together places tend to accumulate in people's memories and form new worlds of remembrance out of a kind of *bricologic* temporality (Benjamin 1969, Stewart 1996). With each new piece of the puzzle, the tectonic plates of local being shift and form new connections of being-in-time-and-space. This is the process through which, as Stewart (1996:90) claims, "the effects of history lie gathered into a space of impacts and remainders storied as a space on the side of the road". Nolalu, the farm and my family are histories on the side of the road.

The landscape of Nolalu is populated by characters who form another constellation of historical remembrance, an intersection of local being and time. I remember an old Finnish man who lived in a broken-down cabin up one of the dirt sideroads. We'd often see him making his daily trek to the one-lane bridge that spanned the Whitefish River, hoping to catch a glimpse of a submarine in the shallow water that ran beside the post office. I remember my father asking him if he'd seen any "U-boats" that day and the answer was always "not yet". This character is fixed in the space of my remembrance of this place, and through him I remember the other bits and pieces of that time: the beige half-ton truck that my father drove, our Airedale terrier, Syke sitting between us as we made our weekly

trip to the feed supplier, the colour and sound of the river and of the tire-noise on the zig-zagged wood of the bridge.

I remember finding old photos of the people that lived on the farm before us—another group of back-to-the-landers who let go of their dreamworld—and my father telling me about meeting them and buying the land. I remember an old lumberjack sitting with my father at the kitchen table and telling him about how what we called The Back Lane used to be the main road to Nolalu back in the twenties and how the crooked shed half-way up the hill was once the building where the electric generator was housed. Pieces of history start to line up, others disappear.

Most of these histories had to be inferred during my fieldwork in the deserted ghost towns of the Plains. I had to construct my own narratives of time and place, I had to create my own worlds out of what I found in the empty houses and hollowed-out storefronts. These bits and pieces of history weren't mine, and so I had to draw them out of hiding using only the scattered clues that had been left behind. Of course, all of these stories that I told myself were based on my own sense of place and on the practice of trying to map my personal collection of lines and experiences onto other sites of memory. But isn't this what we're always doing as ethnographers—mapping our own imaginations onto the spaces of others? And I wonder if there is a kind of nostalgia, remembrance or common history that can be transferred between sites by the ethnographer? I stand at the side of a dirt road in Saskatchewan and stare at a deserted farmhouse that I've never seen before. It does look a lot like the house where I was born.

Go West Young Man

He's just twenty and it's 1969. He's heading west to San Francisco. He's standing at the side of the road outside White Bear Lake, Minnesota; his hair is blonde and he hasn't grown a beard yet. He wants to visit Haight-Ashbury before it crumbles; he wants to live the hippie dream on the other side of Great Divide, at least for a little while. He gets the shit kicked out of him in Wyoming by some cowboys. Somewhere in Idaho we gets a ride from an escaped psychiatric patient on the run from the police who tells him that he's going down fighting and he's taking the young Minnesotan with him. He reaches for the Bowie knife tucked into his boot. The driver catches a glimpse of the steel and screams something about bad ideas. He grabs the wheel and in the struggle the car hits an embankment and flips over. The last thing he remembers is being upside down and then nothing until he wakes up in a mess of blood and glass. The driver's seat is empty. He finds a gas station bathroom a ways down the road where he tries to clean up, but it's too late, someone's already called the cops. They pin everything on him and put him in jail. A few days later they catch the wounded driver trying to steal another car and they let the hippie go free. When he makes it to San Francisco, he lives on nothing, eating the free food given out by the Diggers every day at four o'clock in Golden Gate Park and crashing at various run-down apartments along Haight Street. He'd wanted to see what was going on in California for himself; he hung out with aspiring rock stars, junkies and displaced suburban kids from places like New Canaan, Connecticut and White Plains, New York and took LSD at a midnight showing of the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* film. After a few months, he goes home through Nebraska where he gets caught for hopping a train and spends some time in a little jail on the prairie. His father, the chief of police back in White Bear Lake, comes to pick him up—turns out he went to the police academy with the local sheriff. They don't talk all the way back to Minnesota.

His past is always re-written, but his future remains unwritable. These are just some of the stories that make up the Dream, it tells him who he was and who he has become. He told me other stories of the sixties as we drove across the Dakotas and I just sat there, filling in the tiny narrative holes of my father's history.

I've just turned thirty and it's 2007. Now I'm heading west, into Wyoming. I want to visit the ghost towns of the Dakotas before they're swept up in the wind that's always-already blowing in from Paradise. This wind is Benjamin's (1969) allegory for change and progress; it's something that's always blowing in from some place better, newer, and ultimately unknowable. In this case, among the wheatfields of the Plains, Paradise is an intricate constellation of agri-business, shifting global and local economies and steady rural-urban migration. I'm looking for answers to why people leave and to how I can write

their absence into an ethnography. I get drunk on cheap gin with an oil rig worker in a hotel bar in Williston, South Dakota. We talk about the end of the world and the evils of money and oil. At the end of the night, after the bar has closed and the bartender is collecting bottles and wiping down the bar, I stand up to leave and the oil rig worker throws his arms around me and hugs me tightly. He tells me to speak only the Truth. That's all he wants, that I tell it like it is. But like the Cree hunter in James Clifford's "Partial Truths", "I'm not sure I can tell the truth....I can only tell what I know" (1986:8).

Abandoned bicycle, Nolalu, Ontario

The Collector

We spend most of one day at the farm organizing various tools, notebooks and work clothes that my father has managed to accumulate over the years. He is an eternal collector, always hesitant to throw anything away, always concerned that its usefulness might resurface some day, that it can be redeemed. I find myself constantly asking him if this broken shovel or that moth-eaten jacket can be thrown away; sometimes he says yes, most often he says something like "just put it over there for now". The acreage is littered with enough building materials to construct four new homes. My father has salvaged everything from glass blocks to steel fire doors. He does this because he can't stand to see these things

end up as landfill. He talks about building a new house. Perhaps this is how he intends to rewrite his history. By building a new house, my father will re-inscribe himself on this space, he'll be able to re-calibrate the parameters of the Dream.

My father collects and accumulates *things*, he ties knotted stories around each artifact that I uncover and situates it in his own narrative of time and space. Here, his collections form a history of his being in the world, they build a wall that pushes against emptiness and the years spent away from the farm. Each piece of the collection tells a story through its relationship to other things and to my father; they're all tied to the times and places of his life: a suitcase with ticket stubs from trips I never knew he took, an old sweatshirt with the word COLORADO printed on it that he got as a Christmas gift from my aunt when he lived in that state, a toolbox full of specialized woodworking tools, faded family photos with weird candy-coloured water stains in their corners. In a way, I'm performing an archaeology of my father and at the same time, of his son and daughters and their mother. In this setting we're all a bit like ghosts. We're all always-already present in the things and places that I uncover in the farm's outbuildings and in mildewed cardboard boxes.

Dismantling Memory

I'm inside the old farmhouse with two of my childhood friends who've come out for the day to help with some demolition. We're pulling down plaster from the ceiling in the one-time living room and knocking out the plank walls upstairs. I think that it must be strange for them to be dismantling a house that they often visited, a place where we used to have sleep-overs and birthday parties. Their memories of this place will now be punctuated by its collapse. But this isn't how it is for my father, at least that's what he tells me. By destroying this house my father is trying to rewrite his isolation by erasing the memories of a different time and rebuilding his vanished dreamworld. For me, our old family selves are like mythical ancestors now, only alive in a couple of scattered photos and flickery memories. Among the ghost towns of the Plains, there's no one left to lovingly dismantle the memories contained in the abandoned houses and caved-in grain elevators; there's no one left to rewrite history. Without some kind of attention, these places seem destined to fade away into forgetting and out of history.

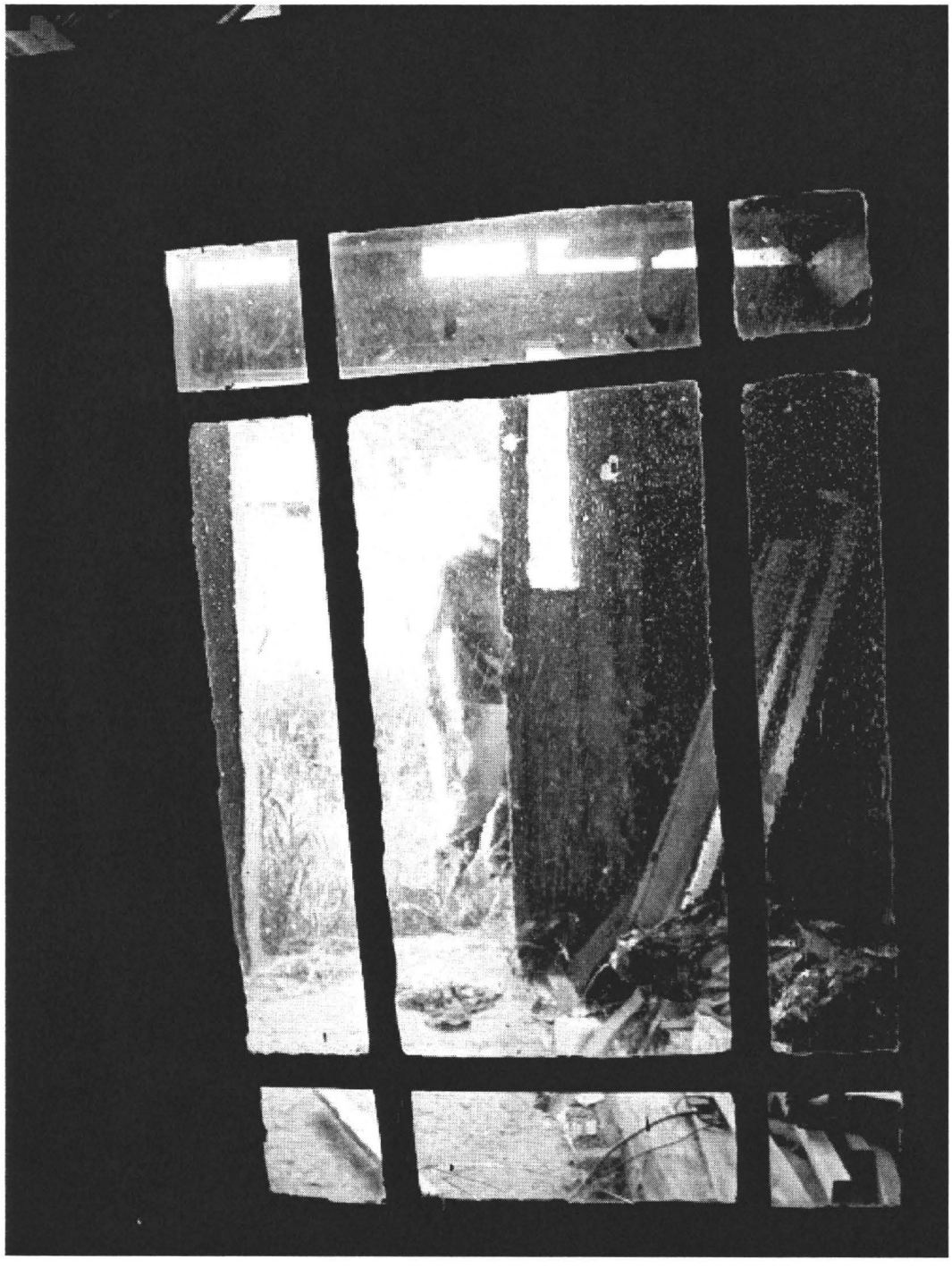
Author and his father, Nolalu, Ontario

I'm sitting on the tailgate of the blue Ford pickup with my father. We're looking out into the area that we used to call "the pasture"; there aren't any horses or cows or goats to eat the grass and it's become overgrown. Nature has begun to seep back in. He's telling me how happy he is out here, in the wild, away from the noise and thick light of the city. He'd been living in Colorado Springs for the past few years, taking care of his ageing parents. They're both almost ninety. He tells me that he's glad to be back where he belongs. I wonder if he really belongs here, in this time. My father's time is what Bloch (1977) calls "nonsynchronism", a time apart, moving at a different rate and in alternate paths from here to there. He tells me not to worry about him, I tell him that that's impossible.

What follows is an ethnographic sketch of space-based experiences, of moments of lives-once-lived and of lives on the periphery. It is the beginning of my attempt to draw an atlas of maps of memory and space, of forgetting and remembering people, places and things. At times, I might chase my tail, I may even catch it for a moment or two, but it will always get away and I'll keep on following it to all of the islands and ghost towns that I can find. For me, the abandoned farm in Northern Ontario is only the starting point of this project

because it led me to question how people remember places and how places remember people.

And so I begin my search for other abandoned and isolated worlds, hoping to find the place where the dreamworlds of here and there begin to overlap. Like Tom Petty, I'm "runnin' down a dream, that never would come to me, workin' on a mystery, goin' wherever it leads".



Incidents and accidents: wayfaring as ethnographic methodology

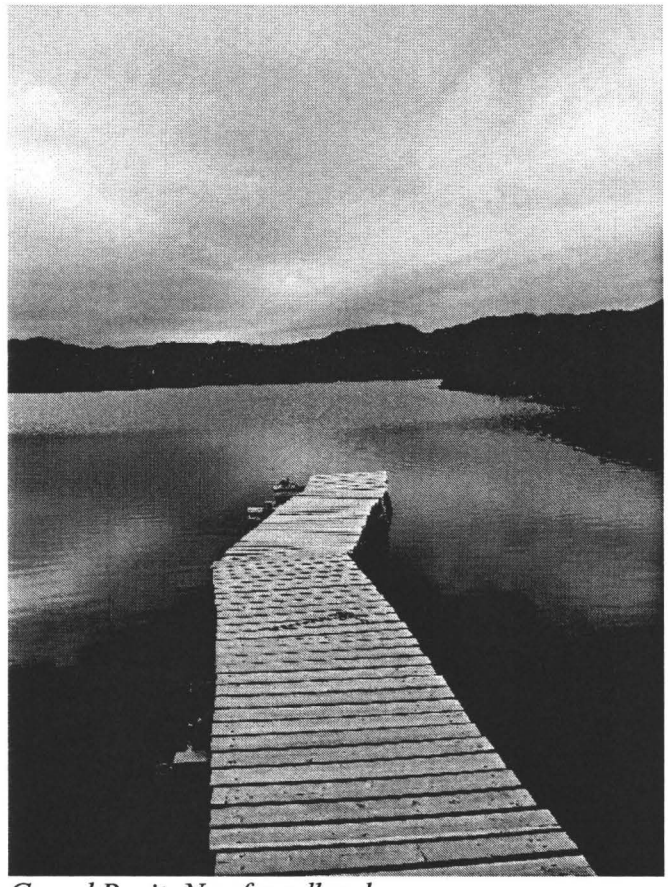
Saskatchewan

> "The storyteller falls in step with the lively pace of his fables. He follows them in all their turns and detours, thus exercising an art of thinking"
> -Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

> "Airplane flights are usually from city to city, but in between are the untrodden realms to which you can only give approximate labels—somewhere in Newfoundland, somewhere in Nebraska or the Dakotas." (Solnit 2005:40)
> -Rebecca Solnit, A *Field Guide to Getting Lost*

From fieldnotes written in Buffalo, Wyoming on October 18, 2007:
Sometime in the night, in an abandoned city in Wyoming, I got lost. Like floating on a wild sea, in a small white lifeboat, I drifted. Familiar shores out of sight, waves of blown-dry topsoil and yellow grasses pushed me on through the night. When I woke up, I found myself in an unknown place, a terra incognita *of beautiful weirdness.*

Good-Evening, Distant Shores: on becoming a psychoethnographer



Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

My interest in developing an ethnographic methodology based on unplanned and randomized movements first emerged from fieldwork for a project on the street art of New York City and London (Armstrong 2005). While conducting this research, I travelled increasingly deeper into spider-webbed back alleys and side streets in search of artwork, always seeking ever-narrowing and disused passageways that held fragments of the city's ephemeral visual culture amongst the brick and cement of the urban margins. After several weeks of moving through both cities' less-trodden spaces, my experience of their geographic spaces began to shift noticeably. What had once appeared to be a simple series of streets, sidewalks and subway tunnels now became a complex network of layered topographies with unique visual and spatial characteristics, generated by my search for street art. As I slowed my pace and continued to vary my movements through the levels of urban space, I began to develop new mental

maps of the city. My experience of these places became one that was infused with new modes of thought and movement, an approach that was based on chance encounters and indeterminate lines of motion. With time, the cities and their environs changed from a series of linear subway rides and A-to-B sidewalks into a constellation of visually significant spaces and overlooked corners; these marginal spaces were street art's natural habitat. Through a re-imagining of urban space and place, London and New York were transformed for me into an accumulation of interconnected webs of spray-painted walls and faded posters glued to metal doors, all linked by lines of movement that were generated by a conscious avoidance of the conventional routes (major streets, wide shopping avenues, expressways) and modes (taxi, subway, fast-paced and directed walking) of urban travel.

These invisible lines that connected the locations of street art—when carefully studied—revealed subcutaneous maps of the city drawn by the artists in the night. To avoid detection (street art is illegal and carries hefty fines in both London and New York), artists often work under the cover of darkness, in out-of-the-way places where curious pedestrians, the police and the omnipresent closed-circuit-television cameras are less likely to interfere with their work. As a result, street artists have created a new sense of urban topography for someone who endeavours to follow their unseen lines from one piece to another—each poster or sticker becomes a point plotted on an imagined map that can be traced from one side of the city to the other. To be able to effectively and critically engage with this artform and its spaces, one must follow a different kind of mental map, one that establishes a new form of urban geography, an alternate topography of the city and its passageways.

And it was in the moment of recognizing this subcutaneous cartography of the city, that I was able to step back and examine the lines that my own movements had inscribed onto urban space—the paths that I'd followed—that I realized that I'd been walking along the lines of a map that formed an alternate pattern of moving through cityspace. This realization lead me to re-examine the work of Guy Debord and the Situationists International with a specific interest in their theories of *dérive* (translated from French as 'drifting') and psychogeography (the study of the effects of the built environment on the psychology of city dwellers). Through a careful examination of key Situationist writings (Debord 1955, 1958, Chtcheglov 1958), I began my initial attempts at translating these political and artistic practices into a viable ethnographic methodology.

Perhaps Walter Benjamin's (1999, 1983) examination of the figure of the *flâneur*—a character first introduced by Baudelaire (1970) in the mid-19th century as someone who wanders the streets observing everyday life at arm's length, looking but never touching—provides the most logical starting point for a

discussion that incorporates the Situationist practice of *dérive* into what I call *psychoethnography* (a combination of psychogeography and ethnography). The flâneur can be described as an urban wanderer who ambles leisurely through the city and its various environs, without a concern for time or direction, moving through space simply to experience the urban environment as it presents itself. For the flâneur, the ability to free oneself from the constraints of time (affording themselves the luxury of *slowness*) offers this modern wayfarer the opportunity to move in alternate spaces and times without any concern for specific agendas. No longer are the city's streets a means to an end, they have become an end unto themselves, resonant with qualities available only to those with the temporal surplus necessary to explore this parallel dimension of urban space. On this notion of accumulating surplus time in the face of the industrialized, modernized cult of speed, Benjamin (1999:107) writes that the flâneur maintains the ability to "store time as a battery stores energy" which, implies that to be able to experience an alternate cityspace, one must be afforded the opportunity to accumulate a sufficient amount of surplus time. At one point in his discussion of the flâneur and temporality, Benjamin essentially outlines a kind of proto-psychogeography when he states that:

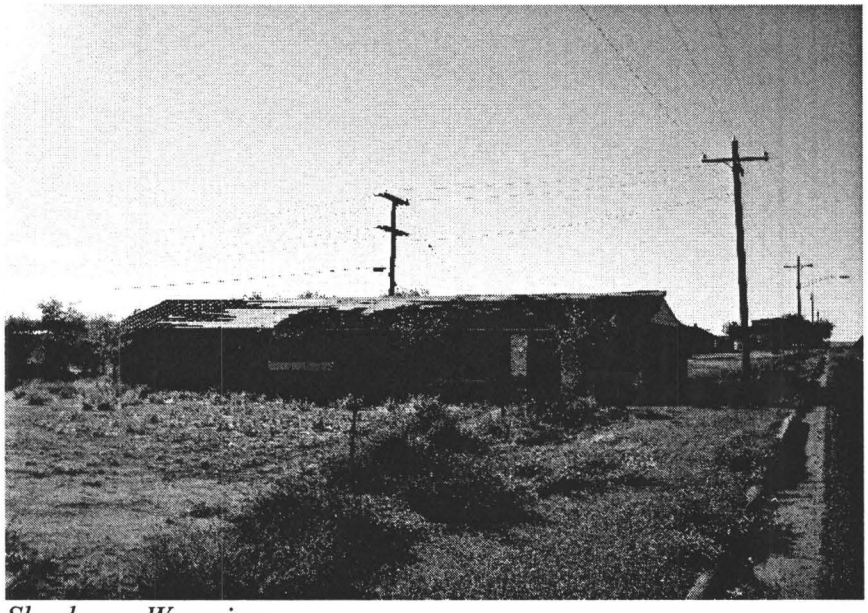
> "What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course. On the differentials of time (which for others, disturb the main lines of inquiry), I base my reckoning." (1999:456)

Here, Benjamin presents *flânerie* (the act of being a flâneur) as a means of gaining knowledge of space, a methodology of potential that embraces chance occurrences and alternate experiences of time and place. For Benjamin's flâneur—and later the Situationists—the ability to experience an alternate reading of the city offered a chance to glimpse a world that few modern city-dwellers had seen: the city as a network of critical potentialities, an undiscovered country of cultural connections between the commodity, space, art, time, history and imagination.

...

While the practice of psychoethnography is only hinted at in my previous work on street art (Armstrong 2005), I was able to give it a far more detailed exploration in the context of my current project on the abandoned and isolated spaces of North America. Here, my ultimate goal has been to transpose what was initially imagined as an urban and locally-based practice into something that could be accomplished in a rural setting and across great distances. In essence, what I have attempted to do with this project is to expand the scope of psychogeography to include spaces, times and practices that it was never intended

to encompass: the rural, the past, driving.



Shoshone, Wyoming

While the Situationists had initially conceived of this project as a sort of artistic and political intervention that was designed to act as a critique of capitalism (Debord 1955, 1958), my translation of these theories reframes them as a way of foregrounding chance occurrences, re-imagining (and re-mapping) space and focusing on travel as a form of data collection. And while I understand that these practices are not new to anthropology, my project works to make these elements of ethnographic inquiry much more explicit by essentially *unplanning* and deconstructing the existing methodologies in contemporary anthropological fieldwork[5]. This project does not seek to discredit current practices or refute their utility, it simply offers an additional (often parallel) avenue of potential cultural inquiry. Beginning with the model of psychogeography originally developed by Debord and the Situationists, I overlay the methodology of ethnography to create a functional practice of psychoethnography. To understand the trajectory from psychogeography and ethnography and their hybrid form, psychoethnography, it is important to know something about the historical development of the

5 While complete unplanning of anthropological fieldwork is almost impossible, I have made every effort in conducting my research to open it up to chance occurrences whenever possible. For obvious reasons, some planning is necessary, including such logistical concerns as car rental, air travel and accommodation.

Situationist concepts of psychogeography and *dérive*.

The beginnings of what would come to be known as psychogeography began to emerge in the mid-1950s with a small group of artists who called themselves the Letterist International, a collective of cultural producers and theorists whose goal was to enact a radical criticism of urban and capitalist power structures through artistic interventions, including most notably the "Psychogeographic Game of the Week", which was published regularly in the group's journal *Potlatch*[6]. In a 1953 article entitled "Formulary for a New Urbanism", Ivan Chtcheglov described a series of revisions for urban space and its usage, including the development of an intersection of spatial poetics and urban space, a re-imagining of how a city's inhabitants move through its space and the possibility of seeing the city as a kind of canvas onto which social and aesthetic change can be inscribed. Chtcheglov's piece asked the reader to re-imagine a city that opens itself up to chance occurrences and artistic intervention; it called for nothing short of a complete reform of the way in which cityspaces are conceived. Chtcheglov (1953:n.p.) wrote, "we don't intend to prolong the mechanistic civilizations and frigid architecture that ultimately lead to boring leisure. We propose to invent new changeable decors". When read in conjunction with Debord's "Theory of the *dérive*" (1958), Chtcheglov's article provides a foundation for understanding the practice of urban exploration/critique that was further developed by the Situationists throughout the 1960s.

One of the first uses of the term *psychogeography* can be found in Guy Debord's 1955 essay "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" in which Debord defines psychogeography as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (1955:n.p.). Debord goes on to describe how, through a study of the psychological influence of urban geography and the built environment, one can begin to recognize the emergence of alternate spaces of engagement (alleyways, disused courtyards, urban ruins) and novel ways of moving through the city's environments. In so doing, the would-be psychogeographer becomes an agent of resistance, opposing predetermined lines of thought and travel that are often dictated by the capitalist cityscape which, according to Debord, forms itself around conspicuous consumption and automobile travel. Here, Debord calls for a "renovated cartography" (1955:n.p.) that re-imagines the city as a system of passageways, traversed not in the service

6 "Depending on what you are after, choose an area, a more or less populous city, a more or less lively street. Build a house. Furnish it. Make the most of its decoration and surroundings. Choose the season and the time. Gather together the right people, the best records and drinks. Lighting and conversation must, of course, be appropriate, along with the weather and your memories." (from Potlatch #1, June 1954, no page, no author listed)

of the commodity, but in the name of the "insubordination of habitual influences" (1955:n.p.). In a way, Debord called for a re-routing of the space of capitalism through a ludic engagement with the city. By re-imagining the predominant view of city-space, psychogeography offered a theoretical avenue into understanding how commodity spheres affected the everyday patterns of city life and how they might be renovated and rewired for other uses.

One of the central tenets of psychogeography is the practice of *dérive*. This exercise explores the possibility of "rapid passage through varied ambiances" based on "playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychological effects" that are "quite different from the classic notions of a journey or stroll" (Debord 1955:n.p.). This sportive appropriation of cityspace offers an alternate view of urban environments that questions the prevailing patterns of movement that dominate the capitalist-centred city. Here, the psychogeographer becomes something of a conduit through which the "varied ambiances" of the city are read and translated into a critique of the built environment and its various forms of affect. It is the reading and translation of the affect of marginal and secondary space that opens up the possibility for an engagement with alternative, coexistent views of the city (Armstrong 2005).

For Debord and the Situationists, the city represented the spectacularization and commodification of social relations and the erasure of affect[7] that accompanied the rise of commodity forms and media pollution/saturation. Through the practice of *dérive*, the Situationists advocated a reformation of the cityscape by freeing city-dwellers' imaginations from what they saw as the endless repetition and banality of the everyday spectacle—in the forms of conspicuous consumption, sporting events, celebrity and media. For the Situationists, the routinization of consumerist lifestyles had become the prevailing ailment of the modern, capitalist city, a pox on genuinely lived experience. Debord saw the city as a place that had been taken from the wayfaring pedestrian—the flâneur—and given over to the automobile, a condition that he claimed increased alienation and detached urban populations from affective experiences of space and place. Within the confines of Debord's late-capitalist Paris, the urban environment had become something to be experienced only from the window of a car or in the short distance traversed between instances of consumption. On this idea, Debord writes that the "society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation"

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7 I use the term affect within the context of this project to define the resonant emotional impact produced by people, places and things, and the ways in which these reverberations structure human engagement with their emergent environments. Ultimately, it is someone or something's emotional agency, its ability to act through what Williams (1977) calls *structures of feeling*.

(1983:167); he believed that the further people remove themselves from the experience of moving through space, the more they separate themselves from a true engagement with the city.

For Debord, the commodity sphere, along with its associated fetishes and technologies, serves only to isolate and alienate. This notion of emotional detachment from one's environment is echoed in the novels of J. G. Ballard (most significantly in *Crash* [1973], *Concrete Island* [1973] and *High-Rise* [1975]). Ballard portrays modern urban life as a sterile and alienating experience, where a break in the everyday patterns of consumption leads characters to seek spectacular and violent experiences as the only means of escaping the monotony of modern existence. Ballard's writing reflects a refutation of contemporary society where characters are thrust into bizarre situations and set adrift in the chaos of the city and its decay. Where Debord and the Situationists imagine a playful remixing of life-patterns in the city, Ballard sees the fallout of modern spectacular culture as a constellation of brutal revelations. If the Situationists offer a playful call to arms, then Ballard presents a bloody eulogy made out of twisted metal and concrete. Both Debord and Ballard offer views of the cityspace as something other than the homogenous arena of conspicuous consumption; for Debord it is hope and for Ballard it is memorial. In my work, I aim to combine the views of both Debord and Ballard in an attempt to memorialize and invigorate conceptions of everyday space and place by forming a renovated topography of affect, memory and ethnographic drifting.

During the last few decades, many other thinkers have taken up the theories and practices of psychogeography as a unique way of experiencing the city (Coverley 2006). Writers such as Will Self (2007), Iain Sinclair (1997), and Stewart Home (1998) have utilized elements of psychogeography in their work to create an urban critique that is based on spatial and emotional experiences of the city. Will Self even maintains a regular column in the British newspaper *The Independent* entitled "PsychoGeography" that examines contemporary culture from a psychogeographic point of view. For Self, the world of the everyday is ripe with opportunities for ad hoc criticism and reflection, all of which are engaged through a random wandering, both physically and ideologically. Self uses a methodology that collects and catalogues experience from marginal or seemingly unremarkable locations to create a type of psychogeography of the mundane. From his missives on ignorant American tourists and their vulgar behaviour to a revisitation of a childhood ocean crossing, Self casts his net wide and assembles a cut-and-paste montage from whatever he hauls up. He is essentially performing a *dérive* of a fragmented culture that, in the end, resembles something very akin to ethnography[8].

8 Ethnography, for the purposes of this project, can be defined as the inscription and

The practice of ethnographic wandering, or wayfaring, as Tim Ingold (2007) has called this form of movement, has most recently been touched upon in Raymond Lucas' (2004) article on flânerie and Tokyo, wherein Lucas examined the possibility of engaging with city-space through unplanned and generative drifting. Inspired by Baudelaire's flâneur and the Situationist's psychogeography, Lucas engages with Tokyo through the production of what could be called *field-drawings* (notation taken as figurative sketches instead of text), culling his ethnographic data on people's movements through a large Japanese subway station by utilizing the practices of *dérive* and unplanned wandering. For Lucas, *dérive*—in concert with his drawing—acts as an alternative tool-kit for thinking about space as a location for emergent and generative social analysis.

Psychogeography has taken a number of forms over the years and has inspired many writers and artists to re-envision the city as a place for random experiences that exist outside, alongside and in between the flows of commodities and spatial usage patterns in the city. Building on the work of this new era of psychogeographers, I seek to reframe the practice of ethnographic fieldwork as something that foregrounds chance encounters and reveals—in the messy mistakes of practice—an engagement with space and place that looks to dirt roads and overgrown pathways for its subject matter. Here, I want to take psychogeography and its associated schizophrenias and translate them into something that allows the anthropologist to trace alternate lines through space and examine the margins of cultural change. For me, the practice of psychoethnography is about uncovering the lines that connect space/place and time/memory through travel and the experience of affect (Stewart 2007).

Always and Never Before: traces, desire lines and sidewalks to nowhere

> "The figure of the flâneur. He resembles the hashish eater, takes space up into himself like the latter. In hashish intoxication, the space starts winking at us: 'What do you think may have gone on here?" And with the very same question, space accosts the flâneur."
>
> -Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

From fieldnotes written in Bowman, North Dakota on October 19, 2007: *Space always winks at me as I navigate the labyrinth of South Dakota's dirt roads, as I pitch back and forth on the deck of a lobster boat in the Atlantic. It's calling to me, hailing me from some unknown distance like Benjamin's trace, that thing that seems close at hand, while its origins—its kernel—remain at an*

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translation of cultural phenomena. Quite simply, it is the analytic record of the anthropologist's experiences in the field, wherever that may be. Ethnography is, of course, not the sole domain of the anthropologist. Any manner of critical, reflexive meditation of cultural practices can be considered ethnographic.

unknown distance. Sometimes, on the Plains, I can almost hear the voices of mothers calling out over the fields to their children. They won't come back—they're sitting in a nursing home in Rapid City, listening to the wind sing loud songs outside their energy-efficient windows.

The most significant change that I make in my translation of psychogeography into the language of ethnography is shifting the location of engagement from a populated urban environment to a depopulated rural setting. Whereas the Situationists focused on the generativity of marginal spaces in the city, my work resists prescribed routes (interstates, tourist itineraries, rest stops, cities, suburbs) throughout rural North America, always taking the road less travelled and avoiding, whenever possible, predictions along the way. Here, I exchange the bustling streets of Paris for the wind-swept gravel roads of Wyoming substituting the city's multitudes and ever-deepening accumulations of commodities for the spectres of ghost towns and the innumerable layers of discarded things. What I take from the Situationists is their practice, not their setting.

Nowadays, many of the places that we, as a society, encounter on a daily basis have been emptied of a certain sense of human place (highways, airports, subway platforms, shopping malls); these kind of non-human spaces have the chameleon-like ability to exist anywhere, unattached to any specific time or place, nameless and numberless, adrift as nothing more than hollow referents to occupied space. These affect-less spaces are what Marc Augé (1995) has called "non-places", that is, places which "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (Augé 1995:77). They are, in a way, spatial forms without affective content. Modern existence shapes itself increasingly into something that is cluttered with "non-places". It has been my goal in developing the practice of psychoethnography to explore spaces that I believe have managed to maintain a resonant sense of place despite their marginal locations, what Stewart (2007:2-3) has called "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected". As I wander the spaces of ethnography in a mostly unguided drift, I record a sense of place that addresses my presence—hailing me from an unknowable distance—and movements. Across the Great Plains and in the the tiny Atlantic villages, what some people see as "non-places" (ghost towns, shorelines, deserted houses, endless stretches of highway and water) emerge as places filled with meaning, emotional resonance and rich narratives. Here, I argue that—from my particular perspective—an abandoned ghost town in North Dakota contains a more affective and resonant *placeness* than do the countless suburban shopping malls across North America.

In developing this methodology, I aim to reframe the ways in which space is experienced through ethnography and also to illuminate the convergent narratives

of places that make themselves known through the process of movement/travel. This practice can be likened to how a jazz musician, playing in a group, might improvise a musical phrase, understanding the theme or outline of the piece (key, rhythm, mood) and moving musically through the space as it comes into being as a collective endeavour. Similarly, in the practice of psychoethnography, the 'musicians' that I collaborate with are the people, places and things I encounter as I draw lines of generative movement across my fieldsites. I react to—and interact with—the melodies and rhythms of ghost towns and islands, adding my own notes to a sort of *ethnographic score* as it builds and changes across time and space. I follow the traces of old harmonies through empty living rooms, over crumbling streets and along rocky shorelines. In the practice of psychoethnography, the chance encounters, mistakes and detours become the basis for ethnographic reasoning and analysis, and just as in improvised music, it is always difficult to write a score for something that has yet to occur.

For Benjamin, the idea of a trace marks the "appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be" (1999:447); the traces that I follow within the practice of psychoethnography are those that emerge and bury themselves, only to resurface further on down the road. A coffee cup left in the kitchen sink of a deserted farmhouse in Saskatchewan recalls its drinker's nearness despite their unimaginable distance. Wheat blowing across the floor of a decrepit grain elevator in South Dakota looks for a railcar that could have left in the last few minutes or forty years ago. These traces are the clues that I use to build my renovated topography of abandonment and isolation, they are the points on an imagined map of the High Plains.

Elements of this revised cartography as well as psychogeography can be found in the phenomenon of *desire lines* (Bachelard 1994); these are the paths traced by people and animals as they move through their environment, taking the route of least resistance, following the natural curves of the earth and circumventing the prescribed lines of travel that take the shape of the sidewalks and roadways. The worn-down trail across an open space on a university campus that runs between two buildings is a desire line. The maps that I made in my psychoethnography are also built on a type of desire line. For me, these lines of desire are not the dirt tracks that appear in city parks, or across snow banks in the parking lot of a mall, they are the desire lines of ethnography. Lines of travel broken free from the totality of the interstates follow gravel roads out into the prairie.

I followed caribou tracks into the hills of Newfoundland's southern coastline and found myself knee-deep in moss and a layered history of its stalwart populations and its fading fishing villages. I walked the edge of the island of Matinicus, off the coast of Maine, along centuries-old footpaths that looped in and

out of tiny inlets and I ended up painting a house with the lobstermen's wives. I followed bad directions in Wyoming and drifted into the home of an aging street fighter, a man I could have never come to know except by accident, and whose stories of being an outsider in a town of fifty people illuminated the stark realities of abandonment and isolation on the Plains. These are the paths of desire that form a map drawn only as far ahead as I can see—and sometimes not even that far. It's as though the edge of the world—that mythic point at which Columbus' crew thought their ship might drop off the Earth—is always only a few steps away.

...

Sometimes the sidewalks in ghost towns end themselves, taking their own lives and getting swallowed up by history and dirt. These slabs of cement once led somewhere and now they are mute, broken off, heads and tails buried in the ground. These sidewalks are not lines to a place that can be touched or seen, rather they are pathways to other times that lie just beyond the reach of the everyday. The sidewalks are signposts, mile-markers in the material world that lead into other times and places, and they tell a story through their presence. In a similar discussion of the material world's ability to transport people through lines of time and place Allen Shelton (2007) writes:

> "When I stuck my hand into some honey-like goo combed around the lettuce, I realized the refrigerator was a time machine. The bees were back.
>
> There on the third shelf down, under the flour tortillas, was the fruitcake my grandmother Landers gave me the Christmas before she died. I was storing it like it was a brick from the walls of Troy. In the door was a jar of pickled herring in sour cream I had bought in case my dad ever came over. I'd even practised what I would say. 'Dad, would you like some herring with your beer?' Next to the Heinz ketchup was a jar of pickles sealed up tight in a powerful garlic gas; my grandmother Shelton had given me the jar for never painting the barn roof before it burned down. The refrigerator nicely preserves the wreckage." (2007:36)

For Shelton, direct engagements with the sensorial and material world act as mnemonic portals to other times and places. Like Shelton's refrigerator-time machine, the accumulated debris of the ghost towns of the Plains sucked me into their affect and pulled my feet down lonely sidewalks. To be lost is to have followed the desire lines of sidewalks into another place, another time. At its core, psychoethnography is about being always-already lost, it's about not thinking that you might fall through the floor of a deserted building or that you might run out of gas just over the Montana state-line. Often psychoethnography is a beautiful, stupid compulsion.

Imaginary Subways

A subway is like Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) concept of the rhizome: there are multiple entry and exit points, dead ends and rewired connections. The paths of psychoethnographic research resemble an imaginary subway system that overlays the world of chance encounters, forming stops, platforms, red lines, L-trains, transfers and rushes of oily, warm air. Like the network of multi-coloured routes that comprise the subway lines of New York and Boston, it is possible to travel and transfer throughout the system of imagined metro stops, visiting ghost towns and stretched-out highways by hopping invisible turnstiles and riding the train to the end of the line. Imaginary subways make a different kind of map that leads between the margins and peripheries of North America. The High Plains have an extensive imaginary subway system, but the stations are rarely visited and their entrances are poorly marked. Along the subway routes, I followed desire lines and recorded the stories that crossed my path, inscribing them into my ethnographic imagination.

Kathleen Stewart has called this mode of generative ethnography "a surreal, dream-like description of ordinary spaces and events" (1993:1015). For Stewart, the world is composed of "the haunting or exciting presence of traces, remainders, and excesses uncaptured by claimed meanings" (1993:1015). For me, it is precisely in the spaces that are found outside of "claimed meanings" that psychoethnography begins to map its territory, a kind of *terra incognita* of sometimes forgotten, sometimes remembered fragments of everyday life. The stories overheard at a prairie lunch counter become interviews, the left-for-dead cars in a deserted garage in North Dakota become dwellings for ghostly informants and the back-country roads of Wyoming make themselves into the ethnographic pathways of affect that I follow across my home-made maps.

It is through the process of unplanning in fieldwork that these moments of emergent ethnography reveal themselves. Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007) constitutes what could, in some ways, be called a psychoethnography, in that it works to uncover the sidelong resonance of the everyday through unintentional encounters and reflections. For Stewart, the world is heavily populated by ordinary forms of affect that are always present, but lie in wait for a chance to be decoded through the process of ethnographic analysis. Here, Stewart explains her project of making the everyday into something ethnographic as one of "building an idiosyncratic map of connections between a series of singularities" (2007:9), in essence, mapping the rhizomes and imaginary subway lines between emergent moments of experience. None of the fragments contained in *Ordinary Affects* appear to have been pre-planned, rather they are all reflections on how the everyday speaks through affect. This too, is my aim in developing the practice of psychoethnography, to trace the desire lines of generative experience in

anthropological fieldwork.

In many ways, psychoethnography is the anthropology of a dreamworld; not in the sense that it examines a location of the unreal, but in that it finds the modern, waking world in a state of dreaming that is ripe for cultural critique and interpretation. Psychoethnography examines the fragments that remain as people move between spaces, times and dreamworlds. Psychoethnography explores an ethnographic dreamworld (Shelton 2007) made out of—and connected by—rhizomatic interstates, gas stations, supermarkets, televisions, empty houses, ferries, garbage and so many other shining artefacts of late-capitalism's imagination. It sets off into the roadless expanses of anthropology's *terra incognita.*

...

My guide through the Plains was a little gadget given to me by my wife before I left on my fieldwork—a GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) receiver that tells me which way to turn, how far I have to drive and where I am amongst the 97 818 square miles of Wyoming. Jane (that's the name of her/it's pre-programmed voice) is a simple navigation tool that helped me to find my paths on the way to getting lost. A small touch-screen allows me to type in my final destination, the machine then plots a course based on certain limitations that I've set (for my purposes it's always set to 'avoid motorways'). Jane tells me how long it will take me to reach these places and asks me if I want to avoid unpaved roads (no, I do not), and then I'm off, across the thin arms of asphalt that stretch out over the ocean of dust, wind and grass. Along winding country roads and cracked-up regional highways, I'm never *really* lost because I can always find my way back by following the directions transmitted to Jane by an invisible constellation of satellites overhead. Sometimes I turn Jane off and let myself follow the instant reasoning that lies at the heart of psychoethnography, embracing the effects of landscapes and roadways on my psychological and anthropological imagination, always safe in the knowledge that at any moment Jane and her army of satellites will be there to pull me back from the brink. With Jane, I am only ever *virtually* lost; I have a safety net in her ability to re-route my wanderings, forever coaxing me and my nameless rental car along the gravel roads that lead to the next nearly empty motel, to the next last-train-at-midnight subway platform on the invisible subway that runs from Wyoming's Big Horn mountains all the way out to Grand Bruit, Newfoundland.

Fieldguides: outline for practice of psychoethnography

At its core, the practice of psychoethnography questions how contemporary ethnography engages with the people, places and things in the 'field', asking what is seen as 'ethnographic' and what constitutes an effective methodology.

Psychoethnography is the practice of looking at ethnographic space in a way that foregrounds generative and emergent experiences (Stewart 1993, 2007) while avoiding detailed planning. In what follows, building on the work of Debord and the Situationists, along with other theorists such as de Certeau (2002), Clifford (1997), Ingold (2007) and Stewart (1993, 2007), I outline precisely what the real-world pursuit of psychoethnographic data looks like and how it can be used as a novel form of movement across ethnographic time and space.

Parts Unknown

The road opens up in front of the car's white hood as the splits and fissures in the asphalt disappear under tires. Waves of prairie horizons that are almost as long as forever cast themselves over the day. There's a list of town names written into the margins of the endlessly creased atlas in the passenger seat; it lies open on Saskatchewan: a tall rectangle of Canada, lines of various thicknesses and colours bleed across the page, notes in ballpoint pen, people I should look up when I get somewhere. I pull into a nameless diner along the highway and I punch the names of the towns into the GPS as I wait at the counter for coffee: Orkney, Robsart, Dollard, Ravenscrag—that one's not on the map[9], but a farmer I met yesterday at the side of the road told me I might want to check it out. "Lots of old buildings, one family's left up there", he said. I'm planning my unplanned day. I'm outlining how I'm going to get virtually lost.

The storm door claps shut behind me as I leave the diner and I'm back in the car and on my way. Only points on a map. The points form a constellation of abandonment, a new kind of topography that ignores highways and thickly settled places. About an hour out from breakfast I turn off the GPS and begin to drift through the network of dirt road lacunae, pinging off crumpled grain elevators and iron monuments and on to more evaporated one-room schoolhouses. I stop the car beside the road and wander out into the prairie and toward an elderly house that's been turned grey by the sun. I'm drifting in a kind of rural *dérive*; I can't help wondering what Guy Debord would have to say about my upending of psychogeography, turning it from an urban foot-based practice into a vehicular navigation of rural space.

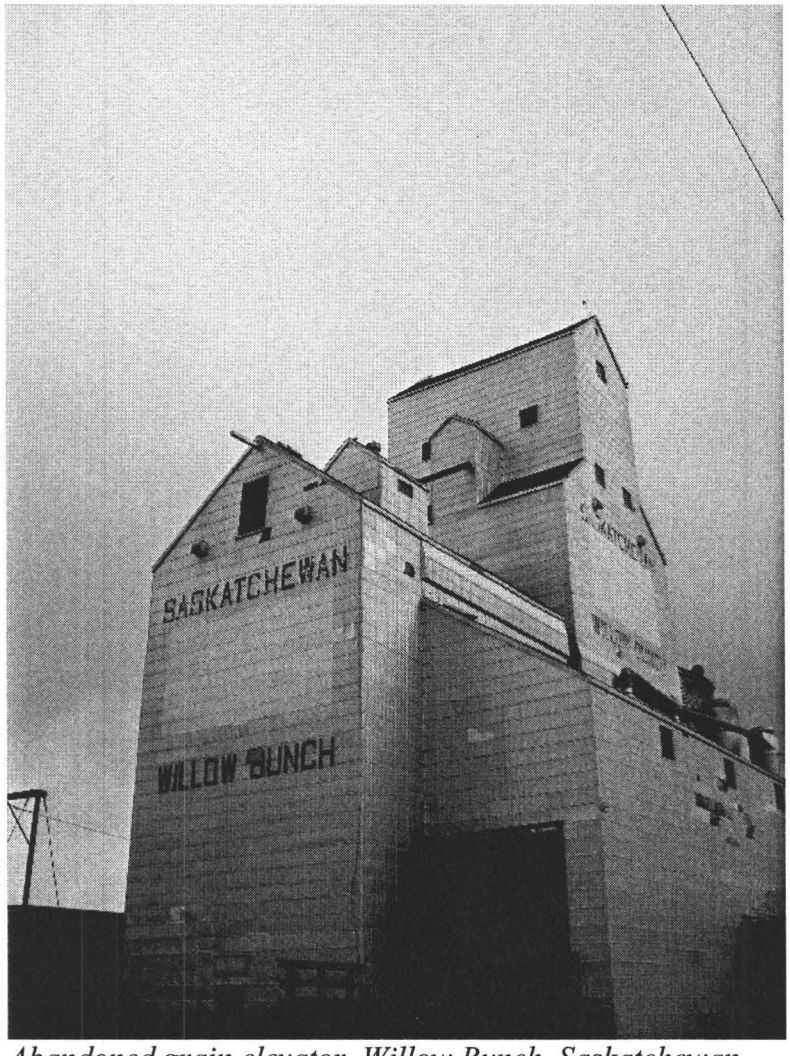
In western Nebraska there are sand dunes covered by grass, like waves caught in mid-roll, a frozen sea of green in a quiet corner of the state. It must be about 6 AM and I'm trying to make Colorado Springs today—the rental car is due back on the lot early tomorrow morning. Still, I stop the car and wander out into the sunrise, over the far-flung hillocks where nobody lives. This part of the state is very sparsely populated. How can I write this place into being? Is there ethnography buried somewhere in this apparent emptiness? Is it really empty? Is

9 Still, Jane the GPS seems to have it listed in her memory banks.

this what Augé (1995) would call a non-place?

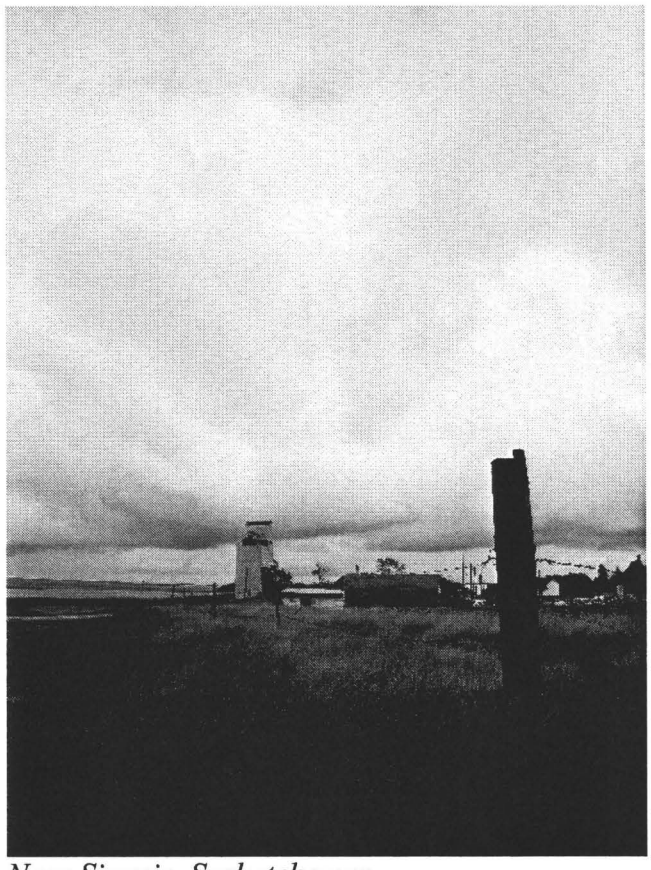
In undertaking this project, it has been my goal to experiment with the constructs of anthropological fieldwork, to see what would happen if I made a concerted effort to avoid planning and to open myself—as much as possible—up to generative and emergent encounters with the people, places and things of marginal North American space. This practice is not new to ethnography—anthropologists have accumulated the random and uncharted experiences of their fieldwork for over a century. Within the context of this project, my aim has been to use these moments of happenstance as an intentional starting point for my ethnographic analysis of abandoned and isolated space. Here, I attempt to plan for the unplanned; I want to invite mishaps and mistranslations as I travel through my chosen fieldsites.

Ethnography and its stage ('the field'), to my mind, are what Clifford (1997:69) has called "a cluster of embodied dispositions and practices", and following this idea of a praxis of affect and methodology, I believe that the process of unplanning is—in the context of my particular project—the most honest way to approach ethnographic inquiry. With the emphasis I have placed on the practices of unplanning and random movement, it is important to admit that I did in fact begin this project with a rough outline—I was, after all, conducting research for a dissertation and I needed some degree of rudimentary planning for my first foray into psychoethnography. Given unlimited time and funding, I imagine that it would be possible to engage in a form of almost totally unplanned and amorphous ethnography, but this is a luxury that few, if any, anthropologists and would-be psychoethnographers can afford. However, I did my best to undertake this project within the temporal and budgetary constraints typical of a graduate student attempting to develop an experimental paradigm. In further outlining my methodology, let me first speak to the practice of psychoethnography on the Plains before turning to a discussion of island psychoethnography, as both of these spaces offer unique and varied examples of how psychoethnography can be utilized effectively within diverse settings.



Abandoned grain elevator, Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan

Spirits of the High Plains: ghost towns and wayfinding



Near Simmie, Saskatchewan

"In the 'accelerated impressionism' of an aesthetics of disappearance, 'the' landscape becomes a blur, a streak, and no sense of place can survive."
-Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon, Too Late*

Armed with a list of names of ghost towns pulled from a few small-press guidebooks (see Bachusky 2003, Miller 1977), a couple of recommendations from friends and a worn-out road atlas, I headed toward the vastness of the Plains in my freshly rented car. Driving north-west into the Rockies from Colorado Springs, my first day of a two month-long journey was spent crossing the mountains and by evening, I'd made it as far as Rifle, Colorado where I spent the night examining a ragged roadmap of Wyoming and pinpointing the places I wanted to visit with no idea of what route I should follow or what I might find at the end. And so began this section of my journey, into the unknown spaces of abandonment in the least populated state in the US (Wyoming has a current

population of 532 668 and is the tenth-largest state by area).

The next morning found me adrift on roads edged by late October''s coolness and fire-gold cottonwood leaves. I felt unsure about how this trip would end, and in some ways I was still a bit unsure about how it had begun. I started to wonder if I would have enough material to write my dissertation. Would I simply drive for two months without collecting anything but a series of photographs? Would I really be lost all of the time? Would psychoethnography prove to be a useful methodology for anthropological inquiry? Hours passed, the landscape rolled itself out in front of me, and I gradually began to let go of my concerns. I allowed myself to drift deeper into Wyoming's inland sea of dirt, further across the short-grass prairie of the High Plains.

When I first imagined the practice of psychoethnography, my aim was to develop a way of moving through ethnographic space in a manner that limited the number of pre-set conditions and employed chance occurrences as the primary means of data collection. Again, this is not to say that chance does not factor into all ethnography, but only that my proposed methodology sought to examine it as the central organizing force in ethnographic research. In developing this practice, I wanted to find a way of combining artistic practices (Situationism) with academic methodologies (ethnography) that provided a novel and productive means of engaging with cultural spaces. What initially began as a thought experiment eventually landed me in the middle of the Great Divide Basin of Wyoming, looking through the broken windows of an abandoned apartment building and smiling to myself, thinking about how wonderfully far I had drifted.

...

Within the practice of psychoethnography, there is always room for improvisation and no hard and fast rules. However, there are certain guidelines that I have found useful in keeping my research moving—not always forward, at times it slides backward and stumbles sideways—toward new forms of ethnographic analysis. Chief among these guidelines is the practice of *instant reasoning* which gives primacy to the impulsive and spur-of-the-moment reactions that an ethnographer might experience in the field. For example, if, during my daily drives, I wondered, even for a second, whether or not I should turn down a given road or follow a certain path, I just did it without any pause for reflection. In psychoethnography, reflection occurs not in the moment, but later that day, when photographs are catalogued and fieldnotes are written up. In the psychoethnographic moment there is no space for deconstruction, only for the experience of space and place and for reactions to the varied environments that we, as anthropologists, find ourselves traversing and occupying. In psychoethnography, to be overly introspective and analytic as one moves through space is to detach the self from the drift, in essence, anchoring experience and

fixing time and space. For psychoethnographers, the drift must be maintained as much as possible. It is the drift that forms the topography of psychoethnography; it is from this unplanned navigation of space and place that the research material—the hearts and bones—of psychoethnography begins to surface.

In the practice of employing chance occurrences as primary data on the Plains, I often felt a sense of uncertainty and confusion about the direction of my research. It is not always (and, to be honest, rarely) comfortable or easy to engage in anthropological research without a clear plan of action, as if to plunge head-first into a lake without any prior knowledge of its depth. But rather than make this condition into an impediment, psychoethnography sees these sometimes painful moments as the forces that move the ethnographer through the space of their research. Here, it is the unforeseen pathways that develop out of chance encounters that often take the research in unexpected directions, creating new lines of inquiry and analysis. In fact, I have always done my best to thrust myself into unfamiliar, sometimes cringe-worthy and generally uncomfortable situations in the service of seeing what comes out on the other side of the experience. Again, this is often par for the course in other modes of ethnographic research, but here I have sought out and cultivated the oddness and agitation of being-in-place. Drunk and listening to stories of the Apocalypse in a bar in South Dakota, crashing a village party in Newfoundland and catching, cooking and eating lobster in Maine (as a life-long vegetarian and animal lover, this was one of the more challenging moments of my research) have all been moments of being out-of-place and of trying to pull myself a little deeper, a little further into the happenstance of psychoethnography.

On the Plains, I follow dirt roads whenever possible. Sometimes the gravel disappears and I'm left standing beside the car in the grass and dirt wondering where this road used to go. I walk a bit further out into the prairie to where a once-lived-in house teeters on the top of a ridge. Ballooned blue-black clouds rumble themselves up behind the building as I stand in the doorway and imagine what might have been happening here forty years ago when a storm like this boiled up. Any opening I see, I take it. Like Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome—that network of multiple entry and exit points connecting and disconnecting with one another—every gravel road, every half-remembered history and every faded road sign acts as new line along which to travel.

I wandered through a deserted town at Wyoming's eastern border with South Dakota, moving along its unused streets, taking photos of all the places that others have left behind. Out in his backyard, an elderly man with a cropped red mohawk haircut is splitting firewood. He looks up from his work and waves me over; before long we're in his kitchen drinking coffee and he's telling me about his life in Wyoming and in jail. He talks about being alone in a town with fifty

people who don't like him and about his wife's death from breast cancer. He tours me around his small house, pointing out little shrines he's made in her memory. On the kitchen table, an almost empty bottle of the pain killer Oxycodone sits beside a photo album filled with images of the results of various fights he's been in over the years. Another ghost in a town where 75% of the population has already left, leaving plenty of vacancies for spectres and worn-out street-fighters.

I had no plan to meet him today, I didn't have any questions sketched out for an interview, I just found him along one of my lines through the Plains and now he's a part of this project. This potential for unknown encounters is what I find so engaging about the practice of psychoethnography. Within this research model, there are only limited preconceptions about what I'll find on any given day in any given space, and there is always the potential for the appearance of ethnographic chance and emergent forms of culture[10]. All of my key contacts are unknown, all of the sites I will visit are, at most, names in the margin of my atlas or points on a map outlined in felt pen.

Fieldnotes

In psychoethnography, one is always lost, always in the middle of nowhere, moving across a space that is open to anything. As I drive through the Plains, I collect little scraps and fragments, cataloguing them in my small brown notebooks, accumulating the discarded and unremembered pieces of place. I'm a bit like Hansel and Gretel, picking up bread crumbs that lead home, but in my case the things that I pick up only serve to lead me further into the woods, always *away* from home. Again, this is exactly what I'm after. These bits of cultural flotsam and jetsam form a map of my movement and they write themselves into my ethnography as I go along, always improvising, always creating an

10 This is true for all forms of anthropological fieldwork, the difference in the practice of psychoethnography is that these chance occurrences are brought directly to the forefront of cultural analysis.

ethnographic montage, patching together lines and experiences. A psychoethnography of the prairie opens itself up like an ocean of scattered meanings and, as I float across its surface, I find my own way to various islands, some are inhabited, others are deserted.

Psychoethnography on two Atlantic islands

A psychoethnography of islands is a slightly different exercise than that of the High Plains. The smaller distances and spaces become new factors in determining how psychoethnography can be practised in these locations. More than a practice of constant movement, the psychoethnography that I undertook on Matinicus, Maine and in Grand Bruit, Newfoundland was formed by a continual retracing of steps through an excavation of the accumulated layers of isolation that pile up on islands. Many of these layers form themselves into stories about island life and the struggles of living in an isolated community. In the Plains, these layers were made out of material artefacts left behind in the form of buildings, vehicles, roads, sidewalks, ice rinks and baseball diamonds. On the islands that I visited, these layers were much less tactile. My island practices involved engaging in a sort of daily re-improvisation of my spatial practices (Clifford 1997) in these communities. On the islands, every day was an opportunity to re-edit my interactions and to discover new openings through which I was able to converse with the island's people, places and things. It was sort of like reliving the same day over and over again, finding new details and unanswered questions at every turn.

In such small places there is only so much actual topography to be explored. Matinicus, off the coast of Maine, has around fifty residents; Grand Bruit, the village in which I lived along Newfoundland's south coast, has fifteen inhabitants —in both cases, I had done a relatively exhaustive survey of the village and its surroundings by the end of my first day. Therefore, instead of using the psychoethnographic model that I'd employed in the Plains—drifting from one place to the next—I established patterns of familiar trajectories and let the data emerge as I repeatedly moved through these spaces. I accomplished this in a very real way by developing a loosely outlined route through the respective villages which I would walk at different times during the day, hoping to find new openings for inquiry and analysis.

I remember landing on Matinicus' dirt airstrip with little idea of what I'd find. All I knew was that I'd rented a house and that the people of this island were rumoured to be particularly unfriendly to outsiders[11]. Down through the dried-out

11 Many of the local lobster fishermen proudly claimed that Matinicus was listed as a 'hostile harbour' in sailing guides to the area. There was also a local myth that I heard a few times on the island about yachts being shot at if they passed too close to shore.

spruce forest, a runway made out of gravel, and we're almost in the ocean before we stop. This track is called the Matinicus Island International Airstrip. The woman who came to meet me and take me to my house laughed as I started to buckle my seat belt. "We don't use those here; you're not in America anymore" she said as we tore off down the road in a fog of dust. I tried not to let her see my hands as they gripped the door handle for all it was worth. As we passed some of the local people along the only road on the island, I nervously noted their hardened expressions. And then I'm alone in the house, wondering how I would come to know this place and thinking that perhaps I should have made some prior contacts. The woman who sells baked goods out of her house has no time for me; she's not interested in talking and curtly sends me on my way. I walked back to the house imagining that I might have killed my project before it even started. Everything would change tomorrow, but, of course, I didn't know that yet.

I'd been sleeping that first early morning on Matinicus; she'd leaned her tanned arms across the window, looking in and surprised to see me lying there. "Sorry about all the racket", she hollered in through the closed window. She didn't seem too concerned. I got out of bed, ate breakfast and went out onto the porch and decided to jump head-first into the web of stories that I'd imagined this place to be made of. "Need any help painting?" I heard myself say. The three women kind of shrugged and one of them said "It's up to you". And before long we had become friends of a kind. They told me all of their stories of life on Matinicus and I wrote them furiously in my notebooks when we took breaks for lunch and a Bud Light or two.

As we painted, she told me the story about how her daughter was born. How they had to fly across to the neighbouring island of Vinalhaven to meet up with a doctor. The pilot had been drinking, but they had no choice but to fly because travelling by lobster boat would have taken too long. Again, the ocean swells up inside a story and washes the narrative up against other times and places. From here, we move to a discussion of the daughter and of her life in the southern US, and then more stories about her childhood on the island. We kept on dragging our oily brushes over the cedar shingles—she painted an island made out of stories and I painted the old house with runny grey stain.

The next day, psychoethnography found me twenty feet off the ground on a rickety scaffold, painting and chatting with the island women whose world I'd wandered into. These women became my key contacts, opening up an extensive network of entrances to their lives and stories. Over the course of four long afternoons of painting, I was able to navigate the island's spaces through narrative. Each day, I found new points in the constellations of the women's stories. As I moved through the actual physical space of the island, I began to fill in the psychoethnographic spaces with missing pieces, but instead of completing

or outlining my movements, the narratives of the lobstermen's wives opened up even more questions about the island; new possibilities for an island psychoethnography stretched wide in front of me.

The knowledge of these stories allowed me to embed myself in the community; I knew the origin myths of these people, places and things, and, as a result, I was accepted into their world, if only for a short time. After my first few days of painting, whenever I was given the chance to attend a lobster cookout, to spend the day on the ocean hauling lobster traps, or to attend a church bingo, I took the opportunity to drift in these spaces and to engage with local affect as I moved across the island's everyday stories. To my mind, this is exactly how Debord and the Situationists imagined Paris and its psychogeography of "varied ambiances" (Debord 1958:n.p.). For them, to passively drift through urban space was to experience the city in a new way by allowing affect to accumulate on its own terms.

...

I arrived in Grand Bruit in the late afternoon. The provincial ferry had reached the end of its ocean-drawn line, and without warning, a little village along Newfoundland's southern coast appeared out of the rocky shore as the boat rounded a small island and chugged into the harbour. A cold June rain fell as my eyes met the stoic expressions of the village's inhabitants; they'd come to see who was on the ferry and if there were any packages brought in for them from Away. I remember that the boat came in at low tide and, as a result, the wharf was several feet higher than the boat's deck, thereby allowing the villagers to survey the new arrivals from above: mail, groceries, boat parts, and me. As with my earlier trip to Matinicus, I knew very little about this place or its people when I arrived, but this is how I'd wanted it—or so I'd been telling myself. Up over the gunwale, across the gangplank and I was quickly ushered to my rented house (simply known amongst the villagers as "The Old House") by the woman whose father-in-law had once owned it. And then, before long, I found myself alone and unsure as to how to proceed; I decided to wait until the following day to begin my psychoethnography of Grand Bruit, Newfoundland.

Grand Bruit is a small village—even by Newfoundland standards. There are no roads, no cars and no stores; this was surely as far away from the Paris of the 1960s—where psychogeographic *dérive* was first practised—as I could get. A long, winding band of cement slabs that serves as the main thoroughfare for the settlement could be easily walked from end to end in under ten minutes—aside from this sidewalk there were only a few ill-defined footpaths leading off into the Blue Hills, rocky mounds that sit like worn-down pyramids just behind the village. Drifting in this space would require a different sort of *dérive.*

On my first full day in town, I discovered, after a few inquiries around the

village, that there wouldn't be any painting, fishing or gardening that I could help with. There would be no stories told atop spindly scaffolding, no life histories unfurled on the decking of lobster boats. Nobody wanted help from a visitor; they did things their own way, a way that I didn't really know. I decided to practice my ethnography of passive engagement with the villagers and their environs by establishing a regular circuit along the path that leads between the houses, across the waterfall (Grand Bruit is French for "big noise" on account of the large waterfall that flows through the middle of town), and out to a hook-like piece of land known as The Arm. Along the way I began to encounter people out weeding their gardens, mowing lawns or coming back from fishing. I paused to talk to anyone who was willing, and after a few days, I had made myself known to the entire population in one way or another (not an overly daunting task in a place with a permanent population of 15). As I chatted with these people, I slowly accumulated a sort of vernacular history of the space as our conversations drifted from topic to topic, and as I quietly side-stepped interview questions or imagined fieldwork protocols. Stories filtered down through regular discussions and, before long, the days and lines of stories and of being-in-place worked their way into the fabric of my experience of Grand Bruit and its people. Histories of past residents were called up as I slowly put pieces of narrative together, cobbling together a patchwork story of this place out of fragments of re-told history, gossip, rumour and affect; I added bits as I collected them, as they came to me during my drifting.

When I wasn't wandering around town or chatting to the fishermen over fried fish and light beer, I spent long hours walking across the tundra-like landscape, picking my way through the rough basalt rocks and spongy lichens. Outside of the village, I followed the desire lines of caribou and people and uncovered abandoned fishing sheds, ghostly foundations of long-dead houses, huge steel buoys lost at sea and beached along the shore, plastic from other parts of the ocean laying in piles amongst seashells and broken lobster traps. All of these non-human agents revealed themselves through the practice of psychoethnography; through their various strata and locations I was able to build a picture of lives once lived and of lives still lived at the edges of space and place.

...

These happenstance encounters with these aforementioned people, places and things are not unique in the practice of psychoethnography; ethnographers routinely build their research on chance encounters and unplanned events; they constantly re-trace their steps to acquire new bits of cultural knowledge. In a way, trailing after cultural meaning is a never-ending project for anthropologists. What I believe is unique to the examination of psychoethnographic topography/cartography is that there is a minimal focus on cultivating or predicting interactions in the service of a specific and predetermined ethnographic

outline. Essentially, this mode of cultural inquiry involved opening myself and my research up to whatever generative forms of island and prairie culture made themselves available to me, never pausing long enough to rethink my intent or over-analyse my position. In both of the island villages and on the Plains, I attempted to drift freely between contexts, between conversations, between writing and speaking, always trying to move along emergent lines of ethnographic potential.

Other Cartographies: map-making as meaning-making

> "To wander about in the world, then, is also to wander about in ourselves. That is to say, the moment we step into the space of memory, we walk into the world."
> -Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*

From fieldnotes written in Devil's Lake, North Dakota on October 20, 2007:
I'm tracing the roads of my atlas. A neon yellow highlighter marks the routes that I've taken through Wyoming and, for a minute, the lines rise up out of the two-dimensional landscape and I can see a new kind of map, a constellation of ghost towns and roadside diners, of real-life tumble weeds blowing in from some unseen Western movie set and rolling across the blacktop in front of the car. This is my personal topography of Wyoming, a new sort of map that imagines a state that's had it's capital erased, leaving only a green and white road sign with an arrow pointing off into forever, followed by the word 'Cheyenne'. On my map of Wyoming Cheyenne is eight letters without buildings. It seems that everywhere human beings wander, we make our own maps of being in a place, of travelling, of relationships. We're constantly making and remaking the maps of our lives. Map-making is the inscription of spaces into two-dimensions, it's a way of marking out our memories and experiences so that we might retrace them someday, so that we might relive the lives once lived, if only in our minds.

Jake, Fusilier, Saskatchewan

In outlining his theory of psychogeography, Debord called for a "renovated cartography" (1955:n.p.) of the city; psychoethnography aims to provide this kind of renovation in ethnographic space by creating new maps, both psychological and actual. Here, a psychoethnographic map asks what the High Plains might look like as a state of nothing but ghost towns, or how Grand Bruit, Newfoundland might appear if it were mapped as a series of spatial-personal relationships instead of house-squares plotted along a concrete walkway. This way of thinking about space and place recalls a well-known Situationist map created by Debord that shows the streets and neighbourhoods of Paris as a series of chopped-up fragments connected by various multi-directional arrows. Debord re-arranged the spatial inscription of the city, thereby giving the viewer of the map the ability to envision a new model for moving through (or simply thinking about) Paris' various districts and for establishing alternate connections between different areas of the city.

Within the context and practice of psychoethnography, the potential for re-making maps offers a chance to reframe how the people, places and things of ethnographic fieldwork relate to one another, as well as to the practice of anthropology. Here, maps become points of experience, chance encounters plotted onto geographic space. For me, a map of Highway 18 in south-western Saskatchewan forms a line of conversations with farmers and of photos taken in Orkney, Robsart and Bracken. Lines connecting points that draw associations between these ghost towns and their American cousins in North Dakota. As I visit and document these spaces, I'm writing a haunted geography, moving in and out of time and place, drifting along a road map that forms itself as I travel, always just in front of my feet. Within the practice of psychoethnography, there is always a secondary map running below (or hidden alongside) the surface of standard gas station roadmaps, the ones designed to lead us quickly from here to there. Psychoethnographic maps, on the other hand, are never the most logical or speedy route through space, or toward an idea, rather they are the path that has been revealed through unplanned movement and chance encounters, they are the inscription of rhizomatic wandering, a record of roads less travelled. Collected and outlined in ethnographic experiences, these maps form a subway system of subcutaneous trajectories that open up alternate ways of re-tracing and remembering space through different kinds of ethnographic and geographical constellations. These maps are the meeting place of affect and cartography.

How psychoethnography makes us up

In a way, it could be said that the practice of psychoethnography resembles collector and art-maker Joseph Cornell's found-object collage art-boxes: a contained space (an island, the High Plains, the city) with layer upon layer of

palimpsestic meanings piled up on one another (stories, abandoned houses, back alleys), left to the viewer to untangle, translate and interpret. For me, the beauty and significance of Cornell's work emerges when the layers are examined as separate planes of inscription, allowing the work to unfold and tell its story on its own terms, bit by bit. This emergent narrative takes place within the space of what Stewart (1996) calls collected "impacts", an accumulation of cultural-poetic resonance in a particular space. For Cornell, the practice of collecting and assembling artifacts into a wooden frame reflected his desire to examine and display the minutiae of the everyday as art. Psychoethnography's goal is similar in that as the bits and pieces of culture drift in and out of the ethnographer's field of view (touch, taste, smell, hearing), they are collected and arranged into miniature constellations of ethnographic resonance and affect. Here, the aim of drifting as a practice of ethnography seeks primarily to collect and catalogue cultural accumulation in time and space, yet it is also always-already impossible to fully plan for the kind of meanings that will eventually rise to the surface of this type of inquiry; to cultivate and embrace this sort of happenstance as an ethnographic methodology is to draw a new outline around the practice of anthropological fieldwork.

Hallonquist, Saskatchewan

In trying to write these abandoned and isolated spaces into ethnographic being—in what Fabian (1983) has called the process of turning *there* into *here*—I find it useful to experience space and place as it appears to me and as I drift through its complex and varied ambiances. The sense of place that emerges from these locations and their material and human inhabitants is—in the context of psychoethnography—perpetually emergent and, in order for it to function properly, the affect and impact must come to the ethnographer through direct

contact and continuously unplanned interactions. The affective resonance of moving through these spaces, of catching the flashes of history (Benjamin 1969) as they cross my path, of chance meetings with people, places and things, cannot be calculated. It must develop like ice crystals, shooting off in different directions from a central point: ending, connecting, melting, refreezing.

There is also something of a fetish to an ethnography of being lost, of chasing ghosts, of driving endless days across the prairies. There is a romance with the unknown that is always present, in the thinking and doing; there is a danger of collapse that appears endlessly enticing. I'd like to think that the pursuit of this adventure-romance was not the force that guided the development of the methodologies of psychoethnography, but, in the end, there is always some level of fetishization and romance that cannot—and perhaps should not—be erased; there is some kernel of romantic engagement that seems to persist. Thus, abandoned/isolated space and the romanticism of being lost form the desire lines that I ceaselessly pursued across land and sea. I suppose there will always be a little Wild West romanticism left inside of me—it's sitting at the gin-soaked hotel bar, beside the anthropologist taking notes in a little brown book.

Remaining Paths: the future of psychoethnography

And where are we, the anthropologists, left in all of this random movement and trailing after lines in the sunset? Where do we, the ethnographers, rest our practices in the midst of the dust storm of rhizomes, dirt roads and topographical revisionism? Simply put, after considering the practice of psychoethnography, I believe that we are ultimately left with many more options in trying to decide how to proceed along the multitude of paths with which we are presented during our research. Psychogeography does not offer itself up as a new dogma for anthropological practice, instead it asks questions about how we might conduct our fieldwork differently and if the existing methodologies can be modified by following an alternate mode of research. As I have already stated, this is not a new practice, but rather a shift in our attentions, it is a move from an examination of *circumstance* to the cultivation of *happenstance*.

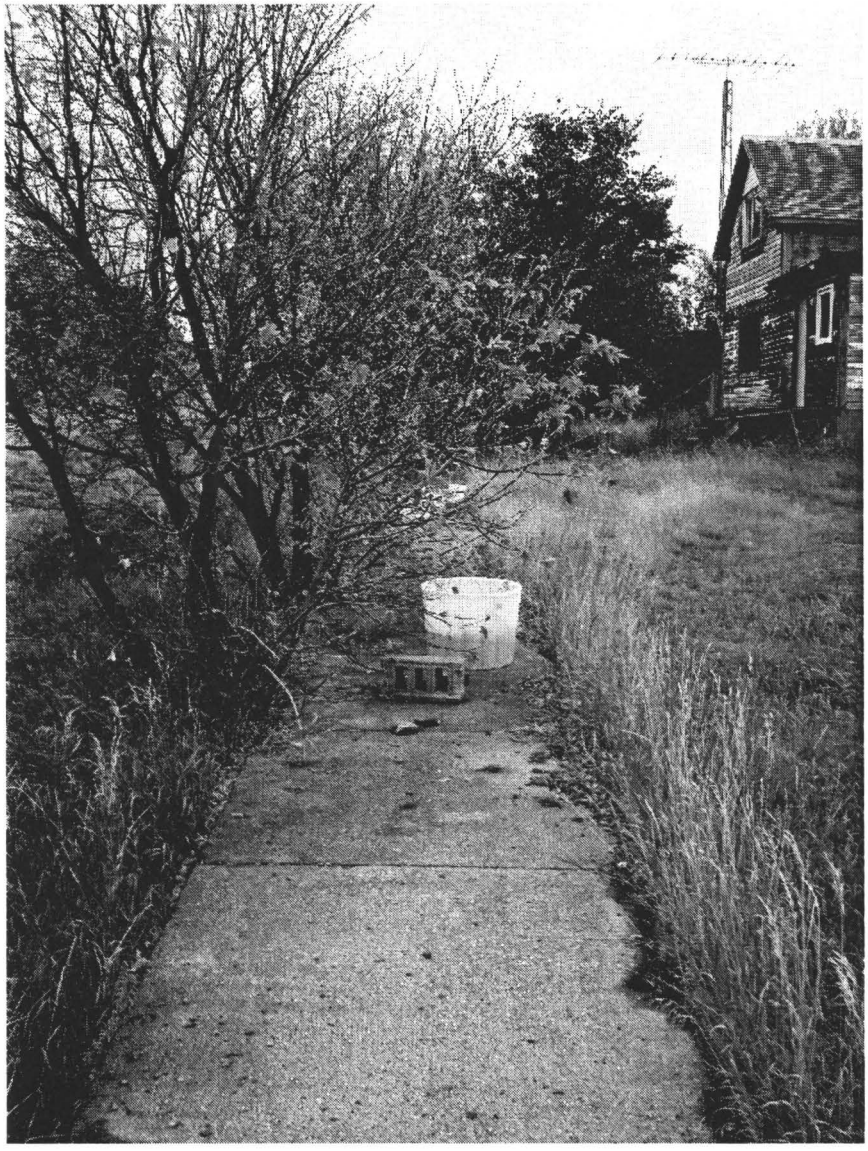
There will always be paths left unexplored in psychoethnography because for every path taken, there is an almost infinite number that have been bypassed. I wonder what it would be like if we were to take our existing ethnographic projects/areas of interest and apply this model of fieldwork to the way that we collect data? Are we willing to be virtually and perpetually lost? If only for a day, an hour, one turn in the road—what unique shape might our research take? Perhaps this project will not resonate with many of my colleagues, but maybe it will. All that I can hope for is that my proposal for a psychoethnographic engagement within the practice of anthropology will lead to debates, questions

and, with any luck, a few more anthropologists who are willing to drift along their own desire lines, following nothing in particular in an attempt to locate everything they weren't counting on finding.

Miles and Miles…

Psychoethnography is not an easy enterprise. It is not a practice that will be applicable in all settings, nor is it adaptable to all kinds of projects. It is, however, useful in helping one to rethink the space of ethnographic inquiry and for allowing us, as anthropologists, to re-imagine how we move within the field and how we engage with the people, places and things that we encounter there. More than anything, psychoethnography is a way of making new maps; it is a way of stepping outside of ourselves and opening up the potential for new forms of generative experience. This kind of engagement with ethnography reflects the convergence of a number of variant theories and practices into a real-world methodology that foregrounds many of the phenomena (chance, wandering, the navigation of space, material culture) that have always existed in qualitative research. Borrowing from the worlds of art, literary criticism, sociology and anthropology, I have endeavoured to create a kind of theoretical/methodological pastiche that offers an alternate way of moving through the field and doing research. The roads are out there, we just need to follow them.

Invisible Cities: High Plains ghost towns and the space of abandonment



"But nothing is left of Julia really, she is not there. The only occupant of the pigeonhole is the silver cup, which can't think or laugh or remember. There is no more Julia anywhere. Where she was there is only nothing."

-Anna Kavan, *Julia and the Bazooka*

Ghost Spaces, High Plains and The Duality of Dreamworlds

In the fall of 2007, I spent two months in a rented car, driving over fifteen thousand kilometres across eight US states and one Canadian province. The purpose of this trip was to seek out and document ghost towns and other abandoned spaces across the North American High Plains[12]. I travelled through this sparsely populated landscape in search of the abandoned and fragmented narratives of the places where people always seem to be leaving; I wanted to study the once-upon-a-time traces of human occupation that I saw being slowly eaten away by time and process of inhabitation and abandonment. I wanted to write the story of the spaces left vacant when people move away.

In documenting theses spaces, I sought to create a record of marginal space by *writing it into being.* In essence, developing an ethnographic text that focused on abandoned space by piecing together the stories, landscapes and artefacts that I encountered during my fieldwork. Tim Edensor (2005:317) has described the space of abandonment as a location that "contain[s] manifold surplus resources with which people can construct meaning, stories and practices". By concretizing these abandoned spaces through careful documentation (photography, fieldnotes, conversations) and forming them into an ethnographic record, I have endeavoured to translate the experience of travelling through the ghost towns of the High Plains into a form of cultural analysis, what ultimately becomes an ethnography of abandonment.

My project concerns itself primarily with assembling fragmented stories of abandoned space through lines of affect, time and space; it is about inscribing and transcribing memory (both collective and personal) into place and engaging with the affect and materiality of abandonment as an ethnographic subject. Here, I ask questions about how ethnography can begin to interrogate space through images and writing and how abandonment—as a quality of space—becomes embedded in the history and affect of space and intertwines itself with my own affective reading of these locations.

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12 I define a ghost town as a settlement where the overwhelming majority of the population has left, leaving their material remains in a state of abandonment. Places such as Jeffrey City, Wyoming, where the population decreased from several thousand to under 100 over the course of a few years, is a prime example of a ghost town. The High Plains of North America are the flat expanses of grassland that occupy at least some portion of the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Montana, Oklahoma and Texas, and continue north into the Canadian prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba (Frazier 1989). I visited almost all of these locations during my research—I didn't make it to Oklahoma or Texas—and the majority of ghost towns that I studied were in North and South Dakota, Wyoming and Saskatchewan.

Large portions of the High Plains have a population density of less than 2 people per square mile. Harding County in South Dakota has only 0.5 inhabitants per square mile (Wishart 2004).

I use the term affect here to describe the complex set of interactions that takes place between perception and experience and between the body and its environment. This notion comes directly out of the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Kathleen Stewart's use of this concept within ethnographic contexts (1996, 2007). For these theorists, the idea of affect focuses on the interactions between various intensities and impacts within a given context. These interactions often dictate how the subject experiences a particular environment and determines the type of emotional response produced in time and space. Affect also forms a unique web of meaning that is composed of multiple interactions between people, places, things, times and spaces. For me, the affective experience of a ghost town is the result of a constellation of phenomena such as memory, nostalgia, fear, sense perception, and other physical and emotional intensities.

Following Kathleen Stewart (2007), I see my work with the ethnographic affect of ghost towns as:

> "an experiment, not a judgement. Committed not to the demystification and uncovered truths that support a well-known picture of the world, but rather to speculation, curiosity, and the concrete, it tries to provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance and impact" (2007:1)

Like Stewart, I intend to examine these spaces as locations of intensities and impacts, constellations and connections; for me, the ghost town exists as a kind of ethnographic question mark that maintains multiple points of entry and exit (as in Deleuze and Guattari's [1987] *rhizome*) through which I begin my analysis. I do not attempt to unveil the hidden truths of ghost towns, nor do I seek a definitive and objective reading of spectral and affective space.

Haunted[13] places are inscribed into being as a unique form of late-capitalist/late-modernist affect—it is a landscape that speaks a different language, continually gesturing toward an explanation of the ways that the lives of people and objects begin and end on the Plains. Here I am interested in how these spaces call forth the spectres of other times and places through their complex layers and constellations of abandonment. How, for example, are the ghosts of space and place maintained in the absence of people[14]? Ultimately, I find myself returning to the simple question of how spaces become haunted and how haunting functions as a form of affect.

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13 Here, I follow Avery Gordon's (1997:134) definition of haunting: "Haunting is an encounter in which you touch the ghost or the ghostly matter of things: the ambiguities, the complexities of power and personhood, the violence and the hope, the looming and receding actualities, the shadows of ourselves and our society."

...

Like the abandoned farmhouses of my fieldwork, I am an accumulator of things. I amass objects and hide them away on shelves and in drawers. Looking around my office, I wonder what story my things would tell in my absence. I try to think about what I would take and what I might leave behind, and in this leaving what narrative of my flight—and of everything before that—would emerge. This question is one that I ask of the ghost towns as I sift through their remains.

In what follows, I use the term *dreamworld* (Benjamin 1999, Shelton 2007) to describe the sublime, often uncanny nature of High Plains ghost towns and to address the space that opens up—sometimes only for a moment—alongside the everyday world of wakefulness. The dreamworld of abandoned space is one that is empty of people yet remains crowded by their left-over resonances, embedded narratives and things[15]. The coexistence of presence and absence forms itself into a dreamlike landscape of strange disarticulation that provides the framework for my inquiry into the way that these spaces can be read as ethnographic texts. Here, the dreamworld is a place of disjuncture, of life and death entangled and askew and where the everyday present becomes haunted by the marginal past.

The dreamworld is a location that often appears as something other to the everyday.

For me, the prairie ghost town develops out of a combination of my own direct sense experience (real-life) and personal memories, nostalgias and imaginations (dreaming-life). The ghost town becomes a space that is coloured by my specific positionality and history. In the abandoned North Dakota farmhouse at the side of the road, the empty bedroom's peeling wallpaper ducks could have easily come from my own deserted bedroom of my childhood in Caronport, Saskatchewan. In the almost-emptiness of the Dakota room, I read the story of two brother sharing this old iron-frame bed, their water-stiffened shoes still sit on either side of the box-spring, shreds of wool and brittle cotton hang on the metal coils. A dresser's skeleton on its side in the corner, with open-mouthed drawers that hold mouse-chewed boy sweaters and a crumbling Archie comic. From the punched-out windowpane I see a steel swingset—one of its back legs is broken and it teeters in the wind. Some unfinished math homework from April

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14 Here, I follow Derrida (1994), Ivy (1995) and Gordon (2008) in describing ghosts not as the Hollywood-esque phantoms of fright, but as the remnants of lives-once-lived, the things and stories set adrift without a human anchor. The ghosts that I describe are the apparently unremarkable constellations of things that lie piled up in layers of time and prairie landscapes.

15 "These wild objects, stemming from indecipherable pasts, are for us the equivalent of what the gods of antiquity were, the 'spirits' of the place" (de Certeau 1998).

29, 1962 hides in the back of an otherwise deserted closet.

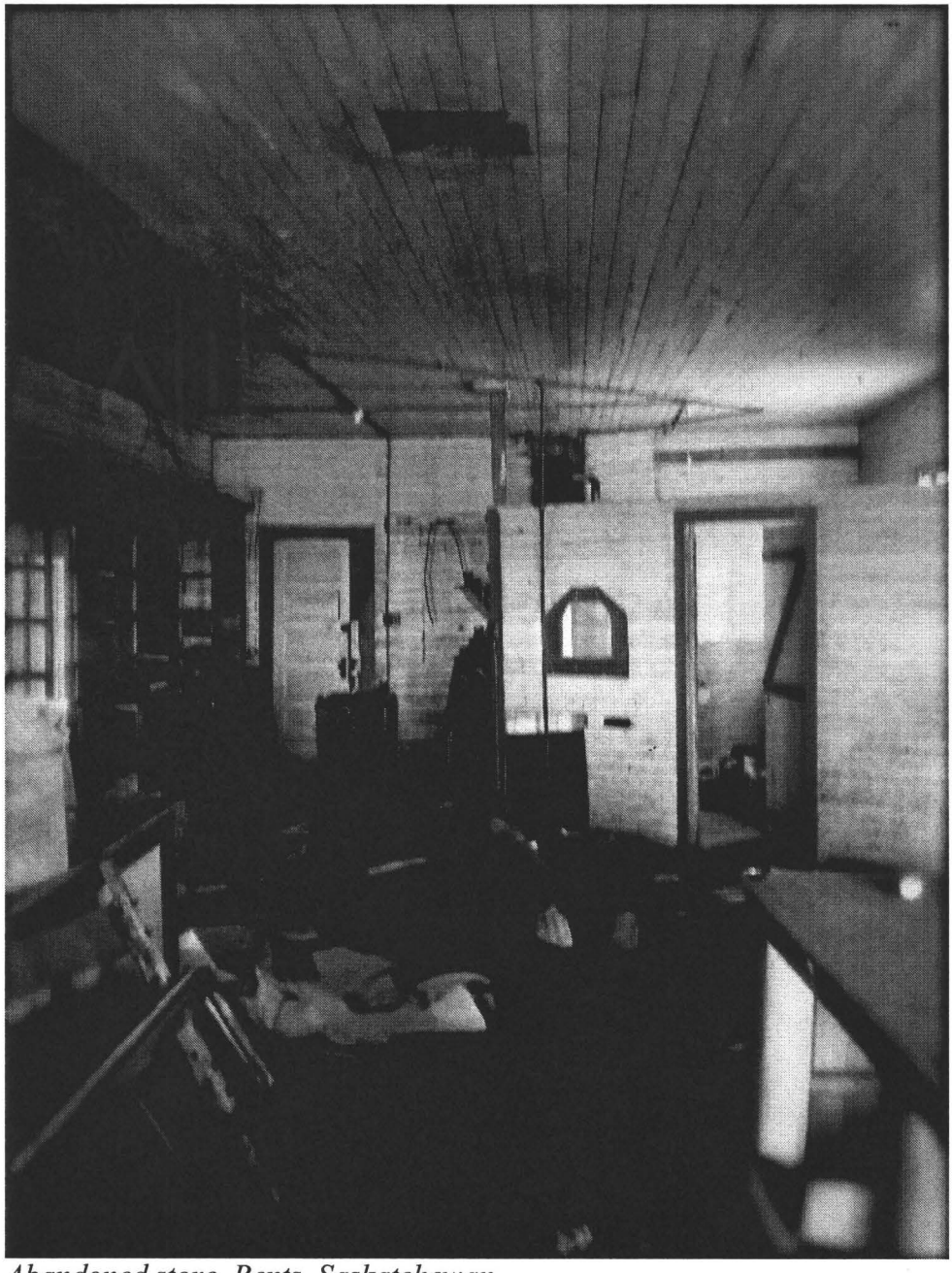
Allen Shelton's (2007) vision of rural Alabama forms itself into a similar dreamworld through historico-poetic projections onto space and its associated artifacts. For Shelton, an old farmhouse, a fence-mending tool, a winding back-country road and a planchette from a Ouija board are more than objects, they are points on a map through his own dreamworld, entry-points into ways of seeing space, place and history.

I'm nineteen and I've come back to Saskatchewan to visit my grandparents for a few days. I ask my grandfather if he can take me over to our old house so I can see it one more time before they tear it down. He's not sure if it's still standing, but he says he'll take me over after lunch. It's winter and the house stands grey and old against the metre-deep snow drifts. My grandfather parks the car at the top of the drive and tells me that if I want to see inside I'll have to crawl through the snow. No more windows and the front door hangs on by a few tired screws. In the living room, skirts of snow and garbage that never belonged to us cover the floor. In the kitchen I see the window where my mother used to watch us chasing chickens, probably calling for us to stop, but we couldn't hear her over our laughter. In the sitting room, the corner where our dog Wedgie used to sleep and the high shelf where my father kept his record albums. Another turntable memory. Up the back stairs the hallway tilts sideways and buckles wildly in front of the room where my sisters slept. In my own departed bedroom, bird's nests and a few struggling slivers of the wallpaper that my parents let me pick out, hidden under a couple of layers of ugly green paint. The door at the end of the hall that used to lead onto a tiny balcony now opens onto thin air and more cold winter comes rushing in. My four year old height notched into a door frame in the summer kitchen. Out across the yard I can see the snowed-in remnants of another old truck that we used to call The Junker, a black 1956 Ford. Back through the house and back through my earliest memories, trying to put together the story of this place. The farmhouse rooms that always seemed sunny and warm are now left cold with abandonment. My father got a job in Thunder Bay and we moved away. We said good-bye to the rented house and never looked back; no one's been here since we left fifteen years ago. This is where my story and the story of my family began.

Space and place often appear as a screen on which our projected dreams take shape, a stage for the creation of imaginary worlds. For this reason, the dreamworld is always fluid, never the same on subsequent visits, perpetually expanding and contracting. For Walter Benjamin, there were two distinct dreamworlds that occupied his writings: a childhood in pre-war Germany (*A Berlin Childhood Around 1900*), and the accumulated materiality of the derelict shopping arcades of late nineteenth-century Paris (*The Arcades Project*). The

dreamworld was most resonant for Benjamin in his unfinished *Arcades Project*, which Shelton calls "a hybrid space made from dreams, commodities, and memory compressed together under pressure" (2007:xv). Susan Buck-Morss (1989:253) describes Benjamin's engagement with the arcades as a "*re*enchantment of the social world", wherein new perspectives on the everyday lead to novel re-readings of space. For Benjamin, an examination of the Parisian shopping arcades became the conduit through which he was able to address the social and political forces at work at the end of the 19th century. In much the same way, I feel that, through my research, I have been reenchanted by the prairie ghost towns and allowed to begin to see the component parts of a hidden dreamworld.

In the realm of literature, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* represent an actual world created in dreaming, where everything that Alice encounters along her journey is later revealed as a warped version of real world experiences, a reenchantment of her everyday life. To be in the dreamworld is to be out of everyday time and place, it is to find oneself in a place that is both familiar and strange. Like Benjamin and Alice, I'm trying to carefully navigate my own dreamworld in an attempt to make sense of the parallel worlds of dreaming and waking, here and there.



Abandoned store, Bents, Saskatchewan

Everything That Remains in Place and Remains for Every Place

"The City, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls."

-*Italo Calvino,* Invisible Cities

Let the lines from this part of my hand begin in South Dakota, along a disused black and faded yellow highway. I'm sitting in a stopped car at the side of some unnamed crossroad. Everywhere, open space as far as the eye can see. There are hills so low that they're almost invisible and a bullet-pierced sign that describes the meeting of two lonely roads in a black cross. This was the first place that I saw a ghost—whispering around an old derelict cowboy boot, its sole upturned on a fence-post with rusted beams of barbed wire shooting off across the

prairie. A material remainder of human presence, of intention and purpose. I pulled the car to the side of the road and walked over to the boot, touching its weather-eaten leather, sun-dried and sand-blasted. Flipped upside down in some kind of unknown memorial—or maybe simple happenstance, some weird collision of conditions and artefacts. In that moment, I wonder where the foot might have gone. Was it dead and buried? Was it alive, cold and unwrapped somewhere in the coming night? What story of a life-once-lived might curl itself inside the toe of this boot?[16]

And as I drove further into the Plains, other abandoned, personless things and places began to rise up out of the grasslands. I soon discovered that I was moving—to play on the title of a Paul Auster novel—across an entire country of *lost* things[17], complete with towns and people and stories and a kind of delicate emptiness, forever on the verge of collapse, just about to dissolve. I had a sense that there was an ethnography already written in this landscape, among the broken buildings and one-person towns; the problem—for me—was how to pull it out and make it real[18].

My approach to the problem of writing a place into ethnographic being is to develop an intimate understanding of spatial affect and an examination of a sense of (spectral) place that becomes a kind of non-human informant. Within the context of this project, interviews are often framed as *phenomenological conversations* (my notion of a dialogic engagement with space via emergent cultural forms) with the spaces and places that people once occupied. In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart describes critical-cultural engagement with affect as "a kind of contact zone" where the analytic lens of affect makes it possible "to trace how the potency of forces lies in their immanence to things that are flighty and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too" (2007:3)[19]. The ghost towns of the Plains are such a zone of contact, a place that is unpredictable

16 "Our South Dakota crossroad is an intersection of ghosts and their texts. The traces and lines (Ingold 2007) that I draw from this place are crossing paths with the ghosts of a shoeless cowboy and an empty strip of asphalt near the Wyoming border. Neither can speak to me; their voices get swept up in the unending wind and they blow away in the dust, down towards Cheyenne and on into Colorado. In that moment I become the author of these texts and form my own ethnographic narratives as I drive deeper into the abandoned afternoon and on to Minnesota." (Armstrong 2010)

17 *In the Country of Last Things* (1989); I often felt that the High Plains were like a different country, a nation apart from the US and Canada that had somehow gone undocumented, or had been accidentally unremembered. Many parts of this landscape seemed to exist in a parallel dimension, occupying their own time and space in a way that was somehow both deeply embedded and forever distant from the everyday of the North American imaginary.

18 From my fieldnotes of October 26, 2007: *The Sand Hills of Nebraska are haunting in their own, non-peopled way.*

and in which everyday affect moves in spectral networks just below the surface in what Deleuze and Guattari would have described as a kind of haunted affect that "knows only longitudes and latitudes, speeds and haecceities, the plane of consistency or composition" (1987:266). I want to excavate the haunted and affective traces of prairie ghost towns and form them into an ethnographic narrative by establishing a specific sense of place, thereby writing—and through photography, *imaging*—these places into ethnographic being, in essence, making the space of the ghost town into a resonant moment that describes the process and outcome of abandonment on the High Plains.

The photographs and notebooks laid out in front of me on my desk in Boston form lines of travel, memory and experience. They describe a set of places, a constellation of haunted towns and abandoned things. I follow the layers of schoolhouses that accumulate in my images and handwriting, and I can see how things fall to ruin, from classrooms with instructions still written on the blackboard to one-room buildings that only exist as a metal marker out on Saskatchewan's southern prairie, and sometimes not even that. I can trace the downfall of a town through the various layers of repair visible in its houses: some look as though they've been patched and rewired a hundred times, while others remain just as they were when their occupants left them forty or fifty years ago. Those people that hold on, bite down hard and keep on bandaging up the wounds of a deserted town, until even they can't remain, and then things go to ruin.

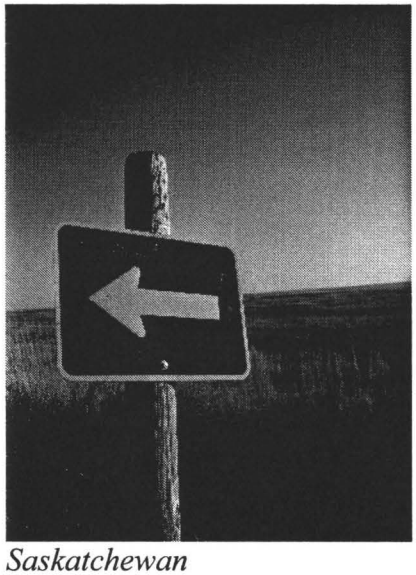
In the upstairs hallway of a farmhouse in North Dakota, a pile of neatly stacked, moulding cardboard boxes recalls a plan to return that never happened. Carefully padded and packed dishes, splintered into a fragmentary cascade that pours out of the soggy corner of one of the boxes—unburied pottery shards from a few years back. Utility bills matted together in a kitchen cabinet chart the slow slide into fiscal delinquency; a busted lock on the back door to keep out the decay until they came home. A well-ordered little family of rubber boots in the front porch—father, mother and the two girls—now stand disintegrated and

19 Here, Stewart also invokes Deleuze and Guattari's (1987:266) notion of a plane of immanence: "Then there is an altogether different plane, or an altogether different conception of a plane. Here, there are no longer any forms or developments of forms; nor are there subjects or the formation of subjects. There is no structure, any more than there is genesis. There are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements, or at least between elements that are relatively unformed, molecules and particles of all kinds. There are only haecceities, affects, subjectless individuations that constitute collective assemblages. Nothing develops, but things arrive late or early, and form this or that assemblage depending on their compositions of speed. Nothing subjectifies, but haecceities for according to compositions of nonsubjectified powers or affects. We call this plane, which knows only longitudes and latitudes, speeds and haecceities, the plane of consistency or composition (as opposed to the plane(e) of organization or development). It is necessarily a plane of immanence and univocality."

unwearable. No garbage on the floors, just dust and mouse droppings that came in under the door; pictures on the wall only skewed by the sinking foundation. This house is a haunting written in time without words.

For me, anthropology has always been about making the strange appear familiar and translating understandings between cultures and times. According to Vincent Crapanzano (1986:51), "the ethnographer does not, however, translate texts the way a translator does. He [*sic*] must first produce them", thereby claiming that inscription precedes description. Within the context of my research it is the inscription of *space* that precedes its description. Crapanzano goes on to state that "ethnography is historically determined by the moment of the ethnographer's encounter with whomever [or *what*ever] he [*sic*] is studying" (1986:51), implying that the translation of culture emerges from the instant of engagement and is, in many ways, authored by direct experience—a notion that is key to my current ethnography of the abandoned spaces of the North American High Plains.

My challenge here has been to develop an ethnography—a cultural translation—of abandoned and semi-abandoned people, places and things, sometimes without the possibility of interacting with the current and former inhabitants of these spaces. As the discarded, lost and abandoned fragments of prairie ghost towns are revealed through an ethnographic inquiry into what I have called the *abandoned ethnographic present*, I begin to collect these particles into constellations of meaning (DeSilvey 2006, 2007, Shelton 2007) and slowly build a narrative of haunted space (Gordon 2008) that attempts to explore the presence of human traces in their (virtual) absence.



Saskatchewan

In the country of lost things, dead things are always on display; their materiality decays in plain view and their memories appear as fragile inscriptions on the precipice of erasure. Geertz (2008:19) writes that the anthropologist changes "a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its own inscriptions and can be reconsulted", a notion that Benjamin (1969:255) touches on in his discussion of revolutionary temporality, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, wherein he writes that "[t]he past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again". For Geertz and Benjamin, the kernel of cultural and historic understanding emerges out of the ability to recognize and record the transient moments of time and space in the moment that precedes their evaporation. Now, through my research and writing, these fleeting glimpses of almost-forgotten ghost towns are carefully inscribed in photos and in notebooks, to be reconsulted, untangled and translated. On the Plains there are no hidden mysteries to be *uncovered*, there are only micro-histories to be unwound across thousands of miles of prairie and in the wind-blown doorways of the too-many-to-count unremembered farmhouses[20].

All things considered, the ultimate goal of my fieldwork in the High Plains is twofold. Firstly, I want to analyse the significance of ghost towns through their social, cultural and economic affects, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I hope to establish a complex and resonant sense of place that can be formed into an ethnographic account of both my experiences as an ethnographer of absence and of attempting to *write a place into being*. It is this inscription of place into the ethnographic record that provides the central focus in the following discussion.

Fieldguides

In a way, I am a tourist of memories, a kind of wanderer of punch-drunk

20 Weeds grow up, reaching out for a thin November sun, and behind their twiggy shafts, a house with boarded-up windows and a screen door hanging on by one rusted hinge. I can see the remains of a mower that lost its last battle and succumbed to the unrelenting grass of the Plains. I can see through what used to be the front door to what used to be the back door from where I'm standing on what used to be a street. I look at this house and it seems to exist only in black-and-white, grey tones without colour, but it's real life and it should be in colour—it's just not there. As this place is unremembered its stories evaporate and its cultural affect slips deeper into abandonment. The interstate bypasses this little town, so even the South Dakota Department of Transportation doesn't have to remember it if they don't want to. Maybe our memories go from colour to black-and-white, and then they start to blur at the edges and faces become unclear, and then, finally, our memories curl in on themselves and implode like a dying star.

dreamworlds[21]. I have become, as Kathleen Stewart writes, a tourist "whose constituting practice is to read things as signs" (1988:230). For me, the texts of the haunted prairie (ghost towns, the people I meet, roads, fields, artefacts) are ghosts; the smashed-out windows and the moth-eaten work jackets hung in the front hall are the see-through remnants of other people, of other times. In many ways, ethnography—over time—becomes a kind of tourism (Clifford 1997); it is a type of academic travel writing wherein the anthropologist uses his or her experiences in the field to illuminate certain ideas about the production of culture (Galani-Moutafi 1999)—as Stewart claims "we are tourists who know we are tourists" (1988:231). Among the ghost towns of the Plains, I am a tourist of abandonment and I am, at the same time, a tourist of my own memories of ruined childhood homes and abandoned farms[22].

...

Abandoned store, Robsart, Saskatchewan

As in the practice of tourism (academic and otherwise), there is also a sense of luxury and privilege that remains embedded in nostalgia because it

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21 In a roadside diner somewhere in Wyoming, layer-upon-layer of newspaper clippings act as wallpaper behind the cash counter with its transparent surface that gives way to the requisite cardboard boxes of candy bars. Every one of the news stories is about a rodeo. Yellowing, grainy images of bulls with cowboys holding on for everything they're worth. This part of central Wyoming is clinging on for its own dear life. No one in the diner speaks, hunched over plates of fried and boiled food, they stare forward into the blankness of the wood-panelled wall. The smell of horses and diesel is close in the room. These people are slivers of haunting, alive at the edge of America, in the least populated state in the Union.

22 According to Paul Theroux, the process of travelling is made up of "flight and pursuit in equal parts" (1975:2)

presupposes a certain degree of available time for self-reflection as well as the opportunity to focus intently on the self-in-the-world. To be nostalgic is sometimes also to be quite narcissistic—as we stare at our own mnemonic reflections, the world around us begins to fade into the background leaving us alone with our own utopian imaginations of the past that inevitably lead to a degree of dissatisfaction with the present. In many ways, nostalgia is a return to the past via an imagined future in the service of bypassing the present. Nostalgia's potential for navel-gazing within the context of ethnographic fieldwork can also be a dangerous enterprise in that it affords the ethnographer the luxury of projecting his or her own network of accumulated memories into a given space. As ethnographers, we must be aware of seeing these projections as something beyond our own nostalgias. Still, a carefully mediated sense of nostalgia can help to both situate the anthropologist within the field, and provide a means of sympathetic interaction with one's subjects. In my case, the nostalgia that I developed around my abandoned family farm functions as a point of entry into the world of High Plains ghost towns. Here, I can position myself—via memory and nostalgia—as both an anthropologist of abandonment and as a one-time resident of these spaces *in absentia*.

Nostalgia can also be seen as a kind of inoculation against the present, a wilful resistance to the current state of things. As a society, we often remember other places and times in the way that we wish they were (not as they *are*); through nostalgia, we are afforded the ability to delay the death of a mythic and utopian past. Nostalgia is history's life-support; it is an unborn utopia that is re-lived in ever-shrinking circles. With each diminishing circuit, the fortifications of affect grow thicker and more impenetrable (Rethmann 2007), but with each consecutive layer of remembrance, the past becomes increasingly difficult to access because nostalgia is, at its core, a meditation on something that can never be returned to, a time and place that exists only in memory (Huyssen 2006).

...

The nostalgic and romantic imaginary of the ruin sees decay as a kind of aesthetic trope wherein the abandoned and ruined space becomes a foil for certain types of emotional responses to landscapes. This view of the ruin forms itself around "the shimmer of a silvery moon, turbulent dramatic clouds, and melancholic lonely maidens" (Zucker 1961:119), in essence, drawing out a nostalgia for an imagined past. And while the ruins of Roman temples, crumbling English abbeys and Viking burial mounds may provide what Zucker (1961:119) calls "the decorative values of ruins", the ghost towns of the High Plains do not seem to evoke similar aesthetic reactions. According to Zucker (1961:120), ruins as aesthetic markers function as either "a vehicle to create a romanticizing mood", a "document of the past", or a "means of reviving the original concept of space

and proportion of periods past". Within this framework, the ghost town is left in a sort of nostalgic limbo, where not enough time has elapsed to make these spaces aesthetically or decoratively valuable; they have become what DeSilvey (2007:879) calls "an American vernacular ruin" (see also Edensor 2005). Here, there is no collective aestheticized nostalgia, only the quiet remembrances that may still reside in the minds of the one-time inhabitants of the abandoned roadways and buildings of the Plains.

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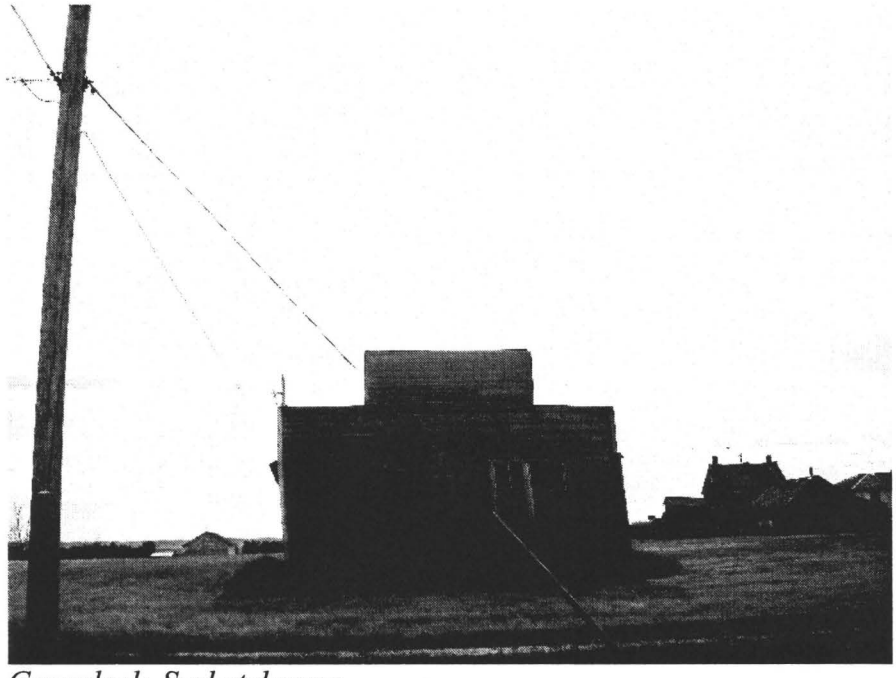

Govenlock, Saskatchewan

To move through haunted geography is to act as a tourist, a documentarian, an ethnographer and a historian, all the while performing what Caitlin DeSilvey has called an "archaeology of the recent past in a place not yet old enough to be interesting to (most) archaeologists" (2006:319), or what I see as an excavation of contemporaneous abandonment. To work in the ghost spaces of the Plains involves pulling apart the thin layers of time, materiality and place to expose the stories that run in narrow streams just below the surface of prairie ghost towns. Here, I imagine my project as something like a Polaroid being pulled from the camera, into the sunlight—the images slowly congeal and dreams are frozen in their tracks, just long enough for me to catch a quick glimpse before

they melt away into the powdery Western air[23].

...

As the layers of time and space are gently separated, my ethnography of the depopulated Plains becomes a collaborative exercise between myself and the spectral presences/absences that abound in these spaces[24]. This practice is similar to Levi-Strauss' (1966) notion of *bricolage* and DeSilvey's (2007) use of "synchronic handiwork" wherein the ethnographic subject becomes a kind of co-creator in the construction of narrative. In the ghost towns of the Plains, the sites and artefacts often stand in for the absentee inhabitants, providing a dialogue that develops out of a direct interaction with place and materiality.

Using her "synchronic handiwork" method of forming stories out of discarded objects, DeSilvey fashioned an ad hoc poem from shredded pages of books and magazines that she found in an abandoned Montana farmstead; this poem represents a unique collaboration between the site and the researcher. In my own research, novel cultural insights often emerge out of my photographic 'interviews' with abandoned sites, in essence, writing their sense of place into being through a visual interpretation of an accumulation of objects and spaces. The build-up of objects and affect in place forms a text that once crystallized, can then be read ethnographically. Not only are these sites collaborating with me, as an ethnographer, but they also work with one another to create a continuous narrative of abandonment and place-based affect across the great distances of the Plains. Each town and house becomes a word in a sentence that begins to tell the story of how places become abandoned on the High Plains.

From fieldnotes written in Valentine, Nebraska on October 26, 2007:
There have probably already been dreams shaped like this one; before, in other times. There have probably been constellations that were tied up like this one, all glimmered and wooden stars made out of flake-painted clapboards. There have probably been worlds made out of lines and lies, of prairie fires that burn up the click-clack history, or of wheat fields and dust roads. Yeah, I heard that wind cut a nice wide slash into their memories. I followed that trail of dried-on blood, past deadly yellowed dreams and onto the Plains.

Haunted Economies

The ghost town appears as a kind of grave marker, a sign of an abandoned

23 As I'm leaving Sanger, swishing my way back to the county road through loops of overgrowth, I notice a crackled electrical meter on a lonely utility pole. Its little set of dials records the last moment that there was power out here, the last time people who needed light lived in this place.

24 Every so often I'd encounter people in these spaces and they'd often tell me stories about the place and how it used to be. Always how it used to be, never how it is or was going to be.

temporality and a reminder of collapse. No one wants to be reminded of past failures, and in ghost towns the foibles of capitalist expansionism are written everywhere in thick black letters that, when lined up, seem to deny any kind of forgetting. To some, the economic death of these isolated and back-watered spaces represents only a minor bump along the road to progress; to others, they are simply nothing at all, the never-seen pin pricks in a world of consumption and accumulation. Still, seen or unseen, the ghost town becomes a physical manifestation of the crumbling American dream. It represents a hollowed-out dreamworld where people once believed they could make a living on the Plains, where it was possible—if even for a brief, shining instant—to hold onto a new way of life.

Not that long ago, in the early 1980s, Jeffrey City, Wyoming had several thousand residents and a hearty economic base tied to the uranium mine at the edge of town. For a few years in the late 1970s and early 80s, everything seemed to be going wonderfully; the town was a bustling mining settlement with a rapidly expanding infrastructure and population. Still, despite what appeared to be a roaring economic boom for a town that was little more than a post office in the 1950s, this prosperity in Wyoming's Great Divide Basin was fleeting. By 1982 layoffs took the mine from a workforce of 554 down to only 47. Within three years of the massive cut-backs, Jeffrey City had lost 95% of its population (Amundson 1995). With nobody left to tend to the memories and houses, the ghosts moved in and took up residence behind darkened windows and among the houseless cinderblock foundations. When I visited Jeffrey City in October 2007, I felt as though I had come upon a mythical lost city, an exploded place, its passageways littered with not-so-long-lost fragments that scattered themselves across the Plains, a vast museum of things *gone lonesome*[25].

In Jeffrey City, Wyoming[26] the story of collapse is written everywhere. This biography of abandonment—and what appears to me as a billowing weariness—is etched on the surfaces of the boarded-up apartment blocks and the empty house foundations set adrift on endless oscillations of short-grass prairie. The story of hopefulness and once-dreamt prosperity can be read through a wide street—now strangled by weeds—on the western edge of town. Here, the shells

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25 This phrase is taken from the title of Dan O'Neill's 2006 book *A Land Gone Lonesome.*

26 "Not just vastness; emptiness too. This little Red Desert Basin is simply a southward outlier of a genuinely enormous basin which occupies most of the southern quarter of Wyoming, a huge vacant area which seems so empty that there is even no geography there." (Banham 1982:52)

"The human settlements around the northeastern corners of the Basin are of a peculiar technological desolation—Jeffrey City (which is probably radioactive), Bairoil and Lamont." (Banham 1982:53)

of the high school, an elementary school and an Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool huddle alongside the fissured pavement of what was once called Bob Adams Avenue. As I walk the streets of this mostly empty place, I can see fragments of the dreamworld that gave rise to these ruins.

Long rows of apartment blocks, tennis courts, wide streets, playgrounds, shops and restaurants line the deserted passageways of Jeffrey City. A kind of hope is written on this landscape, but it's been erased by the process of abandonment. In these markers of a one-time happy inhabitation I can see how wonderful these people thought their lives would be, how utopian and prosperous. They had created a short-lived dreamworld that was all-too-soon swallowed up by the Plains, leaving only ruined traces of a place that could have been.

"Can I help you with something?". I hear the vaguely cowboy twang coming over my shoulder and turning around, I see a man in his early seventies with a friendly looking brown dog on a rope leash. I introduce myself and tell him that I'm visiting ghost towns in Wyoming. "You've found yourself the best of the bunch" he says as he passes the dog a piece of dried meat from a tin can he's holding at his waist. His face looks like it's been sand-blasted; wiry bits of silver stubble poke out from his chin. His eyes are hidden behind a pair of aviator sunglasses. "I just got this dog today. My other one died a few years back in a car accident—he was my only companion, and now I'm trying to train this one, but he's got too much energy, he's too young yet". He tells me that he used to train guard dogs for a living, then he served in the army's Special Operations for awhile before becoming a long-haul truck driver. He was born around here and lived in Jeffrey City for many years before heading to Arizona in the 80s; he moved back up here from Phoenix a couple of years ago and tells me that he's one of maybe 50 people still living in town. Off in the distance, he points out a huge red and brown building that houses a regulation-size NBA basketball court. "Thought they might have a pro team out here in the late 70s. That thing cost over a million dollars to build and I think they used it for less than a year". He tells me that he has to get back to fixing his truck and I shake his leathery hand with its missing fingers.

...

Recently—in what is being described by the media as an *economic slowdown*—ghost space seems to be resurfacing anew, rising slowly from the depths of North American economic history in the form of *neo-ghost towns* appearing in suburban America as deserted shopping malls[27] and uninhabited housing developments[28]. Here, a new layer of scar tissue is growing on America's

27 Perhaps we are seeing a re-emergence of the almost-ruined shopping arcades of Walter Benjamin's 19th century Paris. See Benjamin (1999).

28 See Christopher B. Leinberger's March 2008 article in *The Atlantic Monthly.*

economic paper-cuts; the vacant homes of foreclosed suburbs and dead malls exist in a state of pre-ruin, in the liminal space between occupation and abandonment. Here, in the absence of commodity usefulness[29], haunting begins to occupy abandoned ghost space. Detached from human-commodity relations and no longer of use, the structures and artefacts of the ghost town are set free and begin to drift ever-deeper into the realm of abandonment. In this context, abandoned things are those objects that retain little or no value in the commodity sphere, and without value, they are dead to the world of capitalist exchange. Again, the ghost town becomes a kind of grave-marker for the "social life of things" (Appadurai 1988); as far as capitalism is concerned, the ghost towns of the Plains appear only as a blank spot on the map of economic exchange and development (see Hawkins and Muecke 2003).

...

Left-behind things are loosened from the bonds of commodity fetishism by the absence of their owners. They are disavowed, but like the freed house cat suddenly alone in the wilderness, they are at a loss as to how to exist in a world without their human wards; they are summarily eaten up by the wilds of time and space that they have been cast into. Enter the anthropologist of abandoned things, come to restore the fetish to the objects, appearing out of clouds of temporality to give them agency and power once more. And here they enter into the new economy of *ideas*, moving from use-value to thought-value—in essence, becoming things that help to think about space and place instead of performing some banal function from their everyday past-lives. With my presence in these spaces, the discarded *objects* become *subjects*; they now act as artifacts that occupy reflexive space because they are freed from the bonds of commodity servitude and its incumbent value assignments. The abandoned thing in haunted space becomes an object to think with instead of something to use. A discarded jacket is no longer for keeping a tractor-driver warm, it is for telling the story of how things get left behind and how they might have occupied a faded ghost-world; an empty house is no longer a home—a shelter from the wind and cold—it is a container for the affect of space and place and a house for ghosts.

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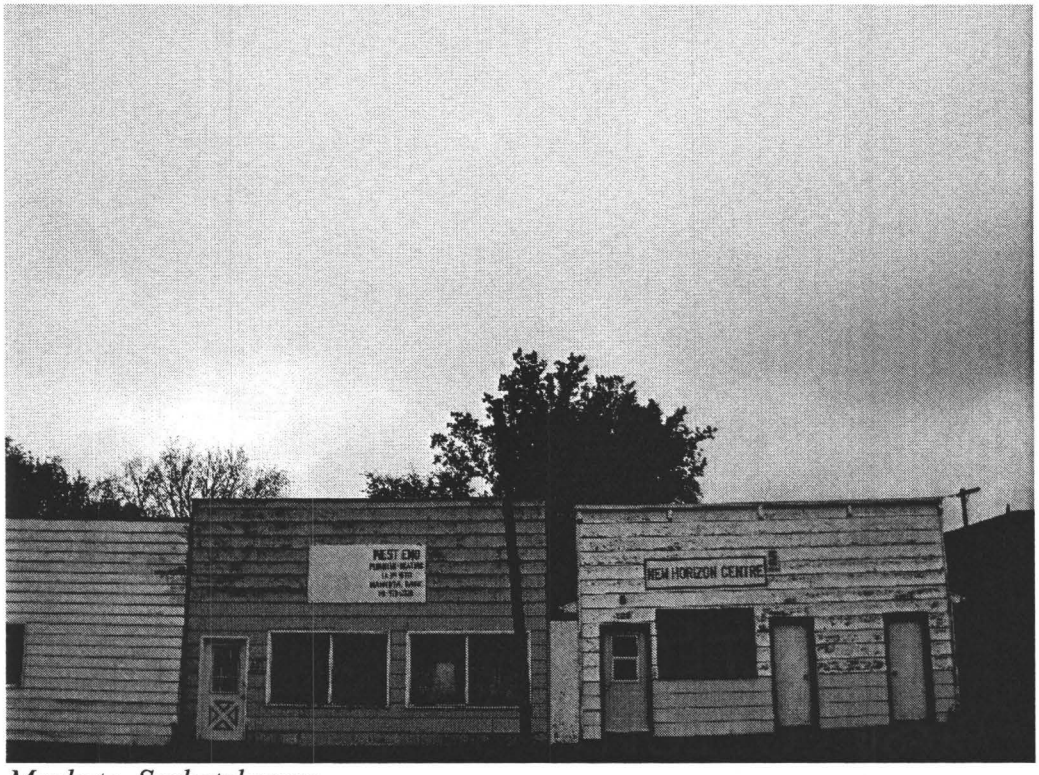
29 The use-value of ghost space is almost completely evaporated. Viewed strictly in the context of late-capitalism, these spaces function as virtual non-places (Augé 1995), the wastelands of capital, consumption and accumulation..

Home-Made Ghosts: how Amerika makes its spectres



Mankota, Saskatchewan

> "The specter is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects—on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see."
>
> -Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

From a hundred kilometres an hour I see the red spray paint out of the corner of my eye. I stop and reverse the car, a minute later I'm standing in front of an old barn in the middle of a field in North Dakota, along Highway 5, a few kilometres south of the Canadian border. It's a twin image of a woman's head, stencilled onto the wood of a boarded-up window. She's smiling or laughing, staring out; an imprint, a trace of some other time and place left as a sign, an *I-was-here.* It's an urban artform—graffiti—outside of its natural habitat, and it seems strange to me. It's a kind of misplaced hieroglyph, like cave-drawings in a shopping mall. It's disjuncture, it's haunting; a caesura in the lines of North Dakota's dirt roads and wheat-encrusted horizons.

These disembodied heads can be read as signs of abandonment. To me, their persistence indicates the absence of humanness from this structure. There's

no one left to clean it off; it's the mark of an empty place. Just as graffiti accumulates in the unwatched, uncared for corners of the city, these spray-painted inscriptions filter into similarly unremembered spaces. Slowly at first, and then they multiply.

These red heads are unique though. This isn't the kind of vandalism that I usually see scrawled on the inside walls of deserted houses and vacant stores throughout the Plains. They do not immediately call forth a specific author. Jim, Carla and the Class of '99 do not claim ownership over the smiling mouths that just float there quietly, haunting the country with a sliver of the city—an aesthetic question mark. Just a pause to think, to stop and wonder about this place.

Roadside grave marker, Saskatchewan

I see faces everywhere on the Plains. I imagine the spectral faces of a family gathered around a blown-out TV as I lean my camera into their abandoned living room; the weathered faces of farmers and ranchers, and of oil-rig workers and born-again-Christian bartenders. To me, the red-lady stencils are a kind of watchful spirit of the left and leaving, put there by someone to stand guard, to give the empty buildings and towns a human face. Perhaps this is what Kathleen Stewart meant when she described the process of "continuously reinscribing places on a place whose meaning is emptying out" (1988:235). Maybe these faces give this old barn a bit more agency in the world.

Catastrophic Dreamworlds: utopias, modern ruins and the faded dream

> "Ruins jutting into the sky can appear doubly beautiful on clear days when, in their windows or above their contours, the gaze meets passing clouds. Through the transient spectacle it opens in the sky, destruction reaffirms the eternity of these ruins."
>
> -Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

> "... ruins are different. They decay from the inside out as the memories become unwrapped from the still existing shapes."
>
> -Allen Shelton, *Dreamworlds of Alabama*

The ghost towns of the Plains are not the travel brochure-and-postcard ruins of Giza, Rome or Chichen Itza, they are modernist sites of wreckage and abandonment. In a short note at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno describe how "history is eliminated in oneself and others out of a fear that it may remind the individual of the degeneration of his own existence—which itself continues" (2002:216). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, this degeneration of existence is perpetuated by the continual erasure of history, a condition that appears to be prevalent in the ghost towns of the High Plains.

Ghost towns—as locations of erasure—are neither utopian nor dystopian, they are, I believe, closer to Foucault's (1986) notion of the *heterotopia*, the multiple "slices" of time that exist together within a single space. Within the heterotopia of the ghost town, utopia and dystopia coexist: the layer of utopia emerges out of the unrealized dream of self-sufficiency on the Plains, whereas dystopia lives in the inscriptions of decay and collapse that are written on the abandoned buildings and streets, and in the stories of the last remaining residents. For me, there is also a thin layer of nostalgia within this heterotopian landscape

that functions like a mirror[30]: the way that I experience this space is contingent on what I project and what comes back (haunts) in the form of an echo or a reflection. This hauntological reverberation is a condition that speaks to a human pre-occupation with the passage of time through space and the scattered layers that accumulate as heterotopias and convergent histories (Huyssen 2006).

In many ways, the ghost towns of the Plains also represent the *blurred boundaries* (Gupta 1995) of authenticity in ruins. To return to the ruins of the ancient world for a moment, one would hardly argue against the perceived authenticity of the ruined pyramids at Giza or Tikal—they are viewed as classic, authentic ruins that mark out a very distinct historical trajectory and narrative; this is not the case for the ghost towns of the High Plains, although there are a few abandoned settlements that have recently become tourist attractions and currently market themselves as *authentic* ghost towns. In discussing the fate of ruins in (post-, late-, super-) modernity, Huyssen (2006:10) claims that "the ruin of the twenty-first century is either detritus or restored age", a delineation that can be readily applied to the ghost towns of North America's prairies. Among the multitude of abandoned spaces that occupy this landscape, there are definite examples of both detritus (forgotten, continually decaying towns) and restored age (preserved ruins, the ghost town-as-museum).

Sanger, North Dakota is a detritus ghost town: empty, overgrown, caved-in, isolated by a labyrinth of gravel roads and acutely invisible to anyone who doesn't specifically seek it out. Sanger has been left to drift and corrode; its last residents walked away from the town in the 1980s. Today, the crumbling basements and unwired utility poles of this town don't seem to have the same kind of touristic draw as an *authentic* Old West gold rush town—the kind of place many of us remember from Western movies like *High Plains Drifter* or *The Magnificent Seven.*

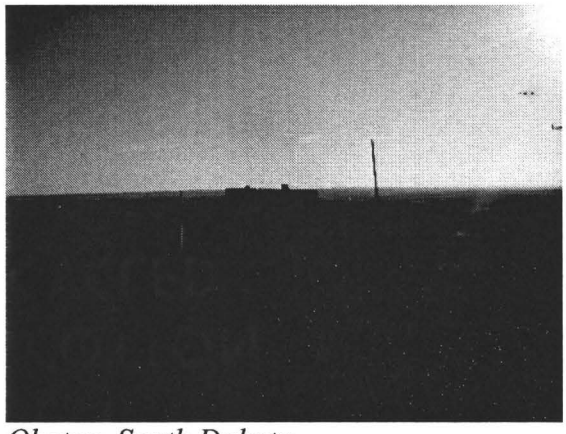
There are stories hidden inside Sanger's detritus; they came to me long after I'd left town. I'd been looking up the town's coordinates for a talk I was giving on my research in the Plains when I came across an old newspaper article that had been archived on the Internet describing the life of the last resident of Sanger and her family. After a bit more digging, I found out that she was still very much alive and teaching in the art department at a university in Valley City, North Dakota. I sent off an email, asking if she might have any old photos or stories about living in Sanger. A few days later, she responded with a message saying that instead of writing a letter or talking to me on the phone, she was going to dictate her life story onto cassette and send that to me within the next couple of weeks. Sure enough, about a month later a small, brown envelope arrived at my

30 Foucault calls the mirror a space of the unreal because it has no real-world agency, it is only a *reflection* of the real.

door with a single cassette inside. Without hesitation, I put it into the tape deck and listened to the stories of this place unfurl in front of me, complete with a cast of characters that included a drunken sheriff, a vengeful insurance salesman, an East Coast sorority girl, a dim-witted cowboy and a reclusive sheep rancher. For over an hour, she made each building and deserted street come alive with ghosts and dances, escaped ponies and shootings. She told me about drinking whiskey with the sheriff and how a neighbour had once tried to revive frozen piglets by putting them in the oven. She told me about dying wool with roots and berries, and about ranchers who wore the same insulated long underwear all winter long. From the detritus came stories, and as she told me all about the way Sanger used to be, I filled in the empty holes in the pictures I'd taken with people's faces and all of the things that had happened there.

On the other end of the ghost town continuum—in an instance of what Huyssen calls *the restored age*—are places such as the gold rush towns of Bannack, Montana and Bodie, California. These are ghost towns-cum-state parks that include multiple well-preserved structures that are carefully maintained by park staff and volunteers. Bannack and Bodie are frozen in time and decay has been driven back to a safe distance for the entertainment and enlightenment of any visitor willing to pay the small entrance fee. Throughout the year in Bannack, the park offers a number of activities including ghost walks, historical re-enactments and gold panning, constantly fostering the mythology of a *space-out-of-time*, a space that has been plucked from temporality and formed into a quaint vignette of aesthetic decay. In Bodie, visitors are given access to "a genuine California gold-mining ghost town…visited by tourists, howling winds and an occasional ghost" that has been preserved in "a state of *arrested decay*" (bodie.com, 2009, my emphasis). Here, decay—but only to a very specific point—becomes a static, precious and parochial moment (Huyssen 2006).

There is also a third, less common, category of haunted place that floats somewhere between the two extremes of ghostly authenticity—it is what I have called the *re-abandoned museum*; of this type of space, Okaton, South Dakota is a prime example. Passed over by the interstate and abandoned by the railroad, this small town in southern South Dakota is a perfect example of a heterotopia. Here, multiple lines of history coexist. Okaton might best be described as a meta-ghost town in that it once was a typical prairie farming community—complete with railroad tracks, grain elevators, stores, homes, a school—that fell into ruin (most likely during the 1980s when many smaller Plains towns had already lost their rail links and were continually circumvented by the nation-spanning interstate system), only to be revived as a ghost-town tourist attraction complete with a *re-*reconstructed Wild West facade and a hand-painted sign listing the current population as an eerie 13.



Okaton, South Dakota

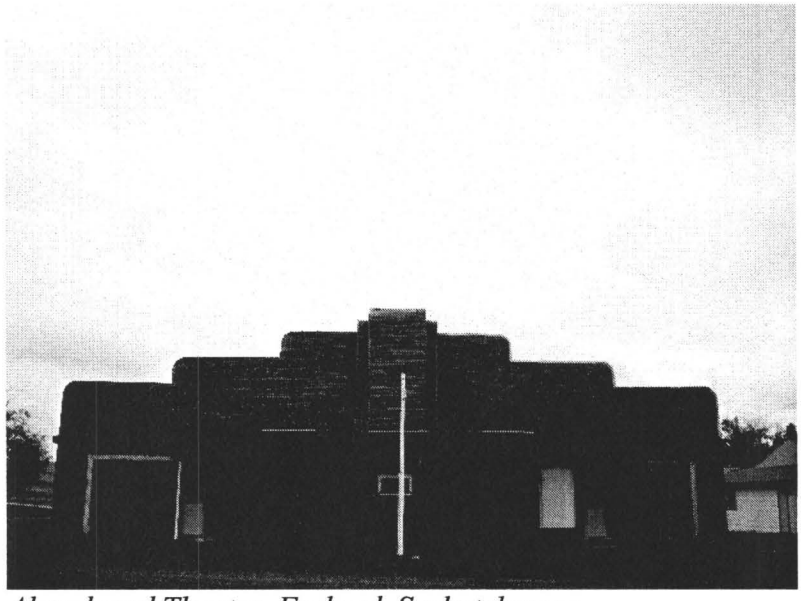
When I visited Okaton in the fall of 2007, its dirt streets were completely empty. The ghost town's roadside attraction had been shut down. The gift shop had been boarded up and the mock Old West boardwalk had started to rot away. On the old general store, there was a cardboard sign written out in maker that read "CLOSED. Sorry we missed you". I'm sorry I missed you too, I think to myself, half out loud. The sign is faded and it looks like it's been there for quite some time. Just below it there's another sign that tells me to watch my step and I wonder when the last time was anyone had to heed this warning. Across the road from the store is a chain-link enclosure with a picnic table inside. On the table are a number of rather unremarkable chunks of rock and another hand-written sign advertising their price as $1. More grass grows up through the table's benches and a thin film of dust covers the rocks. At the end of the main street a man with a pick-up camper has stopped to take a break from driving. He's on his way to Colorado to take rich people into the mountains to hunt elk. He's in his late forties with a round, pulpy face, far-back eyes and scrub-pad beard. Head-to-toe camouflage, smoking Marlboros with yellowed fingers and teeth, he points to a sunken house further up the street and tells me that "some famous Indian used to live there, Crazy Horse or something". He tells me that he stops here all the time on his way out West, says that there used to be a gas station here until a couple of years back, then it was just gone, everything closed up and no one ever returned. "Someone lives down in the old schoolhouse, but I think they're meth-heads—got a bunch of big, mean dogs; I'd stay away from there if I was you", he says, elbows bent on the rusty hood of his truck, looking off into the prairie. "Some guy from out East bought up most of this town about ten years ago and tried to make it into a kind of ghost town theme-park, but with the Interstate just over there, no one ever came up here. You see that huge sign for gas off of 95? Yeah, that was their last attempt to get people to visit, and after that didn't work, I guess they just gave

up. Place has been for sale for the last three years".

This place has been re-abandoned, thereby completing a cycle from authentic town to authentic ruin to fabricated ruin and finally back to authentic ruin. Here, the fabrication and preservation attempts couldn't save Okaton from its inevitable ruin, and even with decay as its main industry, the little town couldn't resist the entropy of the Plains.

From fieldnotes written in Kadoka, South Dakota on October 11, 2007: *Tonight I laid down among a chorus of ghosts.*

The Pox of Memory and Nostalgia's Vaccine



Abandoned Theatre, Ferland, Saskatchewan

> "We are threatened not just by memory loss, but by the routing of the synapses by the filterable viruses of memory. The strange disappearance of names, faces and places seems like a programmed erasure, like the imperceptible advance of a virus which, after infecting the artificial memories of computers, is now attacking natural memories. Might there not be a conspiracy of software?"
>
> -Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Cool Memories III*

I'm sitting in a hotel room in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, about to make a back-up CD of the digital photographs I've taken during the day along Highway 13, in the ghost towns of Orkney, Robsart and Bracken. My computer screen freezes. A faint ticking is coming from where I know the hard-drive is located and I quickly try to reboot the machine. Nothing. The computer's memory has

crashed and all of the photos from that day are gone, vanished into some irretrievable quadrant of hard disk space. After an appropriate period of anger and loud grumbling, I resign myself to the fact that I'll have to make another 300+ kilometre round-trip to re-visit these towns and re-shoot the freshly erased images. When I drive into Orkney the following afternoon, it looks almost the same—almost, but not quite.

I find it strange to return to a ghost town—I'm haunting these spaces in some small way, remaining tied to these spectral landscapes and materialities through my search for evaporated memory. If the figure of the ghost is always, in some way, about return (Gordon 2008, Ivy 1995), then surely I am, once again, Derrida's ghost hunter who is, themselves, pursed by ghosts, eventually becoming both follower and followed. I suppose that this might be as close to *going native* as an ethnographer of ghosts can get.

The first time I drove out of Orkney, I felt a strange sense of relief, like I was leaving behind a wavering sliver of melancholia; a heavy dusting of memory and loss seemed to have settled on that town. And here I was, back again, staring into the same haunted windows, trying to recreate my photographic memories of this place. I think about what it must have been like for the last residents of these towns as they pulled away from their one-time homes. Did they wipe their memories clean, or did they archive their lives-once-lived in a special little folder, somewhere deep in their brains? The abandoned photo albums[31] I found floating around an emptied house in South Dakota make me think of the erased photos from my hard-drive—both collections of images are lost and found. Perhaps some day, someone will uncover an old hard-drive in a small plastic sleeve[32], and they'll somehow manage to extract the data that I lost so long ago, but it won't mean anything to them because I'll be dead, or at least off somewhere else, not thinking about the photos that I thought were gone forever.

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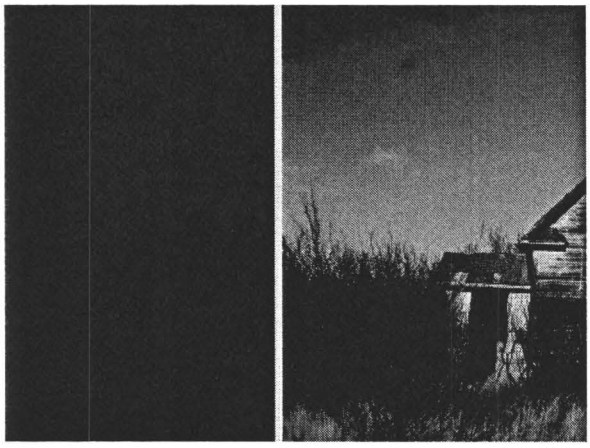
31 I often thought about taking some of these photos with me, but in the end, I always left them where I found them. Maybe someone will come looking for them, and I wanted the memories to be waiting for them when they returned from Away.

32 I've had two hard-drives die on me, and I've kept both of them in the hopes that someday, I'll be able to recover what I've lost. It's like people freezing their brains after they die, imagining that, in the future, science will revive their memories.

A Tattoo, A Map



"In the dreamer's dream, the dreamed one awoke"
-Jorge Luis Borges, *The Circular Ruins*

On the Plains, I tried to document a sense of place that appears to have become unhinged from time and space in the way that it has been sidelined by changing social, demographic and economic patterns (Hyde 1997). Among the ghost towns of the Plains, there is a sense of place that cannot be readily told by their inhabitants *in absentia* and must—in the service of anthropological inquiry—be drawn out through through sense experience (see Stoller 1989, Howes 2003, Feld and Brenneis 2005), visual analysis (see Hockings 2003, Pink 2006), and here-and-there discussions with any remaining inhabitants. These spaces of haunting (in the form of memory, history, ruin and geography) tell the stories of what Kathleen Stewart (1996, 2007) calls "impacts"—those fleeting moments in time and space that situate a place; they are the anchors that attempt to fix locations in memories[33]. These are the instants that tattoo themselves on human brains, making maps that we sometimes can't help but follow in our hearts

33 "I was walking out to the barn and the sun was coming up, and there was this kind of bird-noise off—it was to my right—off into the field...let's see, toward the ranch and the river, between the river and the ranch is where it was occurring; and I looked up and there was this woman standing, and she was wearing a very long skirt and blouse that had a bit of a pattern to it, and her hair was piled up on top of her head and I was half-asleep, and I'm going: "Isn't she cold?". Because it wasn't warm out, it was cool. And of course I had on my barn-coat. And then I kinda snapped awake, and I looked again and she was gone. She just disappeared." (from the tape recorded oral history of Laura Whitley, last person to live in the now-abandoned town of Sanger, North Dakota)

without first seeing where we're headed. Here, I'm trying to make a way of seeing those maps, of concretizing the unseen maps of affect that determine human movements and engagements with landscapes and memories. For me, these lines (Ingold 2007) are connections and constellations that we often follow without knowing why.

This notion of stories and impacts that develop a sense of place—a kind of virtual, affective cartography—has been explored in Caitlin DeSilvey's (2006, 2007) recent field research on an abandoned farmstead near Missoula, Montana. Utilizing a process of careful archiving (organizing and cataloguing the farmstead's various artifacts) and critical analysis, DeSilvey pieces together the narrative of life on the Plains through a series of discarded objects and vacant spaces. For DeSilvey, these fragments represent the elements of what she has called a "hardscrabble homestead", a place that "reminds us that every object left to rot in a dank shed or an airless attic once occupied a place in an active web of social and material relations" (2007:403) (see also Appadurai 1988, Brown 2004, Miller 2005). It is in this network of mnemonic, material and spatial relations that I seek the touchstones of affect, the openings into the stories that lie in layer upon layer in these haunted spaces. These strata of temporality are what Allen Shelton (2007:62) describes as the "layers of hauntings that reach through the landscape and bite"[34].

Following the discussions of haunting and place in Shelton (2007), Gordon (2008) and DeSilvey (2006, 2007), I conceptualize the ghost towns of the Plains as complex constellations of materiality, memory and affect. Here, artifacts, nostalgias, memory projections, histories and sense-experience work together to form lines in space and time, drawing out paths made out of busted-up dressers and water-logged cookbooks. These constellations become the inhabitants of a dreamworld that runs in parallel lines alongside a waking-life that forms everyday experience. For DeSilvey, these constellations of remembrance imagine "history against the grain in the very fine grains of that history, while insisting that the story can always be told otherwise" (2007:420). These constellations of the "grains of history" form a kind of "memory-making game" (2007:416) that functions as a type of puzzle, a riddle waiting to be solved[35]. The fragments of lives-once-lived "make present previously absent objects" (DeSilvey 2007:420). Out on the Plains, there are many answers to the same riddle; the lines

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34 I'm standing in front of the old house, staring dead-straight into its guts, imagining the sounds of their voices, the just-painted cupboards and the smell of cut hay coming over the hill. I feel myself falling back in time and place, but before I go too deep, a searing pain rips up through my hand and I'm shaken back. A big, black hornet angrily buzzes away and I'm left with only an empty, fallen-in house on the prairie.

35 Or perhaps simply retold.

of constellations can be drawn in multiple ways, making markedly different forms. In the (perceived) absence of human agency this kind of ethnographic Truth is always-already partial (Clifford 1986).

The front door of the grange hall in Bents, Saskatchewan is stuck, grass and dirt have conspired to keep it shut. Around the back, a set of stairs leads up into the hall, dark and creaky. The smell of cold air and rancid dust rests on the backs of the lined-up wooden chairs. I hear a racoon in the rafters. Arrows of sun illuminate little discs of light on the floor and I can see a kind of shifting image of the blackened room. There's a raised-up platform at the front of the hall with a table and a folding chair where I imagine the town-organizers would have met at one time to discuss the fate of Bents: how falling grain prices might impact the residents, who had moved out and where the kids would go to school next year. A roll of unused raffle tickets is curled up just inside the doorway and a half-eaten poster for a dinner-dance is push-pinned to the clapboard wall. Electrical wires hang down from the ceiling, caught like anemones in the afternoon's outside brightness. Across the road, the farmer who bought the town tells me that he'll probably tear it down soon, he just hasn't had the time; I'm welcome to look around, he says, and reminds me to be careful in the old buildings.

Abandoned church, Cottonwood, South Dakota

Prairie Séances: writing haunting into being

Collapsed house, Okaton, South Dakota

> "Memory as a place, as a building, as a sequence of columns, cornices, porticoes. The body inside the mind, as if we were moving around in there, going from one place to the next, and the sound of our footsteps as we walk, moving from one place to the next."
>
> -Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*

In the first half of *The Invention of Solitude*, entitled "Portrait of an Invisible Man", Paul Auster reconstructs the life history of his recently deceased —and somewhat emotionally distant—father from the objects that he had left behind. As Auster writes about his father, he methodically brings him into existence through an engagement with personal objects and memories. The scraps and fragments of a life-once-lived begin to form themselves into a ghostly persona that had remained relatively unknown to Auster during his father's life. Here, Auster writes a person into being by using the discarded ephemera of a material existence in the hope of solidifying and anchoring his father's memory before it vanishes into forgetting. In much the same way, I seek to write the ghost towns of the Plains into being before they are forever swallowed up by the prairie;

my work is as much about the preservation of cultural memory as it is about the ethnographic analysis of abandonment and history. Like Auster, I want to draw new lines among the constellations of fading stars, to write a place into memory and into being before it is consumed by the space and time of History.

One or Many Occupations

In "An Occupied Place" Kathleen Stewart writes:

> "The sense of place in the hills, as I imagine it, stands as an allegory of an interpretive space or a mode of cultural critique that often finds itself crowded into the margins of the American imaginary and yet haunts the center of things and reminds it of something it cannot quite grasp" (1996:141)."

This is how I imagine the Plains. In my mind, they are the kind of place where silence[36] makes room for conversations with oneself and with the way things appear as they lie among the discarded layers of history and place. This "interpretive space" opens up a hole in time and space where it becomes possible to peer into being-haunted and to see how things begin to decay and how they work themselves out. On the Plains, in haunted towns and empty farmhouses, the margins of the North American historical imagination come slowly into focus.

The Plains aren't really the kind of place that people seem to want to visit, they're more like a series of brown and beige squares, a place to be flown over[37]. They're the places that boom and bust in the American imagination: first they were the endless expanses of opportunity, then becoming the Dust Bowl of the the 1930s and finally fading from view as the century waned in its final few decades (Popper and Popper 1987, 1999, Cronan 1992, Opie 1998). According to Popper and Popper (1999), the Plains maintained its highest population during the 1920s and 1930s, steadily declining from that point onward, until, when in 1990, the entire region had only 6.5 million people occupying one-sixth of the continental

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36 Petra Rethmann (2007:39) asks "what silence can teach us about presence?", to which I respond that, among the ghost towns of the High Plains, silence reveals the *absence* of human occupation and the *presence* of spectral affect.

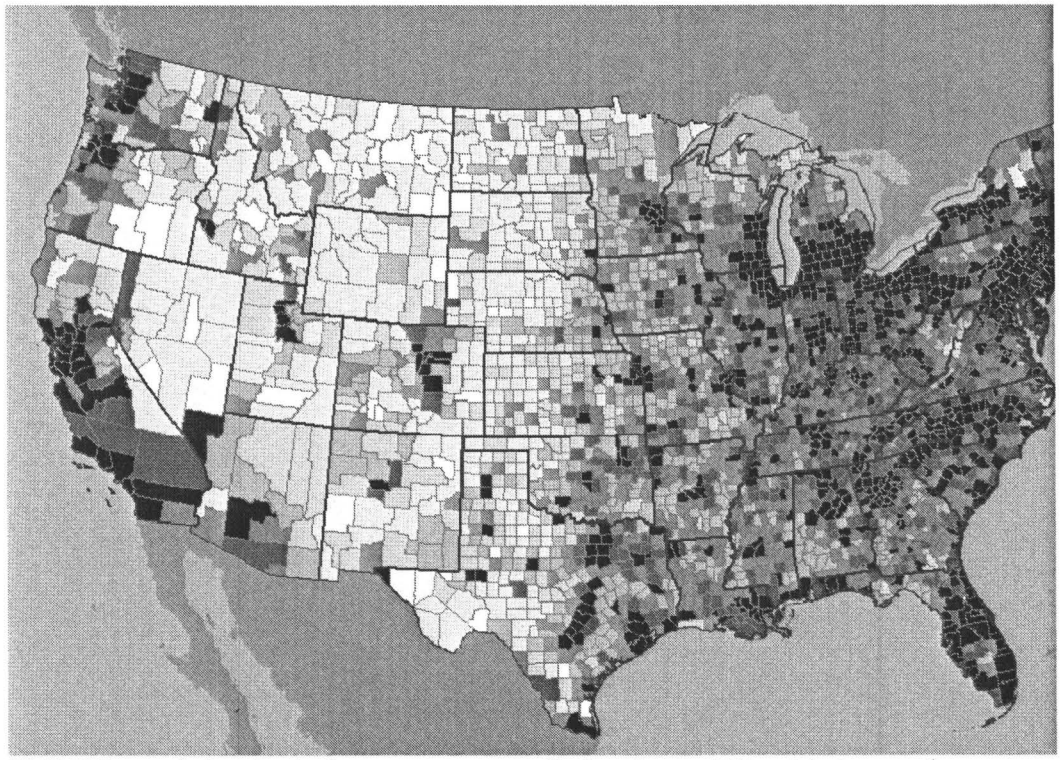
37 "By the second half of the twentieth century the Plains had slipped off most Americans' mental map; they became a region beyond society's edge. By mid-twentieth century, American 'social space' stopped at the boundaries of suburbia, and any unique features beyond suburbia appeared to be antique, hardly relevant curiosities. Agriculture and rural America now stood on the other side as if they were in an alien zone beyond historic norms and rules. The Plains were seen as a minimalist landscape bounded only by the flat horizon and the infinite sky, where any human presence shrank into nothingness. Today, to most Americans, the great grassy flatness is an interminable, mediocre place with few scenic or picturesque stops, seen as travelers rush across the thousands of miles between Chicago and Denver." (Opie 1998:253)

United States. Also, by 1990 some 57 million acres of land were labelled "highly erodible", as a result of over-farming and the persistence of mono-cultural farming practices, leading many smaller farm operators to leave their land in search of new livelihoods (Opie 1998). John Opie (1998) sees the development of agriculture—and the subsequent desertion of small-scale farms in the face of mounting agribusiness—across the Plains as the end point of American expansionist notions of Manifest Destiny wherein homesteaders "were deliberately lured into a searing environment that was unfit for farming and left...stranded in crushing failure" (Opie 1998:247), with the ultimate result being an unsustainable lifestyle that was always-already doomed to collapse.

On the Plains, marginalization is a result of depopulation; with few people left to tell their stories, few will ever hear them. The Poppers (1999) go on to explain that in the wake of the extensive federal farm and energy production subsidies of the 1970s and 1980s, shifts in government policy, global economies and national resource markets, the Plains quickly turned from boom to bust. In the following decades many young people left the family farm in search of work and to escape the sometimes aching boredom of a rural existence. In light of the phenomenon of emptying Plains, Popper and Popper (1987) suggested that a huge section (139 000 square miles) of the Plains be allowed to return to its natural state, eventually becoming an expansive grazing plot for buffalo. Fittingly, this space was to be known as the Buffalo Commons—a notion that portended the abandonment of abandonment, a conceit to collapse[38]. With the implementation of this plan, America would have to admit that life on the Plains was unsustainable, and for this reason, the Buffalo Commons never came to fruition and the intense over-farming continues as family farms dry up and blow away along with acres of dusty topsoil.

And now, as I drive through these abandoned places, I imagine the Plains as a kind of central margin, an *embedded periphery*, a place that is occupied by absence and unoccupied by bodies.

38 See also Jared Diamond's *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or succeed* (2005)



2000 U.S. population density in persons per sq. mile (contiguous U.S. only). Averaged on a per-county basis (darker areas are more heavily populated). Source: National Atlas of the United States.

To Be Lost in a Country of Lost Things

It's a strange feeling to be lost amongst things that have been left behind; to have intentionally unhinged myself from known routes in favour of the snaking gravel roads (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of the process of becoming lost as ethnographic methodology). What does it mean to set oneself adrift in an expansive constellation of other abandoned things? The ghost towns of the Plains are complex collections of lost things: houses, clothes, tools, books, coffee cups, photographs, vehicles, hockey sticks, streets, sidewalks. Asking similar questions about the nature of discarded objects, David Bissell (2009) discusses how things take on different senses of affect depending on how and when they were lost. For Bissell, things that are accidentally lost maintain a different aura than those that are purposefully cast aside. There seems to be a sense of longing attached to those objects that have somehow slipped through our fingers, that have been permanently misplaced or that have fallen off the back of a pickup truck's tailgate, unbeknownst to the driver. In the unintentional loss of things there is usually a

hope of return, a belief that the object will somehow return to our possession. It's a long fade into total forgetting. In contrast, those things that are purposefully abandoned are intended to be erased from history, contentedly forgotten in a quick rupture of attachment (Edensor 2005).

Ghost towns are neither accidentally lost nor intentionally discarded, rather they occupy some middle ground where loss hovers in limbo, never quite sure if it should stay or go. Tim Edensor (2005:317) remarks on this grey-area of human leavings when he writes that "[w]here rubbish heaps might be off limits, ruinous matter has not been consigned to burial or erasure, and still bears the vague traces of its previous use and context, however opaque", implying that the ruin acts as a kind of open-source text that has yet to have a new meaning assigned to it. Perhaps ghost towns and their materiality-in-ruin are examples of Foucault's (1986) *heterotopia*, a location of multiple "slices in time" (1986:26) existing in one space and layered on top of one another to create a strange, disjointed accumulation of temporality. In the heterotopia of the ghost town, some things are discarded, while others are simply misplaced—they lie in constellations and strata of personlessness, abandoned in different ways, in different times.

...

In some ways, modern society has become increasingly infatuated with decay, ruination and marginality in a variety of forms including the numerous films, books and articles examining Hurricane Katrina; the memorialization of Ground Zero in NYC; the practice of so-called 'urban exploration' that focuses on documenting and exploring such abandoned structures as hospitals, asylums and catacombs; the recent proliferation of doomsday films. Everywhere there are markers of our fascination with the process and outcome of ruin; from the numerous photo-blogs dedicated to decrepit urban infrastructure[39], to the throngs of tourists lining up to gaze at the columns and steps of a crumbling Roman ruin, there is a desire to unwind the meanings that always seem buried just below the surface of these spaces, to imagine the lives-once-lived within their architectural remains.

Of particular interest to my project is an examination of *modern ruins*, specifically the ruined spaces that begin to emerge and accumulate across the rural landscape of the High Plains following this area's population peak and steady decline that began in the 1950s (Popper and Popper 1987). Just as Benjamin (1999) carefully documented and commented on the fading glory of the Parisian shopping arcades of the late 1800s, my project attempts to perform a similar documentary exercise among the ghost spaces of the High Plains. The ruins of modernity—of which ghost towns present a key example—offer a

39 See undercity.org, infiltration.org, urbanexplorers.net and uer.ca

window into the relatively recent collapse of utopian ideals, the downfall of the dreams of certain strains of freedom and progress[40]. In a careful examination of the ghost towns of the Plains, it becomes possible to catch a glimpse of how things fall apart, how they break-up and what they look like as they fade away.

Still, as much as society may continue to be fascinated by the ruination of space and place, these locations of haunting also represent the socio-economic holes that begin to emerge in the fabric of the (North) American dream. These spectral spaces are pinpoint tears that slowly open themselves to capitalism's quiet declinations and subtle failures. These places represent the downside of free-market economies and the death of the family farm (Popper and Popper 1987, Cronan 1992, Opie 1998).

It is not with a sense of lament that I document High Plains ghost towns, nor is it with a fear for the future that I follow an almost-endless chain of emptied prairie towns, sifting through their left-behinds for remnants of history and memory. I'm looking for the stories that are written in the dust on the mirror in the vacant bedroom, because it's in this faint inscription—and in all of the other fluid signs that hover at the edge of town—that I hear (see, smell, touch, taste) what the future looked like as seen from the past (Huyssen 2006)[41]. From here I can imagine what this dreamworld looked like, if only for a moment, through the hazy moth wings of muslin curtains.

For me, the ghost town is a space that is neither joyful nor sad, it's affect and abandonment form a convoluted and multi-layered location of haunting and remembrance. To experience these spaces through ethnographic inquiry is what I would describe as *uncanny* (Freud 2003), that odd moment of combined recognition and unknowing, a sensation that lies somewhere between affect and analysis. Again, the ghost town becomes an in-between space, a location that is, itself, homeless.

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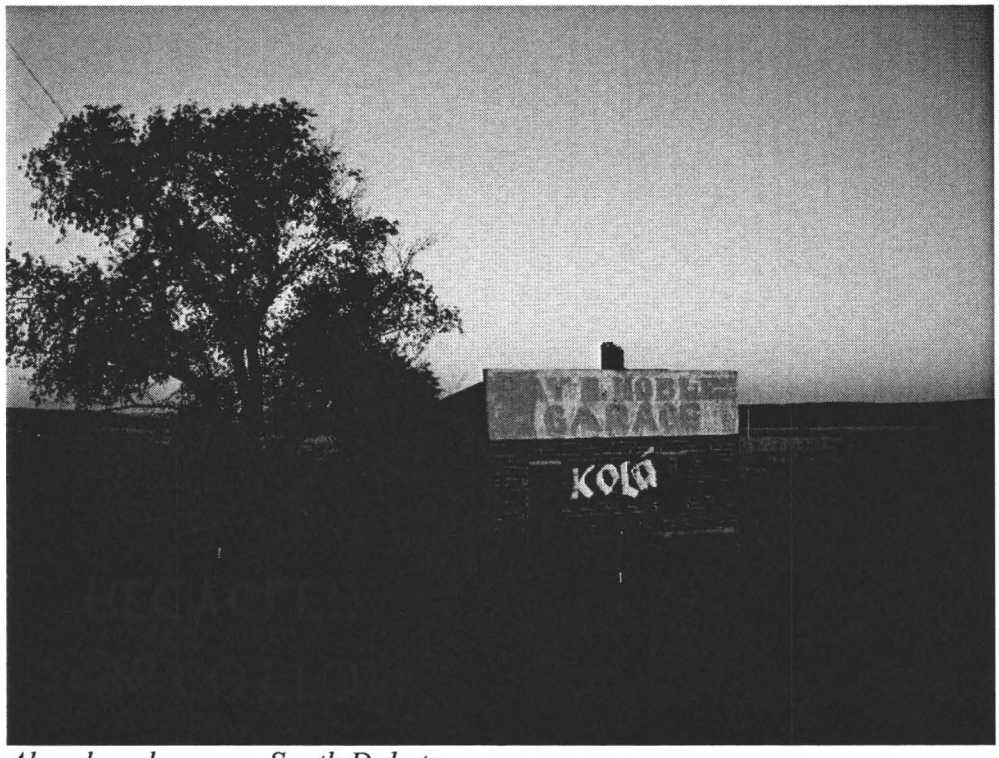
40 Here, it seems that the 'new' economic freedoms of neo-liberalism have supplanted what might be called the pioneer self-reliance that was responsible for the development of many of these settlements. Late-capitalism does not favour perseverance, instead, self-interest now seems to offer the greatest rewards.

41 In his article on ruins and nostalgia, Huyssen states that a "contemporary obsession with ruins hides a nostalgia for an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine the future" (2006:7)



Abandoned garage, South Dakota

Museums of the Last Person, Cemeteries for Dead Voices

Sanger. North Dakota

"And the last remnants
memory destroys"
-W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*

The rooms of this museum don't have recessed lighting or small white cards to explain what I'm seeing; there aren't any dioramas with plastic-modelled humans doing plastic-model things in a plastic-model world. This place is a dirty and corroded life-sized museum, catalysed in the final backward glance of the last person to walk its ghostly streets.

...

What happens when all of the living become all of the dead, when there are no more people to visit the cemetery at the edge of town? What happens when all the people move from their houses into the ground? Maybe their ashes get thrown into the wind by their children, and now all that's left of their time on Earth are the scattered remainders in a house on a once-upon-a-time street in a place like Orkney, Saskatchewan.

...

These see-through museums are different; they're a sort of implicit and subjective memorial instead of the more codified displays one might encounter in places like the British Museum or the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. There are no velvet ropes to partition off the spaces of an empty farmhouse; I touched the worn-down kitchen table through a veil of spider webs and grey dirt particles. The ruined town is a museum of decay. Rather than arresting and cataloguing the final moments of the space through careful preservation, these spaces have most often been thrown into the sea of entropy, quietly erasing themselves bit by bit in the night, sinking lower and lower among the waves and waves of grass and time.

In most museums the artifacts are laid out carefully and intentionally to provide a frozen vignette of lives-once-lived in a particular space (Edensor 2005, Rethmann 2007). For Foucault (1986:26) the contemporary notion of the museum functions as a space of "indefinitely accumulating time" where an attempt is made to amass a collection that encompasses every moment in time and place by continually acquiring new additions to the collection. In contrast, the ghost town-as-museum can collect no more artifacts; when a farmhouse is deserted, it ceases to add to its collection, it stops resisting decay and becomes a museum of abandonment. In the museum of abandonment, entropy is the main exhibit.

Borders Like Lines Like Stories

There are all kinds of borders out here on the Plains: state-lines, correction-lines, town-lines, county-lines, great divides, missouris, asphalt-when-it-meets-gravel. The most important of these lines for me is the border-line between living and dead. It's a line that doesn't seem to be easily crossed. People, places and things hang in the breeze, at the edge of both states, never really planting a foot on one side or the other. Here, the border is always-already fluid and the subject resides betwixt-and-between (Turner 1967) states of being. Neither alive nor dead, the ghost—and the ghost town as, itself, a kind of architectural/civil spectre—roams a liminal space of haunting (Derrida 2006), it exists in a separate dimension where "the entire reality of memory becomes spectral" (Bachelard 1994:58). The ghost of the Plains is a spectral memory that resides in empty post offices and burned-out pool-halls, themselves a kind of undead architecture.

Borders appear as fluid entities on the Plains, always expanding and contracting, skipping beats and looping back on one another, always dependant on one's point of view. As the shapes of spaces change—forming inhabited localities

into deserted expanses[42]—so too do their senses of place: as street signs fall over and the pavement gets cracked up by grass, soon it's only a faint outline that doesn't really separate the lived from the unlived; one of the original 640 acre homesteads gets subdivided; doors and windows are gone, opening up the formerly closed-off country of their interiors. And to write these spaces into being—to take them from experience to memory to inscription—is to follow the shifting borders of known/unknown, lived/once-lived, dreamworld/wakingworld, alive/dead, memory/history, spectre/hearts-and-bones and past/future.

From fieldnotes written in Devils Lake, North Dakota on October 23, 2007: *A world laid on its side in the cut-back night of eighteen-wheelers, their watery red lights carving a brittle scar through the Plains. And nothing else. I navigated by following a curdled compass arrow made out of nostalgias for places I'd never seen. At the whimpering hem of midnight I bent down to peer into a long, blackened hallway, into another world, another dream—a sideways dreamworld.*

Where the End of the World and the Edge of the World Meet: conclusions

> "While the high wind yelps the names of women long dead
> Or the sound of bitter old rain on a road
> .....
> Listen—now there's nothing—but complete silence—listen."
> -O. W. de L. Milosz (quoted in Bachelard 1994:179)

The abandoned spaces of the North American High Plains offer the possibility for ethnography to examine how narrative emerges out of the material and affective artefacts that remain in space after human populations have moved on. By focusing on the social, cultural and economic aspects of the space of abandonment, it has been my goal to illuminate the underlying stories that reside just below the surface of established notions of memory and space. As I have shown through my description and analysis of these locations, there are always stories, memories and hauntings that lie in thick layers as intricate constellations of affect and narrative.

This project is about stitching dreamworlds together with time and space; it's about making marginal spaces such as the ghost towns of the High Plains into locations of resonant history and affect. At the same time, I have also endeavoured to explore the ways in which anthropologists become haunted by their own ethnographic pursuits. We seem to be constantly chasing the truths of others, when, many times, we are following questions about our own place in the

42 A kind of reverse homesteading.

world[43]. As was true for me, it is often only after the ethnographer returns from the field that they begin to realize that their research has become a combination of ethnography and autobiography (Coffey 1999).

Ultimately, I see my research as a kind of dialogue between myself (as an ethnographer) and the abandoned spaces of the Plains. This conversation served as a way for me to understand that, in the practice of ethnography, there is always something more to see if we—even for moment—shift our critical attentions and our ways of being-in-space.

In many ways, I've come back to the inhabited world of East Coasts and suburbs with more questions than answers. I begin to question how the discipline of anthropology situates itself in the contemporary world of globalization and of *all-knowing-all-the-time*, spaces where everything is always already known (or at least is conceived of as *known*). I'm haunted and excited by the questioning *places* that seem to have no clear answer. I don't think I'll ever know the true stories of most of the places and people that I've encountered during my fieldwork, but I don't believe that that's the point of ethnography; I'm writing what I've experienced, I'm trying to write the truth. Here, what is most important to me is that I'm learning how to ask certain questions, how to look for openings and how to draw lines between the fragments of lives-once-lived in order to make up my own little ethnographic jigsaw puzzles.

In one way, maybe that's what this work is—a compact set of questions with a few suggestions and a lot of lines that make a map of a place that sits quietly in the North American margins. A dream of a dreamworld, a ghost telling ghost stories and layer upon layer of everything that's left behind.

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43 "Travelers, anthropologists and tourists can be considered observers who gaze into the elsewhere and the Other, while looking for their own reflection. Their storytellings and written works suggest that they look in the worlds of Others as a means of laying claim to their own." (Galani-Moutafi 1999:220)

An Ethnography of High Plains Spectres

Brothers, Neidpath, Saskatchewan

> "What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always, persecuted perhaps by the very chase we are leading? Here again what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back".
>
> -Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

What does it mean for an anthropologist to chase after ghosts, through haunted landscapes and empty places, across the Plains and along endless arrow-straight roads? Why these spaces? Why only traces and flickers of people? I'm asking myself these questions as I drive along the dirt streets of Orkney, Saskatchewan. It's early November and I'm searching for the apparitions that place this space along the lines of my hand-drawn map of abandonment. Here, the ghosts that haunt the buildings and streets do not take a human shape, they do not appear as flickering transparent figures, instead they are the mnemonic echoes of the people and things that once inhabited these spaces. Ghosts are the traces that are written into the landscape and the layer-upon-layer of cultural residue that accumulates in place (Stewart 1988, 1996); they are what Avery Gordon calls:

> "...those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view" (2008:xvi).

Gordon goes on to describe how "haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future" (2008:xvi). In the end, am I—as Derrida suggests in the above quotation —being followed by the very ghosts that I am pursuing? Perhaps this ethnography is like a circle where I chase my tail in search of the simultaneity of past, present and future ghost towns, always trying to separate the temporal layers of space and cultural accumulation. Here, my fascination with abandoned space meets the practice of critical ethnography to form a kind of diachronic pursuit that exists in two separate versions of the past—I pursue and am, by turns, pursued across a haunted landscape.

...

In a discussion of time and haunting, Derrida asks "What is the time and what is the history of the specter? Is there a present of the specter?" (1996:48), a query that I answer with my attention to the haunted space of High Plains ghost towns, a location of almost pure spectrality that exists as a space in which the past, present and future flow in surging, warbled loops of time and place. The ghost space forms a past through the lens of its layered histories, a present through its function as an artefact—a ruin—and a future through its significance as a kind of warning against the unremembering of history.

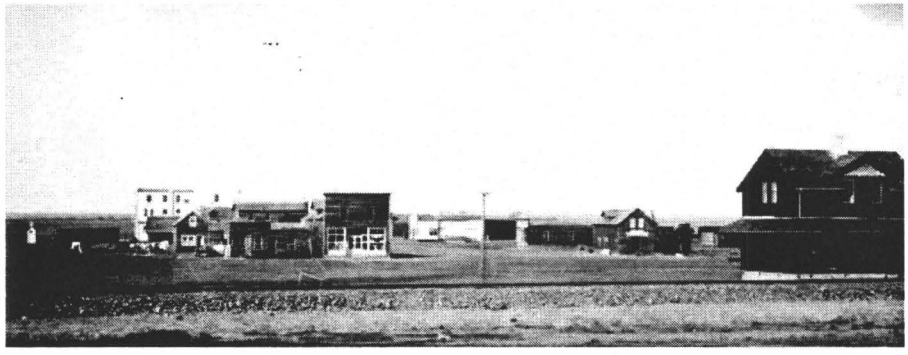
If the ghost can be said to represent the notion of haunting as *return* (Ivy 1995, Derrida 1996, Gordon 2008), then, in a way, I am a ghost—a ghost in search of other ghosts. Just as the ghost is always returning to the site of its former life, looking for closure, I too am coming back to the places that remind me of the ruins of my past lives in Northern Ontario and rural Saskatchewan, searching for meaning. I'm back—in the space of abandonment—looking for clues to my own hauntedness, to how and why places fall into ruin and slip away from the flows of History. Gordon reflects on this state of return as haunting when she claims that the "ghost or apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way" (2008:8); the ghost haunts and is haunted, revealing itself through mnemonic projections and dreamworld constellations.

Bounty, Saskatchewan sits quietly in a stand of cottonwoods, just north of Highway 15, a few houses and little grid of heaving asphalt streets. I park the car by the abandoned theatre; the door slam echoes off the town's emptiness and my

shoes crunch tiny fragments of crumbling tarmac. I wander Main Street, taking photos of the deserted town with its boarded-up houses and forever empty mailboxes. Near the end of the road, I spot a small camper parked beside one of the houses; it looks like it might be occupied and I move closer to find out. The door swings open and a man in his early forties steps out, surprised to see anyone else in Bounty. I introduce myself and tell him about my project. At first he's a bit unsure, but eventually he relaxes and starts to talk about how he came to be here.

He tells me that he and his girlfriend bought several of the houses in town at an auction and are planning on renovating them for resale. I jokingly tell him that he could be Bounty's new mayor if he played his cards right. "I guess I could", he says, as if he'd never really considered the idea. He's living in the camper while he fixes up one of the houses to live in. Through a cloud of cigarette smoke and coffee steam, he tells me that Bounty was once a thriving village with a population of over two-hundred, three grain elevators, banks, shops, a hotel and even a baseball team. He says the last time there was census here, there we only about 15 inhabitants, and most of them didn't even actually live in Bounty. Some people from a neighbouring village had tried to buy the theatre, but its owner wouldn't sell and it's been sitting empty for the better part of ten years. Just past the camper I can see out into the recently ploughed field where the old schoolhouse rests; a lone Angus steer scratches his wooly back against the concrete foundation and a small flock of sparrows rushes out through the doorless doorway. I ask Tom if I can take a photo of him in front of one of his houses. "Sure thing", he says, "can my girlfriend be in it?" as I start to pull out my camera. "Of course", I say, and he yells into the camper for Angie to come out. She's wearing a black Harley-Davidson t-shirt and pink shorts, a pair of pale blue foam clogs ferry her over to where we're standing and we shake hands. Her bleach-blonde hair arcs and curves in waves on top of her head and she shields her eyes from the late morning sun. They proudly stand on the porch of their house, in front of a piece of plywood that's been nailed over the door to keep animals and people out. As they stare out at my camera lens and smile, there's no other sound along these deserted streets. In a way, these two people have become the curators of this museum of abandonment, pushing back at the entropy that threatens to devour the places where people have gone absent.

Robsart, Saskatchewan



Robsart, circa 1914

It's early November on the prairie and I'm up early, heading south from Swift Current to Robsart, Saskatchewan, a town that seems to be breathing its last breath as I crunch and swish up and down the grass-covered streets, hoping to draw out some of the ghosts of place that lie buried somewhere among the abandoned buildings and sidewalks of this one-time railway boom town.

During its population peak in the early 1920s, Robsart was home to over 350 residents and dozens of businesses, including a dentist, a jeweller and several restaurants and hotels. At one point, the town felt so sure of its continued success that it began producing souvenir postcards depicting images of the village along with the phrase "A Town With A Bright Future", but as with so many prairie towns, Robsart's boom was followed by a long and painful demise brought on by falling grain prices, drought, the Great Depression, fires and the advent of more centralized grain collection depots (Bachusky 2003). All of these factors eventually left Robsart as an almost-lifeless ruin resting alongside a little-used highway in an empty corner of the province. In 2002, Robsart was officially "dissolved" into the the regional municipality of Reno as a result of its negligible population base (Anderson 2006).

Robsart's wooden sidewalk construction, 1914

Robsart lies approximately 175 kilometres south-west of Swift Current, near the Saskatchewan-Montana border, at the junction of Highway 13 and 18 between Eastend and Vidora. In this part of the province, the landscape is endlessly unhilled and always without trees; the road is a black string through yellow-brown grass, forever backed by a towering blue sky and thin cloud-lines. The few remaining grain elevators that I pass exist only as part of this spectral geography as they slowly decay, caving in on themselves.

The Statistics Canada census data for 2006 lists Robsart's status as "village/dissolved" with a population of 16. The only person I saw in the village the day I visited was an old man in oil-stained coveralls who was rummaging through a broken shed in search of some unknown item—he noticed that I was watching him and stopped for a moment to look me over from a distance before turning back to his outbuilding excavations. It was clear he had no interest in talking to me, and I turned my attention to the rest of the village and its empty streets and buildings.

Robsart's main street is an expanse of brown dirt and gravel, wide and long, it seems to stretch out endlessly across the prairie. What used to be called Quita Street is lined with defunct businesses and crippled sidewalks; a few

sagging power lines dip across the road, providing electricity to the one or two houses that still use it. Above the general store's front door hangs a five-pointed star made out of Christmas lights; behind the bulbs and wires, a few letters from an old painted sign are just visible. Most of the shop windows are either broken out or covered over with darkened plywood. The grass that grows between the cracks in the sidewalk out front is waist high, betraying the true story of how long this place has been empty.

I often found the buildings in these towns unlocked, their doors left open; their insides became available to my curiosity and I often took this opportunity to explore their dim interiors. Inside the houses there are always layers of things, perpetually piled, stacked and mounded in corners and on shelves. There are collections of human leavings that form stories: a kitchen cupboard with empty cereal boxes and seasoning packets recounts an abandonment through mouse-chewed corners, four chairs around the kitchen table and cracked plates perform a spectral tableau of family dinners, wallpaper with worn-down patterns of flowers and bamboo tells the story of a time when the living room had a life, a pile of broken furniture in the abandoned foyer recalls a discarded plan to move things out, the unlocked door that drifts lazily in the wind describes how places are walked-away-from.

The general store's forgotten interior, once a meeting place for the townspeople, is now littered with empty oil cans and unidentified pages of smudged-out account books. The community centre, the school, the grain elevators and the post office are all closed, half-locked up and rotting from the inside out. Through a window's caked-on dust I see a darkened room where only quiet slices of light illuminate broken boxes of rusted tools, clumps of greasy fabric and a heap of never-delivered telephone books. These are all things that remember a time when people lived and worked in this space. Outside the post office there's a pay phone; I pick up the receiver; the monotonous forever dial tone sounds like it's been waiting for a long time. I imagine the last moments of the past lives of these things, lives of being useful, of having purpose. I wonder what the last call made from this phone might have sounded like, I imagine the grain elevator's final day of standing and I try to picture the last time the store shut its doors.

In a deserted garage on the edge of town, a car sits in mid-repair, its hood wide open with small prairie plants growing up through the engine block. A small line of animal footprints runs over the rear window's film of dust; the license plate tells me the last time the car was registered: November 1964. I wonder about the last person to drive it and where they might have been going. Beside the car, a sea of detritus surges in waves of things that have already happened: a box of Frosted Flakes, pails of hydraulic fluid, smashed sheets of

drywall, a plastic jerry can, some type of disembodied transmission and shelves filled with an iron menagerie of nuts and bolts. Each of these things gestures toward a story that has its ending in the garage: the Frosted Flakes bought as a snack by the mechanic, hydraulic fluid for tractors that don't really exist anymore, the drywall to make a repair that never came to pass, the jerry can full of gasoline and taken to a stranded motorist who thought there'd be a station somewhere along the highway, the transmission is an unfinished work order that was never filled and the nuts and bolts tell the story of an absent mechanic who once knew each bit and piece's purpose.

I'm leaving Robsart and it's getting dark. The street light still senses the night and flutters awake. As long as there are street lights, there will be electricity for the few remaining people that occupy the quiet houses. As I drive away, I see one lonely window glowing dull yellow, turning back the prairie silence for a little while longer.

There are places where the wind seems to always blow—thick and cold—into forever. There are places that remember the glory days that have passed on, leaving in their wake the abandoned bar that swirls with old I. O. Us, written on little yellow slips of water-stained paper. This room in Fillmore, North Dakota still holds the odour of cigarette smoke and the sideways chairs wait patiently in the collapse of the tar paper walls. The late October air is wild with wind and the loose wires that hang from the ceiling whip themselves stiffly against the afternoon sun. In the far left corner of this room there's a mountain of torn paper: tax returns, invoices, menus, stock orders, all of them floating without purpose, whirling in miniature galaxies of numbers and letters, mildew and rainwater clumping them together and erasing their ink[44]. The counter has been flipped on its back and spots of orangey-red rust have begun to blossom on its underbelly. The bar remembers and forgets in waves, its artifacts telling shadowy stories in their ruination. I'm left to imagine the last time the lights went out in this place, when the owner had given up and shut it down, how did that person feel as they closed the door for the final time? What lives have filtered through this room, and where are they now? One bar tab near my feet adds up to a couple of hundred dollars, and a story of self-medication rises to the surface of this abandoned place.

Behind the building, an outhouse has been tipped on its side like some

44 The words melt into one another, indistinguishable as their singularity becomes a mass of forgetting. So too, the buildings and other artifacts of the ghost towns as they collapse and as scraps of wood aren't a house anymore. As people unremember these places the towns become a sea of haunting with fewer and fewer islands that sense place. Each bypass and highway re-route makes the water level rise and before long, all that remains of these settlements are the blurry memories and photos, maybe a few stones and a rough rectangle where a house once stood, where lives once lived.

kind of half-told joke with a perpetually delayed punch-line. Next door, the general store looks like a strange deep-sea fish, mouth agape; white spindles of broken window frames as its teeth and the trembling wind rushes in. A steel pole juts out above the door with small metal loops meant for hanging a sign that now dangle emptily. That sign is also ghost. Patchworks of corrugated tin in various levels of rusted-outness make up the wall that passes a few broken windows and terminates in a tangle of scrubby willow. The roof is caved in and the walls are lined with a few squares of pressed tin, a one-time luxury. There are crumpled piles of splintered wood that used to be counters and shelves, filled with all kinds of cans and boxes from here and there. Now the mice use these piles of wood as their tiny larders. A few stringy prairie plants grow up out of the unboarded floor. The grasslands are seeping back in.

Across the street the community hall looks structurally sound; it doesn't have the fallen-down appearance of the bar and the general store, but inside it's equally abandoned, hovering at the edge of being, seemingly forgotten in the drifting of time. The door is double-wide and I have to pull hard to unwedge it from the frame. I fall back as the door swings open and a huge gust of wind pushes its way inside, stirring up a humble cyclone of paper, leaves and dust. For a moment, I imagine that I see a figure framed by the waxy light coming in from another door at the back of the hall, but in an instant that glimmer is gone and I'm alone in a hall with a little stage and a basketball hoop at the far end. Hardwood floors covered in a layer of dirt crumbs and toothless windows describe the vacancy of this place. To my left, immediately inside the front door, is a small ticket collecting window through which I can see the box office, littered with tickets from shows that never happened. The wind whistles harder now and the heavy door slams shut behind me, sealing me—for a moment—in Fillmore, North Dakota's tomb. This curse doesn't belong to a pharaoh; it's a hex born of changing economies and pulled-up railroad tracks (Birdsall and Florin 1981). No one stirs in Fillmore this afternoon. And even if they're there, behind the curtains, they're not coming outside.

I saw the spectral rail line on my way into Fillmore; I followed its ghostly indentation with my eyes, all the way up to where the tracks once bisected a low hill with a ragged cut to allow the train through. Here, as in the rest of the Plains, no more railway equals no more town.

Narrative Fragments

> "Fragmentary writing is, ultimately, democratic writing. Each fragment enjoys an equal distinction. The most banal one finds its exceptional reader. Each, in its turn, has its hour of glory.
>
> - Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Cool Memories III*

She assembles the pieces of her world in front of me; she lays them out across the bar in narrow story-lines about Nebraska and Jesus. The bar I'm leaning on is covered with deep brown vinyl that's stuffed with foam and made to look like leather. As she talks, she wipes a greyish rag back and forth without purpose, leaving behind little trails of bleachy-smelling water. She's framing her life in this place, telling me the story of how she came to be here and what being-in-this-place means to her. "Living in North Dakota is like living on top of the world" she says wistfully. I sit and listen to her careful sentences, drinking gin and tonic while she sets the stage. She chain-smokes long, pencil-like cigarettes and talks about fate, faith and the importance of dreams. This bar is one of seven on a circuit that she shuffles between during the week, a nomad on a tiny island surrounded by oil and grass. Here it seems that dreamworlds are *actually* constructed out of dreams[45].

She's writing a novel about a romance in the last days before the Apocalypse. Her eyes flitter wildly inside her head as she tells me about how the world will end and how the true believers will be raptured up to heaven. She takes photos of clouds and believes in the powers of angels and demons. Her blonde hair forms a frozen swell of bangs cresting over her forehead and her eyes are made more frenzied by their thick outlines of make-up; she looks like she's around forty and her smile is made out of watered-down dreams. She feels that it was God's plan for her to move to Williston. We're both following ghosts; hers is the Holy Ghost, and mine are the ghosts of lonely farmhouses and deserted roads. Both are invisible, but we still know they're there.

As her life percolates down through places and times, I start to arrange a constellation of her existence, marking out the trajectories from Omaha, Nebraska to Williston, North Dakota on an imaginary map. This is the same ethno-cartographic patch-job I perform in an empty bedroom in Gascoyne, North Dakota, unfolding lives-once-lived and trying to make sense of the remnants. I'm shaping a story out of discarded memories and assembling a kind of jigsaw puzzle made out of a worm-eaten bible, a dress (lopsidedly bleached by the sun and turning mould-black at the hem), old caramelized photographs of children and tractors and dogs, an empty iron bed-frame that must have been expensive at some other point in time, an old steamer trunk with no bottom that holds a rotten pair of leather shoes. I'm attempting to draw new story-lines between things, places and memories and the people who've left them behind.

In the same North Dakota barroom, later that night, he wanders in and sits down beside me at the faux-leather counter. He looks like he's in his mid-thirties, maybe a couple of years older than me. He has a whisper of a moustache and a

45 She tells me that the name of the town—Williston—kept appearing in her dreams. For her, it was a sign from God. She packed up her car and left Nebraska.

pair of thick-lensed glasses sitting slightly askew on the bridge of his nose. His camouflage cap hovers over his face as he orders a caesar[46]. He leans his body into the bar and quietly drinks his cocktail while the bartender and I continue our conversation about the end of the world and the return of Jesus. After about a half an hour, he joins in, at first with only a word or two of agreement here and there, but soon enough he's as animated as she is and they're both talking about the Book of Revelations and the Rapture, and in the same breath, about the rise and fall of Williston and the oil patch and living on the Plains.

He came here from Montana twelve years ago and dreams of going back some day. He feels that Williston is too cramped—by North Dakota standards I suppose it is[47]. He tells me his story, a careful constellation of being-in-place and of bent dreamworlds suffused with crude oil and fluctuations of money. He talks about the wind that seems to always blow down the width of the main drag that's lined with neon-covered mini-casinos, cheque-cashing stores and motel bars. He talks about the lack of things to do and how the only respite—for his kids—from the monotony of small-town nights is a motel swimming pool[48].

After a few more drinks, he turns to me and places his rough-hewn hand on my shoulder, "There's a reason you've been brought to me tonight.", he says with a thoughtful tone in his voice. Apparently that reason is so that he can tell me to "write it as it is". In these few moments, through a gin-coloured film, I'm taken aback and I imagine that he's some kind of medium, a sort of spectral guide speaking to me from another time and place, a place that knows what needs to be said. It's like he's telling me to write my own truth, to make my own constellation of constellations, to tell his story through my story. Maybe I've had too much to drink. He leans in a little closer. "What makes a man strong is his heart—as long as you got heart, you are the toughest son-of-a-bitch", and with that he's hugging me and wishing me luck on the rest of my trip. The bar is long past closing and he's walking out through the dark wood-panelled door, calling over his shoulder "Follow your name, Armstrong". I think back to what the bartender told me earlier about feeling like the Lord guided her to Williston. It seems that tonight has been all about destinies, intersecting lines of flight. Three trajectories converged in a motel bar: a born-again bartender, a reflexive ex-oil rig worker and a drifting graduate student.

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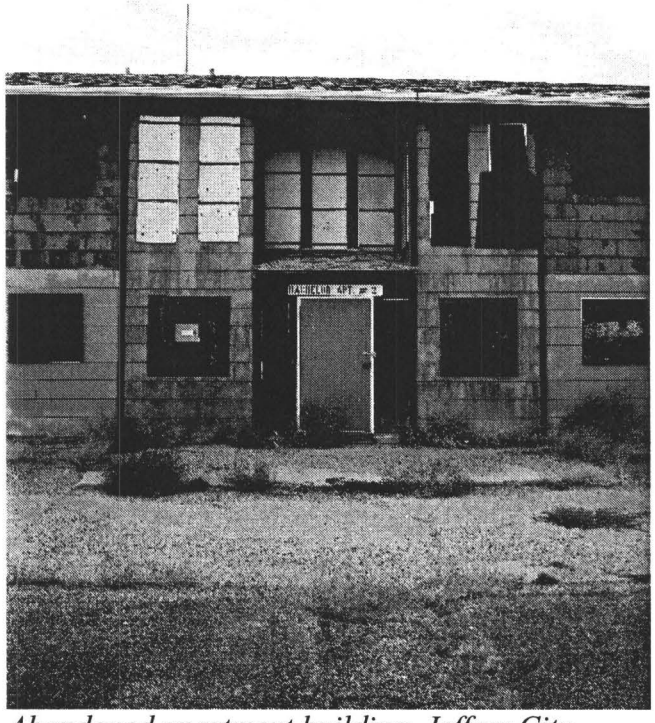
46 My comment that this drink was fairly unknown outside of Canada sparked the conversation that eventually led to discussions of eschatology and prairie economics.

47 Population: 12 512, Land Area: 18.2 sq. km

48 "There's nothing to do in this fucking town—I had to bring my kids to the fucking Super 8 to swim."

Jeffrey City, Wyoming



Abandoned apartment building, Jeffrey City, Wyoming

I turn off onto 287 at Muddy Gap and head west along a black line drawn through the Basin's bowl. Jeffrey City's low-slung buildings come into sight a long way off. Grey and beige bumps in the landscape. There's supposed to be a hotel here somewhere and I'm hoping to stay the night so I can explore this once-upon-a-time city where 95% of the original inhabitants have left. I drive right through town without seeing any sign of a hotel, save for a collection of dried-out one-story buildings that were once—maybe twenty years ago—a motel. I stop at the western edge of town and suddenly realize that that wind-burned motel is where I'm supposed to be staying tonight—Green Mountain Motel, I check my notebook. That's it. As I pull up to the buildings, I can't see any signs of life, let alone a place to check in. After a few circumnavigations of the parking lot, I see a flap of cardboard with the word "OFFICE" drawn out in felt pen. As I open the

door to the trailer that serves as the 'front desk' area, I'm greeted by a young woman clutching her hand, which she's covered with a white dish towel. The cloth is soaked with blood and I can see the blood spilling out of her arm as the makeshift bandage becomes more red than white. Fairly alarmed by what I'm seeing, I tell her to sit down and ask her what's happened. Apparently, she'd been butchering a deer with her mother behind the trailer when the knife slipped and cut into her thumb and forearm. Her mother had gone to get some gauze from the fire station on the other side of town and would be back soon to check me in, she told me as the blood started dripping from her fingertips, down into the grey matted carpet of the small living room. She sits down in a brown recliner and, holding her injured arm tightly, tells me about how the town used to have thousands of residents back when the mine was up and running, how there were kids everywhere and how the restaurants downtown used to be full of people every Friday night. Now the motel was the only business left in town, mostly there to serve the hunters that came in from out-of-state to shoot at deer and antelope. She didn't seem sad about any of this, just kind of resigned.

After about half an hour, her mother came back with the gauze and re-wrapped the wounded arm. I suggested that they might want to go into Riverton to see a doctor in case the cut became infected, but the mother told me that she didn't trust doctors and that, besides, there'd be nobody left to watch over the motel. Gruffly, she checked me in, handed me a key with a large orange plastic tag on it and told me that there was no telephone, no television and nothing fancy in the room. She told me that it was just for sleeping. As I discovered later that night, the room also lacked working lights. In the dark, under a sun-bleached photo of foxes in the snow, I fell asleep surrounded by ghosts of the living, ghosts of the dead and a choir of not-so-distant coyote calls.

Jeffrey City, Wyoming is a place where the streets are as wide as highways; a defunct bowling alley and several hollowed-out restaurants lie in ruin along 1st Street South. This is a place where ten thousand people once lived and now there are only a hundred. As 1st Street bends away from the highway there's a rubbed-out duo of baseball diamonds, only rough triangles in the dirt now, another reminder of a time when people had need of more than one diamond.

Out across the prairie, beside Highway 287 there are skeleton foundations of unbuilt modern homes—basements without houses, front steps that lead to nothing. Ghost walls. It's a whole suburb of ghosts, of half-homes, left to drift. Apartment blocks and semi-detached houses muzzled by plywood nailed over their window-frames and doorjambs; faded street signs bent over by the weather; fissured and silent avenues that curve lazily through the ever-present smell of sage brush. I saw a few real-live tumble weeds blowing through town, like in some kind of anachronistic Western movie set. This place would make a good location

for shooting an end-of-the-world movie;[49] as I stand in the middle of the street, I'm filming an *edge*-of-the-world movie. Hope was once written into this town in thick, fresh lines: there are swimming pools, schools, community centres, tennis courts and playgrounds. This is a place where optimism has been scrubbed raw and left to bleed out. Here, the ghosts of place are very real.

Wheelock, North Dakota

Abandoned school, Wheelock, North Dakota

Hours of driving north lead me through a series of gritty gravel roads and eventually, over a slow hill, I see the vanished town and its smashed-up grain elevator poking up above the prairie. Like a Dakotan Atlantis rising above waves of dried grass, Wheelock is silent on this Sunday morning in late October. Collections of discarded cars and washing machines litter the empty lots of this one-time village that lies in the north-western section of the state, over 400 kilometres from Fargo. Wheelock seems to have fallen victim to its isolation: the rail line looks overgrown and the roads leading to the townsite are deeply marked with potholes and long fissures. Everywhere there are signs of absence, of things

49 I think back to the discussion of the Apocalypse with a bartender in South Dakota, and for a moment I feel like I'm seeing a tiny pinhole open up in the Wyoming desert. The theme of eschatology seemed to constantly reappear throughout my fieldwork. Several times I was drawn into conversations about the end of the world. One of many ghosts that followed me as I followed them.

fallen in and never rebuilt. The school's ceiling has collapsed and the sun and wind move easily through rooms without walls and doors; a few burned down houses tell of families who gave up and walked away. The choice to not rebuild in a dying town tells a story of faded hope and a chance for something better elsewhere. I wonder where the people who lived in the burned-out house along Main Street have gone and why they left. What was their last happy memory of this place?

Off in the distance a pair of dogs bark and I feel like there are eyes looking out at me as I walk between the dried-up houses and long-dead storefronts. More than anywhere else that I've visited, this place has a sense of haunting that lives in stasis; all around me it is as though decay reached a sort of half-life and then stalled, hovering in rack and ruin. There are people living here, I can see the signs of their occupations in fresh garbage and vehicles with inflated tires. A bundle of newspapers pushes out of a mailbox near the empty general store. Two men in a gently shuddering Oldsmobile roll past me with their stone faces obscured slightly by the grime of the windshield; out of the corner of my eye I think I see someone moving inside a worn house at the edge of town, but when I look again there's no one.

People are living in the midst of collapse, perhaps they're just riding it out, maybe waiting to die. Maybe they're insulating themselves in isolation, holing up in the skeletons of a town. No one will talk to me and I'm left to imagine my own map of this dreamworld. Wheelock's history is compressed into a few hours as I move through its solitary streets and up and down the remnants of sidewalks. Nowadays, Wheelock rarely appears on road maps of North Dakota.

I'm at the end of 1st Avenue and I hear the dogs barking; getting louder, coming closer . And then I see two Rottweilers tearing down the road in little clouds of dust. I'm running back to the car with the dogs in my ear. As I drive away, they're gnashing their teeth at the tires and I wonder what things are hidden in the basements of abandoned towns.

...

Robsart, Saskatchewan—again, in early November is sunny and chilled, a perpetual wind turns itself into eddies of dust between the few remaining buildings, little tornadoes of unimpeded grit. The wide dirt street is accented by a few lingering light poles, watching over ghosts at night, making some semblance of lives-still-lived. At sunset, the lights buzz and flicker into being, calling fat, powdery moths in from the fields. Halogen insects without people.

This place is quiet today; nobody's moving, only a few shaggy cows milling around the old ruined hospital. The hospital was built in 1916 to serve a population that by 1926 had grown to 350. Founded in 1910 as a rail depot along the Canadian Pacific Railway, Robsart slowly began to lose its population

following the Depression until, in 1991, its last mayor, Archie Smiley, left town (Bachusky 2003). A certain sense of Robsart's past bubbles up as I wander through the village and poke my camera lens through the blown-out windows of shops and houses. The stories here are those of having to leave and of not wanting to look back. I imagine that to look back on these spaces would not be to turn to a pillar of salt, but instead to succumb to the weight of a faded dream and crippled hopes. A wilful forgetting is written in the kitchen with its pots and pans still in place and mouse-eaten boxes of cereal tipped over in the cupboards. A nest of some kind occupies one of many abandoned corners in the house. But there are other invisible stories collected just below the surface.

In *Ghost Town Stories II: from renegade to ruin along the Red Coat Trail* (2003), Johnnie Bachusky describes a 2000 visit to Robsart with its last mayor, Archie Smiley who served from 1978-1991. As Archie and Johnnie tour through the remains of Robsart, the former mayor recounts stories of harsh winter storms, bootlegging and Depression-era economic struggles. This remembrance is another experience of being-in-place and it writes the ghost town into another kind of being, it becomes what Stewart (1996) calls an "occupied place". Two parallel senses of place, two layers of affect—mine is the lonely ghost town of abandonment, whereas Archie's is a vault of memories and the storied past of human inhabitation. At one point, Johnnie asks Archie if he misses Robsart, to which he responds "there is nothing to miss now" (Bachusky 2003:90). Another Robsart lives in Archie's mind and this deserted space along Highway 13 isn't pined for anymore. On this subject, Archie has re-written an old poem that I saw taped to the inside of a window when I visited the townsite in November, and that Bachusky has reproduced in his book:

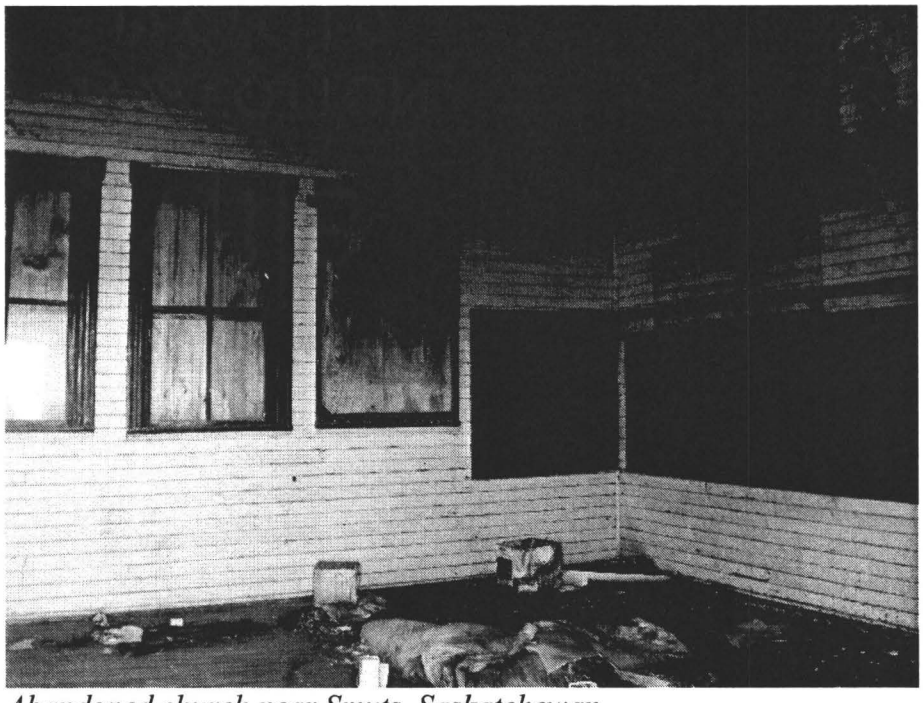
> *"Here's to Robsart, it's still here yet,*
> *No store, no hotel, a well with a jet.*
> *The main street still stretching, not much in your way.*
> *When you put it together, there is nothing more,*
> *No hustle, no bustle, no rumble, no roar,*
> *It's as dead as a doornail, it's as old as the hills,*
> *No fun, no excitement, no jolly old thrills.*
> *But still we did love it, though far we may roam,*
> *For Robsart is Robsart, and Robsart was home."*

My research and writing forms only one of a multitude of possible maps to writing these places into being; it is only one of many ways of understanding and interpreting the phenomenon of High Plains ghost towns. There are innumerable paths to discussing the collapse of dreamworlds, mine is only a beginning.

From fieldnotes written in Swift Current, Saskatchewan on November 5,

2007: *Villages like shrunken heads—dried-out, desiccated and without eyes. Bloodless revolutions, just the kind that turn over, like furrowed soil. But that's gone now too, blown through a never-ending skyworld.*

Who Has Seen the Wind?



Abandoned church near Smuts, Saskatchewan

I have. I saw the bones and teeth of ruination littered across the prairie, washed up on the shore of some imaginary lake. Bones like tarpaper-covered wooden walls and teeth like shards of autoglass scattered in the grass behind the old general store. In the stories that the old farmers tell me at lunch counters the wind is voracious. The wind lives in places and it writes them into being through its ever-presence. The wind is carved on every story and in every deserted town. The wind is a constant occupant in a place where few people remain.

The wind is a key element of these prairie ruins. It makes them shimmer and burn, it makes them more real than a hundred photographs or a thousand words. To experience the abandoned Plains in their whip-smart reality is to hear, smell, taste, feel and see the wind. The notion of ruination having an environmental component is touched upon quite eloquently by Florence Hetzler (1988:52-53) when she describes how a "walk up the mountain to the ruin is also part of the ruin", how "[t]he sun becomes part of the ruin" and how "the intense

cold" can influence the experience of place.

I visited the High Plains in late fall when cold winds blow day and night, when frost accumulates on sleeping windshields and when the world seems perpetually grey except for the occasional yellow bloodstain made out of a grove of cottonwoods. The landscape and the towns became infected with temperatures, like ghost-birds coming home to roost, the coolness and winds make the dreamworld a different place. The light is grey and without shadows. On the Plains, the weather is an inevitable part of the ruined town.

From fieldnotes written in Jeffrey City, Wyoming on October 16, 2007: *Dust—the antiseptic of the Plains. It erases smells and seals away all kinds of civil decay. A hundred years bleed out in red-brown powder, like chocolate that tastes like dirt. To pick it up, to blow away the accumulation, and the ghost's stories are opened up for a few days—but then the dust settles back into place and you're tied back up in little dreams.*

In Orkney, Saskatchewan the Plains are bathed in frozen sunshine and more waves of grass. Here, hockey rinks and their forgotten warm-up shacks slowly fade into the prairie backdrop. Along the sideroads and lesser highways, these towns begin to evaporate as the rail lines move away and the super-highways draw cars and transport trucks across Saskatchewan in as little time as possible. No one I've ever talked to seems to want to spend any time here, they just want to get to the other side, to where the mountains and the oceans make for some pretty scenery and where there are curves in the road.

An old electric stove with grey-black heating elements rests in a kitchen that I can see through one more broken-out window, once again framed by tattered, filmy curtains. Sometimes curtains seem to be the only living things left in these haunted spaces; they perform a weird micro-ballet as the wind slips through the vacant houses. I often imagine—with curtains and every other abandoned thing that I see—what these bits and pieces of prairie life looked like when they were new, what they meant to the people who picked them out and placed them in the homes they thought they were going to be living in for a very long time. Mattresses with protruding springs like broken bones, holes chewed in their soft stomachs by field mice; and I wonder what kind of dreams people had when they laid their work-worn bodies down, when there were still sheets and blankets to keep them warm.

There are places where schools are abandoned, left with chained-and-padlocked doors. Spelling lessons still written on the chalkboards; notes tacked to cork boards reminding the ghosts of students past to remove their "outside shoes"; bird's nests in the hallways, mouse shit and insect bodies piled on the window ledges that look out onto a once-upon-a-time playground; cracked toilets and the rubble of fallen-in ceilings in the basement bathrooms; rotten carpets curling in at

the edges, steeped in years of rainwater; reams of uncollected homework, attendance records and crayon drawings litter the floors. Off in the school-yard's distant corner, there's a baseball backstop made out of chicken wire and gangly wooden poles; home plate is as absent as the home places of White Bear, Saskatchewan where the school and it's ball diamond rest in pieces[50]. With a population of less than ten people (down from a peak of 250 in the 1930s) living in the deep south-west of the province some 400 kilometres from Regina, White Bear is a place where time and memory are scratched into the surface by the things and spaces that have been left behind. On a Sunday in November, the town was silent except for a few nervous whinnies from a fenced-in mare.

...

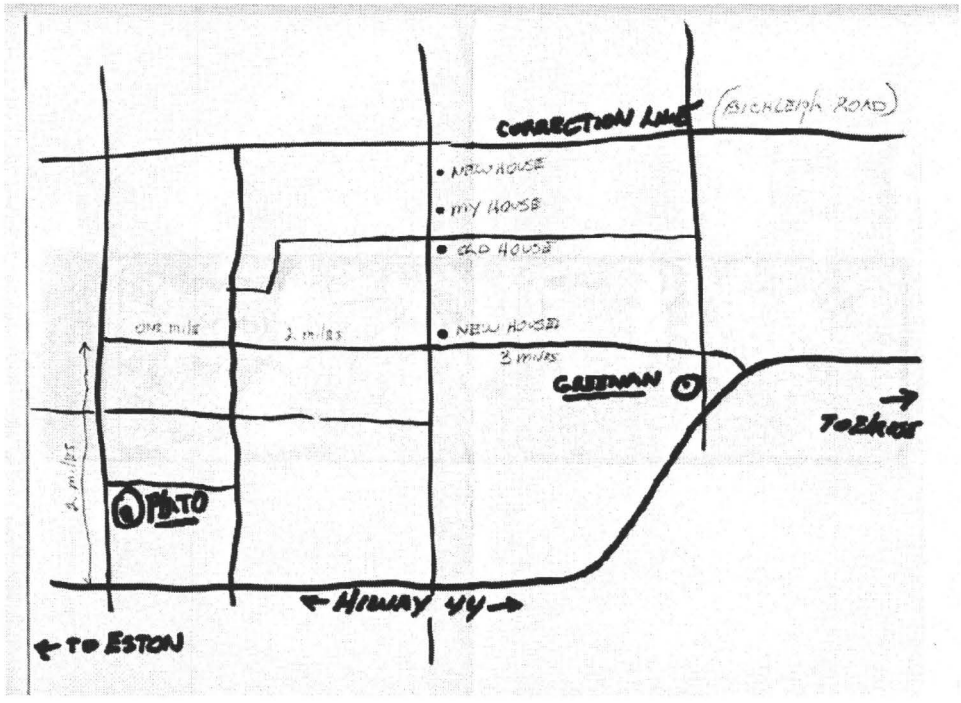
It is from within the layer-upon-layer of detail that these ghost places can begin to be written into being; here they can be lifted out of what Stewart (1996:143) calls "the 'you are there' realism of ethnographic description" and transformed "into a surreal space of intensification". It is in this surreal space of ethnographic inquiry that one is able to see beyond the everyday of a given space and imagine it as a world unto itself, a space filled with weirdly resonant possibilities, a well-lit dreamworld. For Tim Edensor (2005:323), the ad hoc arrangement found in the abandoned accumulations of things constitutes an "accidental surrealism [that] makes normative material order less obvious, more tenuous and stranger than it appeared previously". James Clifford further reflects on the surreal within the practice of ethnography when he writes that surrealism can be used in "an obviously expanded sense to circumscribe an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic and the unconscious" (1988:121). The ghosts of my ethnography are definitely exotic and emerge—in many ways—from the unconscious, but I can't really comment on their eroticism.

...

Almost 200 kilometres south-west of Saskatoon, in Plato, Saskatchewan I found myself alone on the red-brown streets, standing outside the post office. I was supposed to find my way through another labyrinth of dust-choked roads to the home of a friend's father who lived ten miles outside of town. With no cell phone service and no real address to pinpoint, I was left in limbo, suspended above the cartographic dot that my GPS unit called "Plato, SK". Not a person in sight, but empty houses, weathered grain elevators and overgrown churches told

50 "Whether manifest in the serial occurrence of distinct objects randomly strewn or the coalescence of stuff in piles and other aggregations, objects seem to have reached their current situation according to no deliberate scheme of organization but through the agency of obscure processes." (Edensor 2005:321)

the story of a town in rapid decline. I remember my friend talking about playing hockey on the local ice rink; it's gone now, leaving nothing but a conspicuous rectangle of gently mounded earth. The school in Plato has evaporated like so many others in the province, leaving behind only an iron marker to tell the few passers-by the years of its operation.



Hand-drawn map from Plato, SK to my friend's father's house

After awhile, a truck pulls up to the little post office and a thick, dusted man gets out and starts walking toward the building. Imagining that this might be the only person I'll see for a long time, I rush over to ask him if he knows how to get to the farm that I'm looking for. He steps back a bit when I ask him, looking off into the wheat, thinking about whether or not he might know how to get there from here. As it ends up, he doesn't. In the interim, another truck has arrived on the scene and a compact middle-aged woman in a blue checkered flannel shirt steps out. As she passes, the man tells me that she'll know how to get to the farm, and sure enough, she does. After several minutes of her trying to explain *correction lines* (east-west survey lines used to correct the one-square-mile sections of the province as they diminish toward the North Pole) as a means of orientation, she gives up and tells me that I can just follow her out there.

He's tall and wiry with flickering grey hair and wide eyes that continually scan the horizon. A tiny white dog trails after us as he shows me around the farm. She's the kind of dog that would be at home inside the shoulder bag of some uptown socialite; she's almost out of place here, but, for some reason she fits. In the dog I'm reminded that a sense of place is always about *context*, and that things change shape in relation to their environment and in the way they situate themselves amongst other things. I wonder how my presence changes things and how I am changed by the ghost towns and the places with single-digit populations. The Plains are definitely haunted, but I imagine that their spirits take on varying forms in the presence different people. Your ghosts are not my ghosts. Still, I wonder if some of our spectres are related.

Later on, he shows me a kind of yearbook of Plato that was put together by local residents in the 1980s as a way of remembering the town's history. I find this document particularly poignant because here—on the nowhere prairie—history is in the hands of the few, and if they don't work to preserve it, nobody will. Plato isn't even a blip on the provincial radar—there's nothing *Historic* here; there weren't any bootleggers or uprisings, no health care reform or mining claims. Plato is only one in a long line of evaporated farming communities throughout Saskatchewan, slowly fading as its population leaves and dies. Plato and its kin are history unremembered.

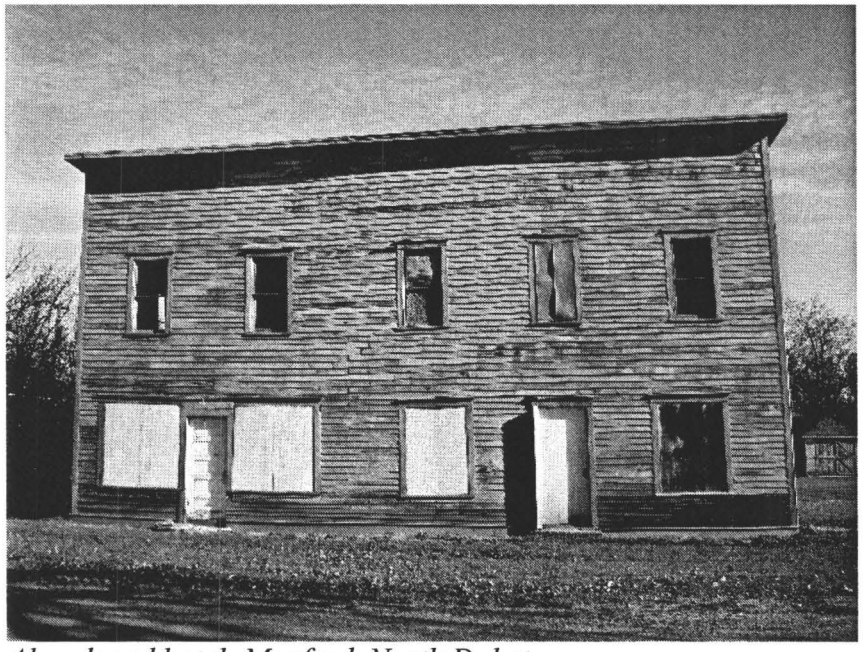
He hands me several Xeroxed pages that make up a detailed map of Plato drawn by his father. He slowly flips through the pages, telling me tiny stories as he does. He calls up a dreamworld of kids skating on a hockey rink at night lit by trouble lights; of rainy evening poker games held in the general store. He points out where all of the houses *used* to be and where a wealthy farmer has bought up all the land for his grain bins. The map outlines where everyone he knew lived and which buildings sat on which lots. One more inscription that hovers at the edge of forgetting, waiting for the redemption that probably won't come.

After following my friend's father back into Plato the next morning, I park my car and hop into his truck. He gives me a driving tour of the townsite, stopping every once in a while to conjure up some ghost or another through stories of his childhood and beyond. An old Chinese man who ran the general store gets a call to perform a small tableau in which he stuffs little splinters of wood into a leaking roof; a small crowd of farmers in overalls and grimy Wheat Pool caps mill around in front of the post office; volunteer fire-fighters throw buckets of water on a burning house at the edge of town. Here and there, once-upon-a-time people move about in their back yards or lean against the grain bins as trucks are emptied and filled. Life on the Plains is not easy and the wind blows forever and ever.

...

All of these places tell a story. Every landscape is inscribed by a series of happenings and occurrences, "incidents and accidents"[51]. Everywhere there are sites of narrative, stories told *through* space and place, lives inscribed on landscapes. As anthropologists and ethnographers, we are constantly writing, re-writing and telling stories; as a spectral ethnographer[52], I am always writing ethnographic ghost stories.

Feeling Structures



Abandoned hotel, Manfred, North Dakota

Among the variety of spectral artifacts left behind in High Plains ghost towns, perhaps the most resonant are the actual structures, the buildings and houses that once contained the people and their things. Just as Raymond Williams (1977) described networks of affective impacts as "structures of feeling", the abandoned buildings of ghost towns form themselves into collections of affective meaning by providing a physical vessel for memories and the fragments of human leaving. Often the architectural structures are the final tactile remnants of abandoned space—even if they exist only as imprints on the

51 "All along along; There were incidents and accidents; There were hints and allegations" (Paul Simon, *You Can Call Me Al* from the 1986 album Graceland)

52 Spectral ethnography is the anthropological practice of examining the negative space of culture, or the space that is left in the wake of human presence. See "On Spectral Ethnography" (Armstrong 2010) for a detailed description of this practice.

landscape: depressions, foundations, topless storm cellars. A blank field becomes a one-time village when I stumble over the last few blocks of a foundation buried in the prairie grass. Without the buildings left to hold onto the layers and fragments of human occupation, maybe everything would just be blown out into the prairie, and out of history.

The old hotel in Bents, Saskatchewan holds the remnants of a thousand stories. Upturned sugar and flour bins guard the front door, their insides long since pillaged by mice and birds. On the main floor a wide counter stretches down the right side of the room, covered with unpurchased merchandise from the last fifty or sixty years: women's leather pumps from the 40s, a handleless tea cup from the 50s, a grade school French textbook from the late 70s, a pair of crushed plastic frame glasses that look like they're from the 60s—a litany of this building's times, a catalogue of deserted commodities.

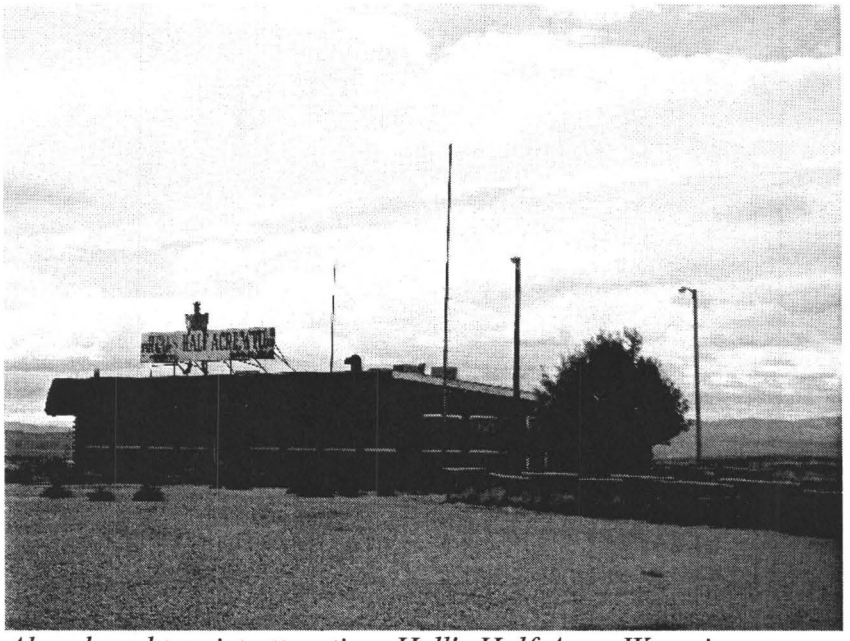
In the back, there's an old post office wicket with a hundred pigeon holes for mail. Uncollected letters, bills and newspapers yellow themselves to sleep in the fall's last curls of sunlight. A pair of faded blue coveralls sits on the counter; grain dust in narrow furrows of the canvas makes me imagine the final days of Bents, a time when the same person operated the elevator and the post office. Back out in the main room, stacks of unopened house paint recall a time when someone was still thinking of staying here. Shelves behind the counter hold mismatched shoes and lonely cans of long-exploded foodstuffs. A bag of cement leaks powder-grey entrails into the linoleum floor's cavities. The sub-floor shudders under my weight and I can hear bits of insulation and dry-rotted wood falling in the shallow basement. More receipts and shopping lists, a book full of unpaid debts with a final entry on June 14, 1973. Outside I can see up to the second floor where walls and doors have been punched out to make a single room. Maybe someone had other plans for the hotel.

Further on, past the grange hall and the hotel, there's a house with broken windows and fake wood panelling in every room. A TV antennae creaks in the breeze, more untethered wires swinging like treeless jungle vines. Women's clothes and a collection of old baseball caps huddle in the corner of one room, mildewed bedding rests in lumpy bulges on top of an upside-down bed. Were these the things they never wanted, or were their owners hoping to come back and retrieve the last of their belongings? Inside the kitchen there's a hand-painted sign for an auction sale, a note about the eventual fate of this house and it's town.

The road into Bents is too overgrown to drive on, only a pair of faint lines follows the hill from the unnamed dirt road that leads off Regional Road 768 to Bents. Still, I could see it from several miles away, its worn-down grain elevator tipping in the cloudless sky, holding the ghost town in place with its presence. Bents won't likely survive too much longer; one of the farmers across the road

told me that the man who owned the elevator wanted to tear down, or maybe just burn it. It was unsafe, he told me over the din of an idling combine. Another structure sucked up into forgetting.

Ghost Ships of The Plains



Abandoned tourist attraction, Hell's Half-Acre, Wyoming

These haunted towns of haunted things in haunted landscapes are like ghost ships, sailing through the Plains without captain or crew. Perhaps a deck hand or two remain, clinging to masts without sails, drifting further and further out from the shore until they sink into the wild waves of prairie grass. Or else they quietly row away in small boats as the phantom slips into fog and out of sight forever. As the ship goes down, some things float at the surface a little bit longer, while others quickly sink to the ocean floor of history.

...

In other ghost towns, there are still a few *living* people who either pass me in sideways glances, or else they stop to chat, usually asking me why I'm so far from home, and what I'm doing all the way out *here*[53]. Sometimes they pull over to the side of the road and—with an elbow hooked through the open window and always looking at something impossibly far off somewhere over my shoulder—they drop little pieces of stories at my feet. Fragments that make up

53 My rental car had Colorado plates and most people I talked to thought that the only reason I might be *out here* was to look for long-lost relatives, or their graves.

the local history of a place, a suite of memories and anecdotes that I try to form into a particular understanding of this place. Knowledge of a place layers itself on itself and begins a chain reaction of stories as bits and pieces move between the various levels of remembrance and narrative. The abandoned house becomes a certain family's home, a grain elevator gets its own history and a deserted street gets a name—this is what Stewart has called "a story designed to reassemble a broken history into a new whole" (1988:236). These particles of narrative that drift down through conversations, observations and experiences are how I assemble a sense of place, through what the one-time rig worker might have viewed as a *truth* of place, an ensemble of positions where haunting is only a matter of untold stories. In one way, a ghost town exists solely as a collection of untended truths about time and place; it is only ghostly because a part of the history has been obscured or erased by time.

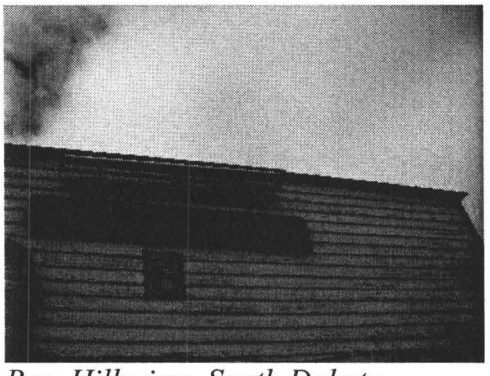
Highway 12 is deserted this morning. Hillsview, South Dakota hovers at the eastern edge of the state with its schoolhouse and 1930s car skeletons. Empty houses, shops and a dead gas station seem to bob on more waves of grass. Again, only dry grass and wind as I move around, shooting photos through cracked-off shutters. Bits of stories flutter up, out past my face like birds. As I'm heading back the car, I see a tractor rolling down the road toward the shadow of the elevator where I've parked. Moments later I'm talking to Bob from six feet below as he leans over the window frame of his road-spanning blue machine. Hillsview comes slowly into focus as he starts sewing up the loose edges of my impressions of the one-time town. "Used to quite a few people living here, at least a couple of hundred when I was kid, but that's gotta be forty, fifty years ago now. Now there's only one guy out here—lives in that grey house. I used to live here, but I moved out a bit further once all the local guys started selling their land off to these big corporate farms. Only way to make a living out here is to keep getting bigger—I don't know how much longer I can keep it up. Wal-Mart and all these government bail-outs for rich farmers is what's killing small towns—people just want everything; they don't want to work for it, they just want it now. You know?". He's in his sixties, with rough, grey sideburns that wrap around the bottom of his stubbly chin. He speaks in a strange accent that sounds somewhat Scandinavian —but maybe like Scandinavian that's never been to Scandinavia. He tells me that he used to go to school here and that the bar over on the other side of the road was moved a few years back when Hillsview's only resident bought it for $151 and had it moved into his front yard. The bar now functions as a pay-what-you-can watering hole for the farmers of McPherson County. Bob points to the different houses that we can see from the road and lists off the names and occupations of the people that used to inhabit them. "That over there, that was the Smith brother's garage, and behind that was where the school teacher lived—man, she

was mean; made me sit out in the freezing cold one afternoon for talking back to her". He tells me that a lot of the farmland has been bought up by wealthy hunters from Texas who come up to hunt ring-neck pheasants for a couple of weeks a year; "hardly any small farms around here anymore; kids are all moving away, no one wants to live up here, it's too rough". We talk for about an hour and then he tells me that he has to get his load of hay over to a neighbour; I ask him where his neighbour lives, "about twenty miles that way", he says. I watch the tractor disappear over a low ridge and then I'm back in the car, passing field after field of wheat labelled with Monsanto, Cargill and ConAgra placards.

Palimpsests

> "Although their journey traced a zig zag on the map, they were heading straight as an arrow towards openness. Each day was longer and more distant."
> -Cesar Aira, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*

Mark Z. Danielewski's (2000) novel *House of Leaves* examines the lives of a family living in a haunted house with an inexplicably and constantly expanding interior space. While the interior swells, giving way to new rooms and passageways, the outside dimensions of the house remain static. Not surprisingly, this architectural condition confounds and unsettles the family. Similarly, as I follow the lines of ghost towns across the Plains, I feel a bit like the family in this novel: never certain about how much deeper these haunted spaces will go; always feeling a spectral presence lying quietly beside me at night; trailing gravel roads that seem to open up and continue on endlessly in to the grass and dirt. As the Plains expand in front of me, I get pulled always deeper into their haunting, looking for stories written on the walls of empty town halls and bat-filled churches.



Bar, Hillsview, South Dakota

These stories are palimpsests; they are the half-deleted remnants of people, places and things that still haunt landscapes. Here, the palimpsests (buried sidewalks, house foundations, deserted streets, peeling wallpaper, worn-off paint) are objects that help to create a sense of place and to describe the process of haunting (Edensor 2005). Along these lines of reasoning, Yi-Fu Tuan (1990:17) claims that "place is a type of object. Places and objects define space, giving it a geometric personality" and in the context of the Plains and their ghost towns, these palimpsestic object-markers give way to a certain "geometric personality" of abandoned space. The materiality—and its absence or pseudo-absence—of haunted spaces gives them shape and makes their cultural significance and affect visible, and in some ways, tactile.

Back in Hillsview, South Dakota[54], the streets were written and then erased. Rubbed out by the Plains and overgrown[55] with weeds. The windows on the old schoolhouse are boarded-up—closed eyes. The outhouse behind the school is gone, but the seat still sits there, on its side in the grass, a palimpsest of the building—more ghost walls. Cars without motors, teeter-totters without seats, doors without handles, bikes without tires.

In the Hillsview Bar[56] the owner is a kind of palimpsest himself. He's the last person left; after everyone else's presence has been erased, he remains as a singular trace of human occupation. Inside the bar, a reclaimed wood stove fires away in the corner, pushing back the cold wind that's been blowing all morning. The place is decorated with all manner of prairie ephemera, things taken from elsewhere and assembled into a patchwork of remainders: a few wooden booths from a defunct restaurant, a salvaged pool table, a bar made out of pieces of a fallen down barn, posters and Christmas lights donated by the few-and-far-between patrons, foam-and-mesh caps with the logos of seed companies printed on their fronts, a light fixture pulled out of an old farmhouse just before it was torn down. This place preserves things by collecting their affects, stitching together the various kinds of resonance to form a kind of unintentional museum, and as its curator/bartender leads me through the menagerie of discarded objects he's like a museum guide listing off important facts and dates. Again, there is another way a place is written into being. In a way, I feel like the bar owner and I are working on the same project—trying to keep the time of the Plains from erasing everything that's been left behind.

54 Official population: 3, actual population when I visited in October 2007: 1

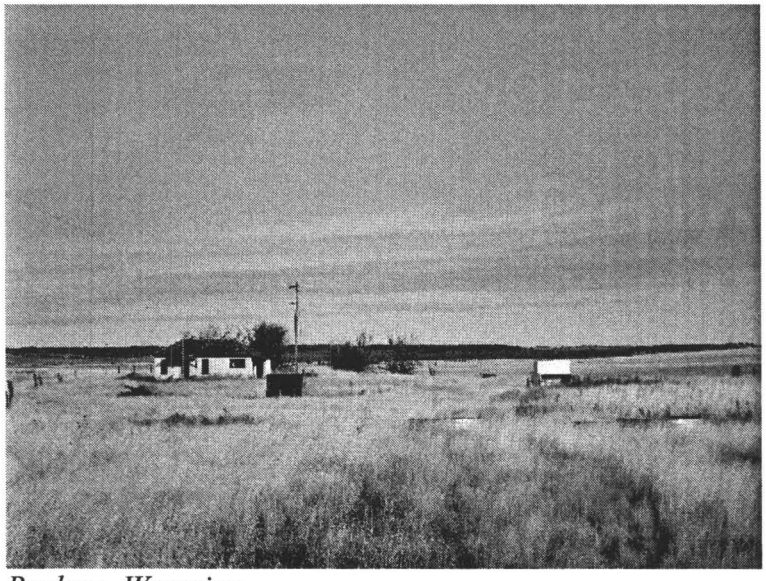
55 The condition of being *overgrown* is strange in that it implies that nature has overstepped its boundaries somehow, that it has exceeded its allowable movement into the realms of culture.

56 The lone resident of Hillsview operates a serve-yourself bar for local farmers. On Friday nights people travel great distances on the hard-packed gravel roads to meet up in Hillsview for a drink.

From fieldnotes written in Valentine, Nebraska on October 26, 2007: *The car slipped like snake poison between The Sand Hills outside Valentine, Nebraska. Stopping on the side of the road, I got out and hurled a hot, dead whiteness into the gurgling night. Distantly, a coyote's call blueprints this solitude.*

One of the most striking palimpsests that I regularly encountered in many of the towns that I visited was a large cement cube resting quietly in a field or at the intersection of some non-existent town centre. An old bank vault: immovable, stalwart and stoic, made to last, even beyond the lives of the town it was built to serve. The vault represents the dreamworld of permanence, a place where collapse wasn't possible—or at least it was unforeseeable—and where there would be money flowing in and out the heavy metal doors as far into the future as one could imagine. The vault is the palimpsest of the bank or municipal office, it is the remainder of prosperity. The vaults are a sign on the landscape, the last unhealed scar that speaks of an optimism that once lived in these spaces.

Ghosts of Hearts-And-Bones



Recluse, Wyoming

Among the rust-bottomed oil cans and the jewelled broken glass, between the phantom mechanics and no-more schoolchildren, there are ghosts that I can touch. I feel their ragged hand-prints on mine as they shake hello or give me my change in smudged-up dollar coins. These are the ghosts made out of what the title of a 1983 Paul Simon song calls *hearts-and-bones*; they are the real people left in ghost towns. I wonder what it must be like to live among the no-longer-

there, with their houses, watching their things get slowly eaten up by the prairie over the years.

A ghost town isn't always abandoned. Often there are people that remain, living out their lives with spectres from other times, always reminded of what shape things used to be. In all of my interactions with these people, I rarely felt a sense of sadness or longing in the stories they told to me in lowered tones, as if someone else might hear them, somewhere just beyond my vision. Sometimes they appear as another layer in the thick strata of history and place that accumulates in ghost towns; sometimes all I see are their eyes in the quick rustling of dust-coloured curtains. They look out from their windows, watching me wander their towns in search of the ghosts they live with every day.

Michael is the last person left living in Neidpath, Saskatchewan—every house abandoned but his. He's standing beside a huge bulldozer with his brother, talking with me about how things used to be as the last bits of afternoon drop behind the low hills that surround the town. He's seventy-nine, his brother is seventy-three and they've lived in the area for their whole lives. The brother lives "out in the country", half a kilometre from Neidpath, but they work together every day, moving dirt, hauling gravel and digging ditches—that's how it's been for the last fifty years. Michael chain smokes, holding the Player's Light cigarette close to his mouth in a cupped hand and coughing between staccato pulls of smoke. He wears a greasy orange cap with a washed out blue work shirt and a pair of matching pants held up by an ancient leather belt. His brother, Dale, wears an insulated jumpsuit and a white plastic hard hat. Behind the arms of some aviator sunglasses, a peach coloured hearing aid nestles itself in his left ear.

"Back in the 50s this place was booming", Michael tells me, "we probably had over three-hundred people living in this place. In those days we had two hotels, two grocery stores, a hardware store, a butcher, a blacksmith, a two-room school with seventy-five students, a church, a post office, an ice rink, a liquor store—you could only get beer and wine, anything harder had to be special ordered from Moose Jaw—, sidewalks, a garage, a tennis court and four grain elevators. There were three trains every day to Moose Jaw and even a night watchman for the rail yard. But once people started driving and the roads got better, nobody wanted to take the train and before long the town was really starting to empty out".

Dale is eating small chocolate candies from a weary Zip-Loc bag in his front pocket and he keeps asking Michael to repeat everything that I've said to them. I ask Michael what he thinks will happen to Neidpath when he's gone. "Not sure, probably just get torn down. After I'm gone there won't really be anything left except these old houses and the elevators, but those'll probably come down while I'm still alive—haven't been used in thirty years". He tells me there's

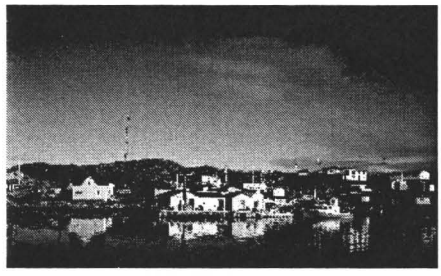
nowhere on Earth he'd rather live. He's been out to BC once, Ontario a few years ago—hated them both. He tells me that the pace of life in those places just doesn't suit him. He shows me a few photos of the town in its heyday and we talk for while longer—not about anything really, maybe a bit about the weather, something about what New York City is like and probably a bit about my life back in Boston. As I'm driving off, Michael hollers through the open window of a yellow-and-rust grader, "watch the Roughriders beat BC on TV tonight, okay?". I'm pretty sure the Roughriders are a football team, probably from Saskatchewan.

I use the term hearts-and-bones because I believe it speaks to the duality of the people who remain in these spaces once the majority of the population has left. The *hearts* are the sense of home and memory that bind people to these places, even in the face of massive depopulation. Many of the people that I met in ghost towns were older, often having lived in these places for their entire adult lives and they all told me that they couldn't imagine being anywhere else. These people are rooted in place through their emotional histories. The *bones* are the structures (both tactile and ideological) that keep people in place, they are the frames on which the hearts are held, a physical presence of continued occupation. The bones are the constellation of material, economic and political factors that anchor bodies in space[57]. The bones are the houses that can't be left because there's nowhere else to go, they're the dying farm plots that keep losing money, but that can't be abandoned because there are family ties or dreams of independence buried deeper than the seeds. Bones are how towns come to have a population of less than ten.

Hearts and bones make up the human remainders of High Plains ghost towns.

57 He left Arizona to return to this almost empty town in Wyoming because he felt that too many immigrants were filtering up from Latin America—he wanted to isolate himself from what he imagines as the downfall of the America he fought to preserve in the army. He lives alone at the end of a street where none of the other houses have people in them. He feeds his dog small strips of dried meat from an old coffee can under his arm and I watch them walk off into the abandoned sunset.

In a Minor Place: isolation and narrative in two island communities



I've been to a minor place
and I can say I like its face
if I am gone and with no trace
I will be in a minor place
-Bonnie "Prince" Billy, lyrics from the song *A Minor Place*

What do islands feel like in words? How do their smells and sounds appear as textual translations in ethnography? How can the memories of their people and places be transcribed into a written history or an ethnographic analysis? These are the things that I'm thinking about as I stare past the paint-chipped ferry railing and into the greenish ocean as the MV Eagle motors away from Grand Bruit[58], Newfoundland, population: 15. I wonder how I can begin to write this place into being in a way that recalls all of the unique and intricate layers of cultural and geographic space-time that make up this tiny settlement on the south coast of Newfoundland. To me, the lives and places of Grand Bruit are intertwined in compact accumulations of artifacts and memory, making any kind of excavation and analysis a daunting task. Hundreds of photos, video tapes, audio recordings and notebook pages accompany me back to New York, but I can't help feeling like there's something that I can never take with me, something that's anchored in the ground out there, unmoving and non-transferable. I've done my best to navigate the narratives of isolation that form the cultural geography of these places, working to build an ethnographic understanding of what it means to live in a time and space that constitutes another version of North America (Stewart 1996). In what follows, I've attempted to outline the specific haunted, mnemonic and narrative sense of place that is endemic to the isolated settings of Grand Bruit and the small island of Matinicus, Maine. And while I acknowledge that there are aspects of these places that cannot be written into words, I nonetheless seek to create a detailed ethnographic sketch of the ways that North American culture functions in isolation on the periphery of occupied space.

58 Pronounced "GranD BRIT"

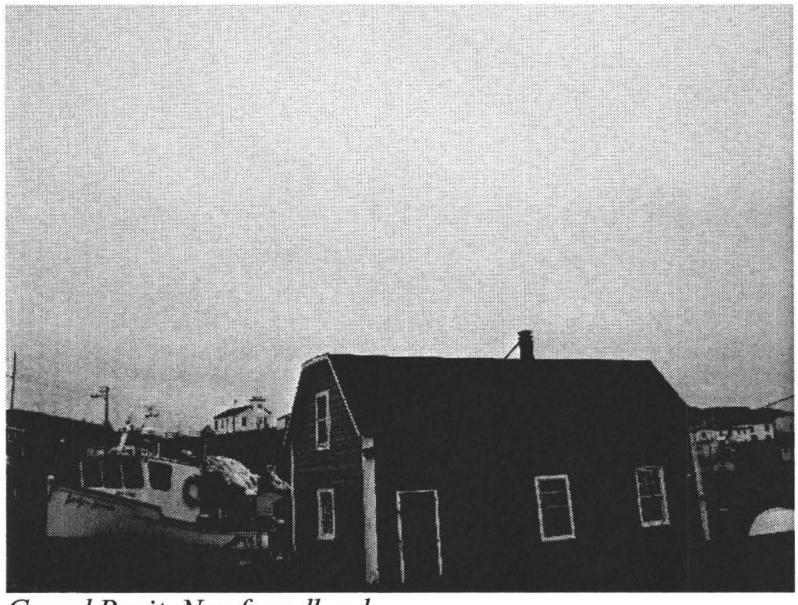
Harbour, Matinicus Isle, Maine

In August 2007 I lived in a rented house on Matinicus, an island located in central Maine's Penobscot Bay. During this time I conducted numerous video interviews with local inhabitants, shot hundreds of photos and engaged in participant-observation with local fishermen and their families. The following June, I travelled to Grand Bruit, Newfoundland, where I interviewed, photographed and interacted with the inhabitants of this far-flung village along the island's isolated and rugged southern coast. My experiences in these two communities forms the basis of a detailed discussion of how notions of place, memory, history and haunting inform aspects of everyday life and narrativity in isolated settings. Building on notions of poesis (Stewart 1996, Shelton 2007), globalization (Harvey 1996, Appadurai 1991), multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), theories of time and space (Tuan 1977, de Certeau 1988, Virilio 2009) and history (Benjamin 1969), I suggest that a sense of place in isolation emerges not out of a linear progression of history and continued spatial occupation, but out of the accumulation of layers of interwoven stories, memories, artifacts and imaginations, as well as the space of absence left in the wake of depopulation (especially in the case of Grand Bruit) (Virilio 2009). In island spaces, time and space exist in alternate loops that maintain only a limited number of direct connections to their respective *mainlands*.

In these isolated locations, space and time take on alternate forms as tiny

loops of localized time-space that provide a unique sense of place that is rapidly vanishing from the everyday experience of what Augé (1995) has called supermodernity (the condition that involves, among other things, the gradual erasure of *placeness* from everyday life). As the world becomes increasingly populated by non-places (Augé's [1995:77-8] notion of places that "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity"); with the gradual evaporation of localized senses of place, Grand Bruit and Matinicus and their individual resonances become more culturally significant with each passing year. As I state below, this is not a project in salvage anthropology, nor is it a lamentation on the passing of the mythic dimensions of bygone cultures, rather it is an ethnographic sketch of the distinctive ways that time and space function at the periphery of human inhabitation.

Ethnography Surrounded By Water



Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

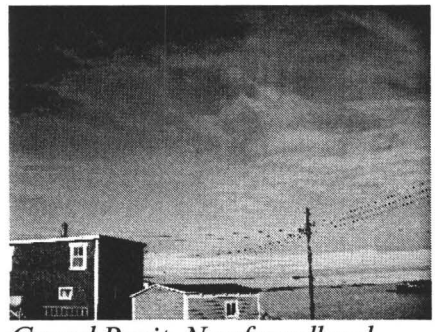
There has been a long-standing tradition within anthropology of conducting field research on islands. Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1961) and Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1973) are classic examples of ethnographies undertaken in island settings. While these works are not specifically ethnographies *of* islands, they represent ethnographic research conducted in an island setting. Cultures in isolation—as is often the case on

islands—offer the anthropologist a neat and compact case-study, a well-defined package of cultural phenomena that remains free of a certain degree of outside influence. Malinowski's discussion of the Trobriand Islander's *kula* exchange[59] and Mead's analysis of the lives of adolescent girls on Samoa are meditations on island life as well as on the condition of living in isolation on islands.

The physical geography of islands presents uniquely isolated cultural manifestations which, in the formative years of ethnography, became one of the key points in anthropological fieldwork. Where earlier ethnographers of islands often used human populations as their starting point, I have instead chosen to begin with the space and place of islands, viewing the occupants of these sites as they relate to their place through narrative and memory and by examining how they function as a part of the cultural geography of Grand Bruit and Matinicus.

Here, I examine the cultural significance of isolation in island settings by unpacking the process of historical accumulation that develops in places that exist outside of the dominant flows of time, space and global imaginations. This is not to say that the two communities represented here function in some kind of alternate reality or anachronistic dreamworld, I simply suggest that the modes of temporal, historical and spatial experience are unique to lives lived in relative isolation in these remote communities. By providing ethnographic sketches of these spaces, I am able to reflect on the haunted/spectral nature of narrative and memory (Ivy 1995, Gordon 2008) in island settings and the ways that mnemonic time is woven into—and pulled out of—space and place. I have endeavoured to establish and analyse a sense of place, a *genius loci* (spirit of place) in two small island communities, through an ethnographic understanding memory, haunting and history in these spaces.

Isolation Oceans



Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

59 This is a classical ethnographic example of gift exchange involving the ritualized and cyclical trade of shell necklaces (*veigun*) and armbands (*mwali*) between the various islands of the Massim archipelago off the eastern coast of New Guinea (Malinowski 1961).

> "The terra incognita spaces on maps say that knowledge too is an island surrounded by oceans of the unknown, but whether we are on land or water is another story."
>
> -Rebecca Solnit, *Field Guide to Getting Lost*

The ocean is always here, like the fields of dry grass that followed me when I was out West—it's always blowing, washing up against the edges of my movements through these peripheral spaces. The sea gets into my clothes and when I'm back in New York it's there with me again, like a stow-away, worming its way into my memory. I'd like to write that smell into being[60], to type it into this document; I'd like to scratch the noise of the waterfall in Grand Bruit into this writing so whoever reads these words could hear it and know the sound of no cars for 500 kilometres.

Now, from my desk in Boston, thinking back to the islands, the memories that appear to me first are of travelling to these spaces, of moving across water or bumping up and down in tiny airplanes that loop over green-grey-brown parcels of earth set deep in the water off the coast. I came to these places looking for a story about isolation and a history of tightly woven lines of remembering and forgetting. I wanted to find out how and why people lived in these places and what stuck them in place, what turned the people into ghosts when they were about to leave forever and what anchored them deeply in the ground and made them never want to go.

In Grand Bruit, I found an island within an island, a town on the verge of evaporation, about to be erased by the villagers and their desire to move to more inhabited places. The people here were contemplating a mass exodus from this settlement where most of the inhabitants had died or moved away long ago—in whatever way a *mass exodus* of fifteen people can occur. Here, I saw the last few breaths of an almost-ghost town as the remaining people wondered how many more winters they'd make it. On Matinicus, Maine, I'd come to a place where 50 people whose staunch perseverance, commitment to family ties and hardscrabble self-reliance held them firmly in place in the face of the ever-encroaching outside world[61]. Matinicus is an island of lobster fishers that lies over thirty kilometres off the coast of Maine, where people wilfully separate themselves from the mainland through a well-advertised disdain for outsiders and interlopers.

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60 Imagine the scent of old leaves, fishy seaweed, musty lavender and salt.

61 Throughout this chapter I refer to the *outside world* as it relates to and opposes the lives of the islanders; this is not to imply that the islands are somehow permanently isolated, only that both communities position themselves at a definite cultural remove from their respective mainlands.

Places: Matinicus, Maine and Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

> "...It is only when we begin to participate emotionally in a landscape that its uniqueness and beauty are revealed to us."
> -J. B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins*

Both settings offered an entry-point into how Atlantic islands can be understood ethnographically, yet each location imparted its own sense of place, one that cannot be easily translated or transferred between the two spaces; what is true of one island is not always true of another. Each space presents its own sense of islandness, and despite the relatively close geographic proximity of these two communities (see above map), they each reflect very different aspects of island living and isolation.

Maine's Matinicus Isle serves as a kind of foil or counterpoint to life in Grand Bruit because it represents a different variety of island microcosm that often travels a parallel, but alternate trajectory through time and space. The primary differences between these locations comes in the form of their degree of isolation, prevailing local ideologies, population demographics and relative geographic locations. Grand Bruit is only reachable by a provincial ferry that makes the three-hour trip six days a week (weather permitting), whereas Matinicus is served by daily mail flights (also weather dependant) and weekly ferry service (during the winter months the ferry makes the trip only once a month). Grand Bruit's population appears calm, sedate and resigned to the imminent abandonment of their village as part of a government-sponsored resettlement program, while the residents of Matinicus see themselves as resistant to outside pressures, acting as perpetually staunch and active defenders of their unique way of life. Matinicus maintains a year-round population of 50, including several children and young adults, which, when compared with Grand Bruit's minute and aging population[62], is a virtual metropolis. Finally, Matinicus is a small, self-contained island, just under 7 km^2 and lying 30 km east of the US mainland, whereas Grand Bruit is a tiny community located on the largely uninhabited coast of the island-province of Newfoundland. Matinicus represents an actual geographic island community, whereas Grand Bruit is more of a theoretical island[63] that occupies a smaller portion of a much larger land-mass. However, for all intents and purposes, Grand Bruit and Matinicus are both islands, especially when considered in the context of their relative isolation from major population centres.

Within the scope of this project, islands are formed not only by watery

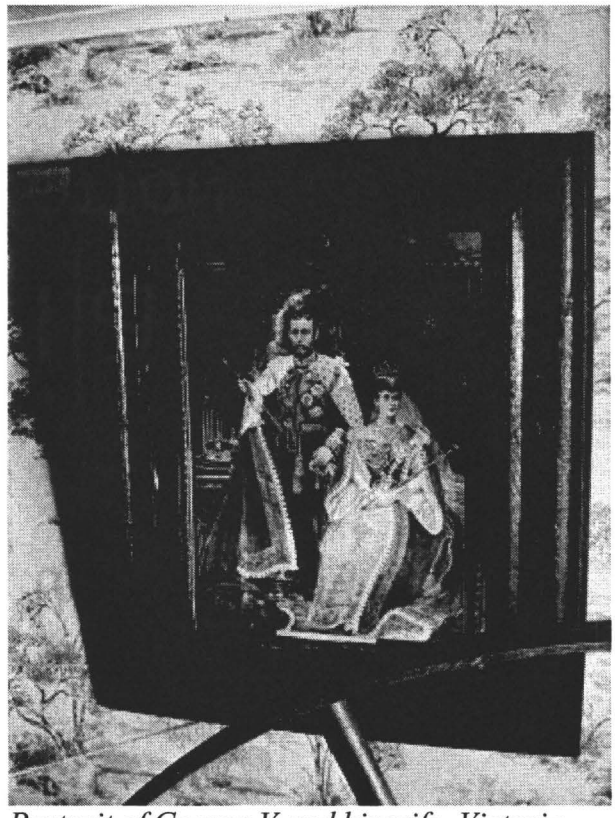
62 Grand Bruit's 15 occupants are all over the age of forty, with most well beyond sixty.

63 A theoretical island is a space that is not necessarily surrounded by water on all sides, instead it is bounded by ideological and geographic distances. Grand Bruit exists in such an isolated location that, for the purposes of my research, it is effectively an island.

barriers, but also by degrees of isolation and remoteness; Jeffrey City, a ghost town in Wyoming's Great Basin is as isolated as Matinicus. Each location is surrounded by over 30 km of uninhabited space in any given direction, making Jeffrey City as much an island as Matinicus. Similarly, Grand Bruit may not be its own geographic island, but it is surrounded by water and only accessible by boat, rendering it extremely remote and isolated, much more so than either Jeffrey City or Matinicus. In this way, islands become not only parcels of land set out to sea, but also occupied places isolated by geography, politics or ideology. In this way, the idea of the island becomes fluid and relative.

Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

Memory's Ghost



Portrait of George V and his wife, Victoria Mary of Teck in the Grand Bruit Museum House

"Yet it is there in the breaking fabric of the universe that reshapes itself invisibly and visibly into a room, a lighted place. Such is the art of the ghosts of memory."
-Wilson Harris, *The Ghost of Memory*

"All memory has to be reimagined. For we have in our memories micro-films that can only be read if they are lighted by the bright light of imagination."
-Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

In Grand Bruit there is a house that the villagers call the Museum, a kind of repository for the community's *things-almost-thrown-away.* A local resident keeps the house like a time capsule, an ark of different befores, local times that barely exist, a tangled collection of the frayed ends and loose threads of history. Passing through the low door frames, I find little vignettes of life in the outport

before Confederation[64]; they're all made out of bits and pieces of things that residents have pulled out of the dusty attics and root cellars of their houses. A portrait of King George V hangs against yellowed wallpaper, a dreamworld firmly anchored in the time of the Great War. In another room, a number of model boats lie in various states of repair, beside them is a three-ring binder with a short write-up about the bygone pastime of making scale models of famous ships. In the kitchen—a room that stands silent and frozen in time, made up to look as though people still lived there—the museum's adjunct curator, a local retired fisherman, points out an artifact that is only found in Grand Bruit, a wall-mounted cutlery holder. This sliver of village culture is a dying ember, fading out as the people who remember it begin to die. This endemic artifact, and so many other particles of life in the village, become the material remainders when the villagers are gone, they will soon exist only as the ghosts of memory the things that hover on the edges of placed remembrance. The museum is interesting in that this is the history of the place that its residents want the few outsiders who visit each year to remember, it is as close to a conventional history as a place like Grand Bruit gets. In other houses around the village there are photo albums that hold individual histories; there are re-told stories of things that happened here that hide in waning memories and plastic-covered photo albums[65].

The ghost of memory in Grand Bruit is the left-behind preservation: the museum, the historical plaque next to the church, the stories told along the benches of the fishing shed-cum-bar known locally as The Cramalott Inn. And like the ghost towns of the Plains, without anyone left to hear these stories and wander through the museum rooms filled with old time bric-a-brac, a certain history fades from view. These stories and images, these flashes of history, Benjamin (1969) would certainly remind us, only flutter into our consciousness for an instant before they're gone into the inescapable accumulation of time; these moments are what Bachelard (1994:xv) calls the "sudden salience on the surface of the psyche". As I sit in the Cramalott, amongst the weathered fishermen and their almost indecipherable accents, I'm grasping at flashes, trying to trap little

64 Newfoundland joined Canada as its 10th province on April 1, 1949, leaving behind its almost 400 year status as a British territory.

65 She tells me about the "come-home year" (reunion) when everyone who had ever lived in the village was invited back for a party. She remembers the cold, wet weather that year and how it didn't phase anyone; how they danced and sang to accordion music all night long under a makeshift awning set up on the government wharf. She talks about cooking all of the food in the various kitchens around the community, trying to time everything just right so that it would be ready all at once. She remembers people sleeping in tents and on living room floors, the paths between houses were bustling for the first time in decades. For her, this was one of the best things to have ever happened in Grand Bruit, and she recalls the sadness of being one of only 15 people left behind when the party was over.

bits of history before they're erased: people's names, their places of birth, who owns which house, what happened on the water yesterday, what this place was like ten years ago, locations of various long-gone businesses and homes.

A warm radio static floats down the path from the Cramalott; a bare-lightbulb glow shines out into the early evening as I make my nightly trek to the makeshift bar room. Seven fishermen in plaid wool jackets and baseball caps sit in a ring around the edges of the shack talking about moose meat. "You've got to be real careful with that stuff, buddy" Cliff tells James, "it'll spoil on you in no time if you don't bottle it right. A guy I know up in Lapoile lost a whole moose one year because he didn't seal it right". Apparently there's been a moose around the village the last few days and it has everyone thinking about canning things for the winter. When Cliff's wife, Sylvia stops by, the discussion turns to where the best bakeapples (a local name for cloudberries) can be found this year. "I was out picking them about a mile in, up by the ponds a few days ago, and I thought I was all alone, so I decided I had to pee, and 'cause there's no one else out that far, I just decide to go right there. Yesterday, I'm down at the post office and Greg asks me if I found any berries up there—kind of smiling, right—and I says 'yeah, why?'. Well, turns out he saw me squatting out there behind a little bush. I guess he was out hunting birds and saw me with his binoculars, and here I am thinking no one's around for miles!". The room erupts in laughter and Sylvia turns to me and says, "see, you'd think in a place with only fifteen people you'd be able to get some privacy, but that ain't so, buddy". More laughter all around.

I'm cutting out shapes of memories, traces of things that people remember, or deem worthy of trying to re-remember. I'm sifting through the rubble of what Robert Finch (2006:76) has called rural Newfoundland's "flat time" wherein

> "'[t]he past', rather than being conceived of as a stratified formation that, however convoluted, is resolvable into linear sequences, seems more a sea of individual and communal experience, where each layer of memory runs off and eventually mixes with, becomes equal to and indistinguishable from, the whole".

These strata of being-there are not easily separated, and I'm often left with a tangled mess of stories, images and impressions, and I have to wonder who I think I am to be uniting these knots. Still, to my mind, it is important to ask ourselves, as ethnographers, whether it's more valuable to allow these isolated ways of life to naturally erode, or if they should somehow be preserved. What I'm suggesting is not the classic ethnographic salvage project as outlined by Gruber (1970) whereby the anthropologist seeks to save a dying culture from the tyrannical spectre of Euro-American colonialism, rather it is an acute awareness of the effects of increasing globalization (Harvey 1989, Crocker 2000) and the ever-present cult of

speed (Virilio 1986) on isolated and marginal populations. Instead of focusing my salvage lens on the language and culture of indigenous groups, I have chosen to attempt a preservation of the memories, stories and images of isolated modern North American populations. In the case of Grand Bruit, I'm witnessing the last gasp of this cultural space as the residents prepare to resettle, whereas in the ghost towns of the Plains, I often found myself encountering the afterlives of people and memories that had already been deleted. I have endeavoured to accumulate accumulations, trying not to apply judgements of quality to the fragments that I collect, in the hope of building a bulk record alongside a critique of the global condition that has led to a point at which there is a need (desire?) to document these fading modes of everyday life. Through my photography, audio recordings and talks with islanders, I have attempted to provide a sketch of lives lived in the final days of a place. I wanted to preserve some record of their presences and absences. Perhaps my approach can be seen as a kind of *post-salvage ethnography* in that I am interested in collecting and archiving the implicit, rather than the explicit, aspects of disappearing North American cultures[66].

The Cramalott Inn isn't a hotel, nor is it a bar, it's a converted shed that used to house fishing gear before one of the lobstermen decided that the people of the village might like to have a place to gather after a long day of hauling lobster traps, a place to have a few beers and talk about almost everything. The Cramalott is strictly Bring-Your-Own-Beverages; cans of pop and beer rest on everyone's knee as conversation loops back and forth across fried fish and rumpled dogs lounging in the doorway. This little shed, with its lone light-bulb and fuzzed-out country music radio, is where I spent almost every evening in Grand Bruit, sitting around with whoever happened in, listening to all the stories about this place, adding a few of my own here and there[67].

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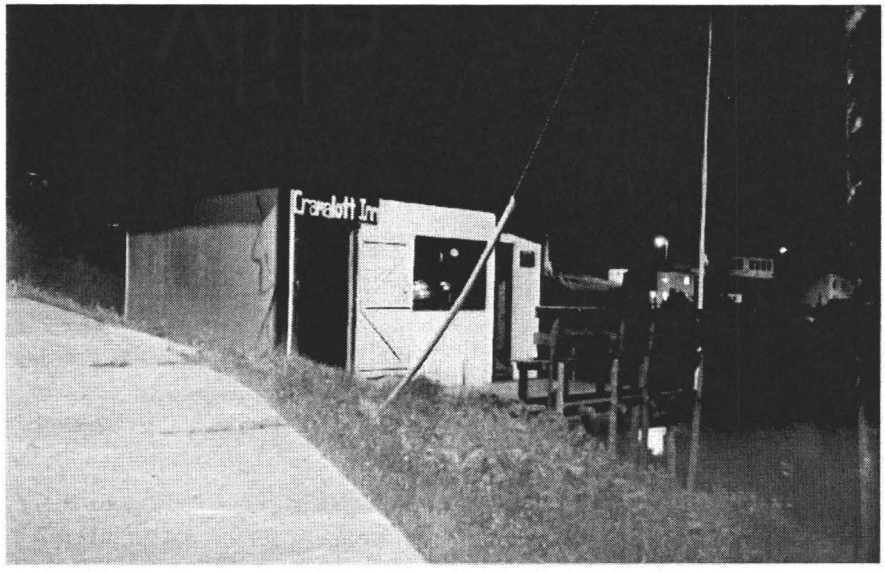
66 She remembers coming to Grand Bruit to live, to occupy the place that she would call home for the next 20 years. Her boxes and trunks of clothes and personal effects piled on the narrow deck of the boat leaving Port-Aux-Basques. Newly married, she speaks of arriving in Grand Bruit and feeling like she'd come upon a strange culture with unknown customs and rules. She talks about getting used to living in the village and learning to navigate the social geography of church, catalogue shopping from Sears and the correct day of the week to serve fish, chicken or beef for dinner—this latter protocol was strictly monitored and carefully adhered to by the local wives. Her children had a wonderful childhood out here, she says; as safe as a place could be and with unlimited opportunities for outdoor activities. On cold winter nights she'd lie in the snow banks with her children and look at the stars, so close, she says, they could almost be touched. The Northern Lights illuminated the hill past Eastern Pond as the sons and daughters of the fishers rode toboggans long into the after-supper hours. A sliver of sadness crosses her face as she laments the current absence of children in the community.



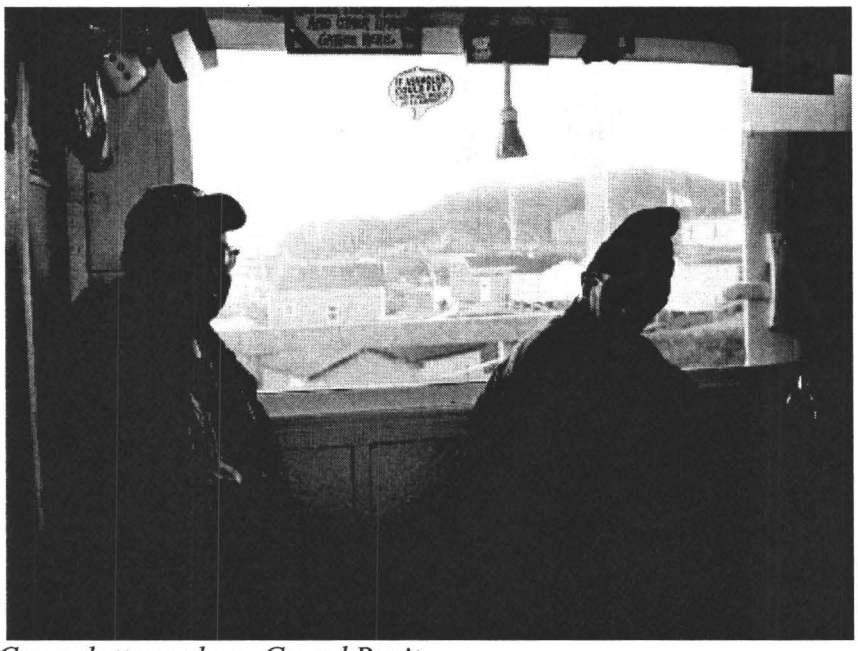
Cramalott Inn, Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

I remember the night that I arrived in the village, talking to the woman who owned the house I was renting and asking her how I might get to know some of the other residents. In a matter-of-fact voice, she told me to "go up the Cramalott" and introduce myself. I told her I'd give it a try tomorrow night. And there I was the following evening, standing in the narrow doorway of the fishing shed as seven sets of eyes looked out at me from under sun-bleached baseball caps. It was like one of those moments in a movie when the soundtrack turns into the sound of crickets, or when a loud record scratching noise indicates to the audience that the normal flow of conversation has been disrupted by some uncouth interloper. In the cricket-noise silence, I couldn't really think of what to say. Looking furtively around the room, I saw that one of the men was frying a piece of white fish on a small hot-plate in the corner; I asked them if they were

67 She remembers visiting the village once before, when she was much younger, with her great aunt who got seasick and vomited her dentures into a bag that she gave to her niece to hold until they came ashore. She was wearing a lime green all-weather coat with a thick felt lining. The garish colour made her self-conscious about leaving the boat and stepping up onto the bustling wharf. She hadn't had time to take it off because Grand Bruit comes out of nowhere, hiding in a little bay behind the same rocks that she'd been seeing for the past few hours. The docked boat swarmed with people as residents and visitors alike worked to off-load the luggage and supplies. Somehow, she says, everything that came with them somehow ended up at their house, even though they hadn't carried it. She was sixteen back then. That was a before, when she could never know that she'd be one of the last 15 people to live in Grand Bruit.

having some fish and one of them said yes. I asked if they minded if I stayed and talked awhile—low grumbles and nods. I sat without saying a word for the rest of the night, bookended by two weathered fishermen, a dusty black dog at my feet. Over the next couple of weeks, the Cramalott gradually became the centre-point for all of my interactions in Grand Bruit.

Back when there were more people in the village and when the store was still operational, all of the villagers would congregate at the store around two o'clock for a "coffee break" where they'd eat potato chips and drink pop, talking about how their traps were doing and if their boats needed any repairs. This scene would repeat itself again around seven-thirty before people headed home to bed or up to the Cramalott Inn. People tell me that the closing of the store was a major blow to the community, that once it was gone, people didn't really socialize as much. Even now, the Cramalott isn't as busy as it once was—squabbles and micro-feuds keep certain people at home in the evenings. There's always some kind of history bubbling just below the surface.



Cramalott regulars, Grand Bruit

David Harvey (1989:218) claims that "time is always memorialized not as flow, but as memories of experienced places and spaces" and that "history must indeed give way to poetry, time to space, as the fundamental material of social expression"; within this framework, it becomes evident that the "fundamental material" of the history of places such as Grand Bruit is not found in its linear

history, but in the poetry of its spatial resonance. This resonance emerges from the spaces between layers of narrative, from the photographs (Sontag 1990) of its material and human presence and from its rarified position as one of the few remaining outport communities in Newfoundland. In this instance, I have to wonder what becomes of this poetry of space (Bachelard 1994) when its authors disappear and when there is no longer an efficient way to arrive at this place. What shape might the stories told around sizzling pans of haddock in the Cramalott take in other settings? Would they even exist? And here I invoke Walter Benjamin's (1969:67) claim that "[o]nly in extinction is the collector comprehended" to describe how the collected/collective memories, ghosts and stories of Grand Bruit will only be known in their true depth in their erasure. To preserve even a tiny fragment of these ghostly memories is to remember a place and its people, another before, or at least a faded ghost image, like something caught at the edge of the camera's lens, a flare up arrested in its evaporation.

Temporal Ethno-Geographies: compression of time and space on islands

In island communities (and in other isolated settlements) time becomes 'flattened' (Finch 2006), compressed and layered; space turns itself into a container with semi-permeable walls, a curtained stage where everyday lives are enacted in miniature, a diorama in an invisible cardboard box. After a few days of being in Grand Bruit, I began to feel a shift in my sense of time. Moments seemed to stretch out long and effortlessly in front of me and I soon lost track of days of the week and hours of the day. Each day seemed composed not of hours, but of layers and bundles of things-that-happened, places-traversed and stories heard. Small details began to take on a new significance; walking to the post office to mail a few postcards was the central organizing focus of a particular Wednesday; more than one day was spent sitting outside my house and talking to anyone who happened by for as long as they could stop and chat, building long and convoluted narratives out of the minutiae of lobster fishing, paving stones, house paint and ferry schedules. As time expands, it makes space for fine details to emerge. With nowhere else to go, the world shrank—I wondered if this was how the residents felt, or if they noticed. As it turned out, when I asked them about this strange condition of isolation, many of them told me that they had never really considered it, that they were used to the way space and time functioned in Grand Bruit—as something different from that of the mainland, but in no way less advanced or archaic. Here, time expands as space contracts; in small, isolated spaces time appears as something much more expansive as the particular details of the everyday take on new resonance in the vastness of isolation.

I do not mean to imply that the people of Grand Bruit are less aware of

time, or that they have somehow managed to escape the temporal constraints that plague the rest of us. Rather, they have been conditioned (through isolation) to conceptualize time in a different way[68], allowing for a greater focus on the details. Based on my many conversations with the villagers, I believe that the people of Grand Bruit approach temporality in a very meditative manner, one that occupies the realm of being that has circumvented many of the excesses of the larger global-technological sphere. The islander's world somehow exists very much in the present, yet is acutely aware of the temporal accumulations of the past and the intricate time-space navigations of the future. People that I spoke with often told me that their sense of time was focused on the rhythms of the ocean and changes in the weather, aspects of life that, in Newfoundland, are very much a part of the present. In this way, they tended to occupy their thoughts with what was immediately in front of them, in terms of both time and space. For example, the residents told me that they often found it difficult to plan too far in advance because a storm could blow in at any moment, cancelling ferry service, knocking out power or making the ocean too rough to fish. In this way, days and weeks accumulate as layered meanings, creating a vertical stratification of *things that happened.*

The layers of time that develop in this setting are often recycled, reused and remixed to create a narrative that constantly loops back on itself—the past eats the future to sustain the present. Harvey (1996:211) reflects on this when he describes people in a particular time-space as "...purposeful agents engaged in projects that take up time through movement in space". Harvey goes on to explain that "[i]ndividual biographies can be tracked as 'life paths in time-space', beginning with daily routines of movement". In Grand Bruit, the space onto which life paths are inscribed has become miniaturized, the biographies of individuals exist in overlapping lines that weave themselves in and out of various storied layers of existence, and through objects and geographies of the village and its surrounding environs[69]. And in between these layers are the ghostly memories of isolation that get caught in an undertow of time and speed; as Bloch (1977:22) writes, "[m]any earlier forces, from quite a different Below, are beginning to slip between". With only 15 people left to lift them out, these memories get pulled ever-deeper into the folds of time-space. Things that happen here are framed through things that have already happened. On this topic, J. B. Jackson (1980:119) claims that "...we can only start to understand the contemporary landscape by knowing what we have retained from the past". In Grand Bruit, the village itself has become the keeper of memories as moments and accumulations

68 On this subject, Bloch's (1977) discussion of nonsynchronism claims that "[n]ot all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, by virtue of the fact that they may all be seen today, but that this does not mean that they are living in the same time with others."

become tied to places and things. Stories and histories get circulated around the Cramalott, across the counter at the post office and over long games of cribbage deep in the winter, weaving their way through tales of fishing, fighting, boat-building and who saw the moose across the bay earlier that morning. This is a place where isolation leads to what Bakhtin (1981) might have called chronotopes of accumulation, a place where the boundaries of the harbour and the warbled tundra work to hem in and filter history and memory[70].

A front-porch discussion of grocery shopping in Burgeo—the South Coast's only settlement with road access—folds back into a remembrance of all the old general stores that used to operate in the village. He points through the smudged-up Plexiglas window of the Cramalott to a pair of rocks in the harbour and tells me that there used to be a store out there, and another just up from the wharf and one more down past the post office. He asks me how much a bag of potatoes was going for in Burgeo and wonders what the cost of living will be like in Port-Aux-Basques when the villagers resettle.

The village and its surroundings are like a screen onto which the lives of the inhabitants are projected; no one is anonymous in their movements among the tiny constellation of houses and rocky hills. He tells me that he saw me walking along the coast today, wonders where I was headed. I tell him that I was just walking, exploring the area behind the town that the villagers call the Blue Hills. He saw me from his boat on his way back into the harbour. Everyone knows where I'm staying and what I'm doing before I've ever talked to them, they've already heard that I'm from New York and they keep asking me how I can live in such a crime-ridden, congested place; they've carefully noted that I didn't arrive with much food and they tell me that they wondered what I was going to eat or if I (mistakenly) thought there was a store in the village. The threads of my being-in-

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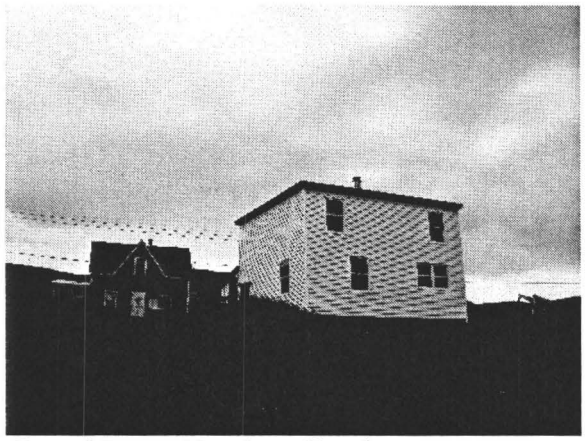
69 The lobster traps on the wharf with their barnacle crusts speak of years of sitting at the bottom of the ocean, hauled and thrown back forever. The peeling paint on the coloured houses exposes their former lives as green or blue buildings. The empty, decrepit cod drying racks up behind the church are reminders of the 1992 Cod Moratorium. The rotten wharf on the other side of the bay tells the story of an already abandoned space. Even in a remote place like Grand Bruit, things get swept up and left behind. The beach at Cinq Cerf , just down the coast, holds onto memories for the remaining inhabitants of Grand Bruit. In times passed, this stretch of pale sand was the site of summer beach cookouts. Boatloads of people and food, sandcastles at the far end by the stream, villagers talking quietly in lawn chairs as the July sun rolls down behind the stunted mountains behind Grand Bruit. Campfires burn on into the night and the sounds of car engines and tires are never heard. This place remembers a time when everyone was still at *home*.

70 Harvey (2006:273): "Processes do not occur *in* space but define their own spatial frame. The concept of space is embedded in or internal to process. ...it is impossible to disentangle space from time. We must therefore focus on the relationality of space-time rather than of space in isolation."

place are already sewn into their fabric. My story has become a known quantity; it is a fresh new layer to the accumulation, a memory in waiting. No one is overly concerned with what I have done, or will do, when I leave Grand Bruit; as we sit around drinking beer from cans, all they seem to be wondering is what I'll do while I'm here.



Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

Outport Globalization

It seems almost cliché to claim that globalization and society's insatiable desire for speed and consumption have effectively forced the resettlement of Grand Bruit, but in many ways this is exactly what has happened. The experience of everyday time and space in this isolated fishing village has become incompatible with current socio-economic practices and patterns of accumulation (of capital, not memory) and consumption. The prevailing culture of global capital has begun to erase the usefulness of meditative time, storied space (which has been replaced by *non-space* [Augé 1995]) and local memory (with the rise of the global village, all forms of memory appear amorphously local and collective[71]). Simply put, the globalized world no longer has time for places such as Grand Bruit, they have become anachronistic representations of lives-once-lived, quaint vignettes on postcards where frozen images are more profitable than frozen fish.

Beginning in 1949 with Newfoundland's incorporation into Canada, the outport communities began to be viewed as major impediments to premier Joey Smallwood's ill-fated plan to industrialize the province and reform its economic

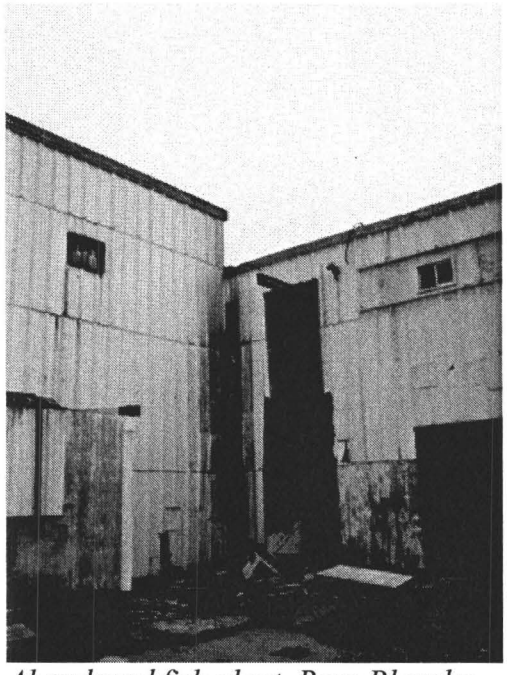
71 The advent of what Castells' (1996) has called the *network society* of global media connections and electronically mediated social linkages allows anyone to effectively 'remember' anything from any time. Here, we all share the same memories because they are all housed in the virtual ether of the Internet, cellular telephones and personal computers.

base as a "modern urban and industrial society dominated by consumerism" (Cadigan 2009:235). For Smallwood, the outports represented a kind of parochial notion of Newfoundland that ran counter to his view of a vibrant global-industrial future. These villages were therefore encouraged to 'centralize' their populations into predetermined 'growth centres' where industry (in the form of footwear, chocolate and confectionary factories, hydro-electric plants and fish-processing facilities) could flourish as a result of the influx of a new outport workforce (Letto 1998). Ironically, the majority of theses planned 'growth centres' suffered from poor planning. Local resentment of new populations and industrial over-spending, led to Newfoundland's reliance on federal aid and the alienation of its workforce (Cadigan 2009). Resettlement did not produce the dynamic, cosmopolitan economy that Smallwood had envisioned; instead, it left the province with a number of abandoned villages, an underemployed workforce and a series of failed industries.

In many ways, this initial push for modernization throughout the 1950s and 1960s was a sort of internal micro-globalization of Newfoundland, whereby a drive to create a centralized and uniform economy resulted in wide-spread social disruption. As families were 'encouraged' to resettle, the island communities along Newfoundland's coastline began to disappear, leaving in their wake abandoned homes, towns and ways of life. The localized and isolated culture of outport communities was slowly being absorbed into the larger entity of Newfoundland. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, Newfoundland's few remaining outport communities represent some of the last hold-outs against globalization's influence on small-scale societies in North America. Places such as Grand Bruit find engaging with the larger, global spheres of rapid technological advancement, national and international commodity relationships and the accumulation of capital increasingly difficult to navigate from their peripheral locations. Many of the residents often complained that it was difficult for an isolated and aging population such as theirs to receive proper health-care and other forms of government assistance; fishermen often told me that they found it hard to compete with larger commercial operations and that transporting their catch, obtaining fuel and repairing their boats had become highly problematic in recent years. This is not to say that the residents of Grand Bruit are without knowledge or access to the global market and its trappings, only that their condition of isolation has developed into a now-unavoidable idiosyncrasy; as isolated, small-scale societies everywhere become less tenable in an increasingly globalized world, their way of life no longer fits into the flows of globalization—living in these isolated spaces has simply become outmoded.

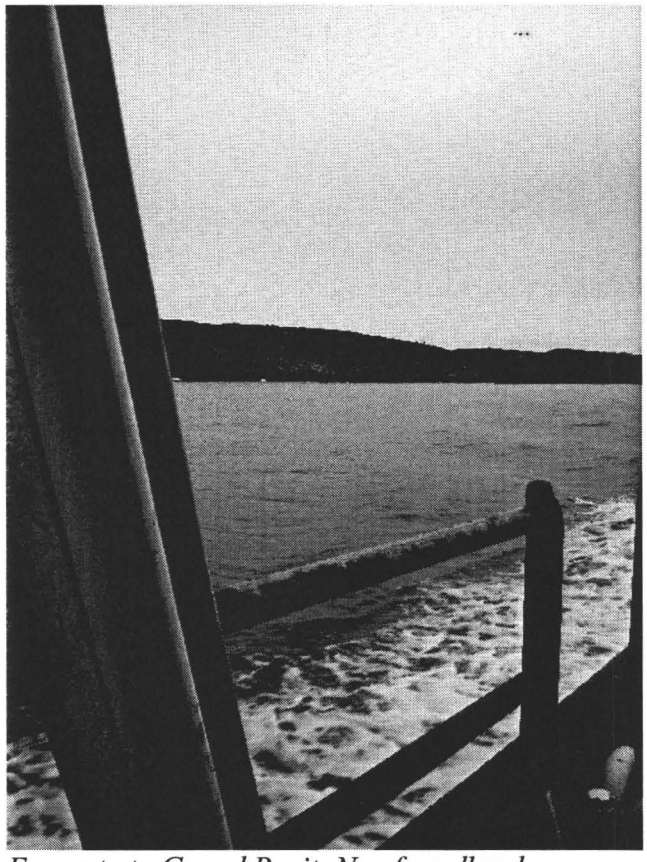
More than ever, memory accumulations and complex oral histories are being voided by the rapid and unending technological accumulation and

fragmentary narratives; life in isolation is no longer possible as the sparkling dreamworld of commodities (Benjamin 1999) hits its late-capitalist stride. Living in a place such as Grand Bruit, people are aware that they lack certain amenities, that they are deprived of access to every commodity and limited in their employment opportunities, all of which are points that have only become significant with the rise of modern globalization and its associated cultures of accumulation and speed. Isolated communities, in Newfoundland and elsewhere, are often told (both directly through government intervention, and indirectly through media influence) that their lifestyle is non-compliant with the dominant, global flows of time, space and capital; they are told that the time has come for them to join the global stream of commodities, technology and temporality. In this scheme, resettlement has become the only viable option in a globalized world where communities must integrate or evaporate.



Abandoned fish plant, Rose Blanche, Newfoundland

Grand Bruit: arrivals



En route to Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

> "Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you."
>
> -Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*

I'm travelling down the western shore of the island on a bus filled with people coming back to Newfoundland. A few hours before, in the Deer Lake airport, families pick each other out of the crowd and duffle bags are collected from the luggage carousel. T-shirts are handed out to parents and tags bearing airport codes from Calgary (YYC), Vancouver (YVR) and Toronto (YYZ) are

ripped off suitcase handles and stuffed into trash cans. Many of these people are coming home, but I'm not even close to where I'm headed. The next morning I take a one-hour taxi ride from Port-Aux-Basques to the end of the road where I'm met by an abandoned cannery and a cemetery covered by a thin maritime fog. The Marine Eagle, a small, rust-streaked ferry, rocks back and forth in the quiet harbour, waiting to take a few people down the south coast of the island, first to Lapoile, and then on to Grand Bruit. That's where I'm going this morning—from Rose Blanche where the road ends, to Grand Bruit where there have never even been roads.

Standing on the ship's deck, seasalted mist sprays over my face as the boat weaves its way between inlets and rocky coastlines along the bottom of the province. Most of the people get off in Lapoile, another small outport along the South Coast with a population of about 150. This larger settlement is viewed by residents of the Grand Bruit as the more vibrant village due to its younger population base and its commercial activity (it maintains a fishing fleet of a few dozen boats and has two general stores, whereas Grand Bruit's population of active fishers is now in the single digits and the last store closed down in 2007). As the ship turns back out into the long fjord that leads away from Lapoile, I'm left sitting on an upturned bucket with another hour and a half left until I reach my destination. I'm nervous about how this fieldwork is going to go. A light Atlantic rain starts to fall and I bury my hands deeper into the pockets of my jeans. The captain, a man of about fifty with blurry naval tattoos on his forearms, stops to ask me how long I'm going to be in Grand Bruit. I tell him I'll be there for over two weeks. His eyes and the tilt of his head ask what the hell I'm going to do there, but his voice just tells me that there aren't a lot of people left out there[72]. I tell him that I know, and that that's exactly what brought me here. The only other people going to Grand Bruit today are an elderly couple who have been into Port-Aux-Basques for medical attention; I later learn that the wife needs kidney dialysis and has to make this trip three times a week. As I watch the treeless cliffs pass by, the husband comes over to stand beside me; he says something in a low, muffled accent that I can't quite pick up, and before I can ask him to repeat himself, he's gone back to some other part of the boat and I'm alone again—in a way, it's almost as if he wasn't expecting an answer.

72 That morning at breakfast, in the hotel in Port-Aux-Basques, two travelling vacuum salesmen tell me that they haven't made it out to Grand Bruit in almost 15 years, and they've been everywhere else on the island several times. The older of the pair tells me that there aren't too many people left in the outports anymore. He asks me if I'm afraid of ghosts. I tell him that that's what I'm looking for, or at least the places where they'll soon be. Slightly confused by my answer, the younger man tells me that crazy things happen in isolated villages like Grand Bruit and that I shouldn't be surprised to come across a ghost or two. They leave the table thinking that they've frightened me, but I'm only more intrigued.

Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

After awhile, the boat makes a wide, lazy turn into a narrow bay. As I poke my head around the side of the ferry and lean out over the water, I see the tiny fishing village and its eponymous waterfall slide into view. And here I am now, alone with 15 full-time residents (plus a few part-timers that drift in and out over the brief Newfoundland summer). Suspicious and inquisitive stares meet me as I clamber down the gangplank; a heavy, grey rain has started to fall. The woman from whom I've rented the house whisks me up the paving-stone path and deposits me in my new home. As she's leaving she's calling back over her shoulder, telling me to keep an eye on the leak in the roof. By the time I'm sitting at the kitchen table, the ferry is already heading out of the harbour, back to Lapoile. After a few minutes all I can see are the pinprick shimmers of its lights as they fade out around the edge of the inlet. And it's in that moment that I start to realize what it means to be isolated, what it means to be removed from the rest of the world and how the flows of information and traffic and people are all short-circuited in places like Grand Bruit. It's beautiful and terrifying, haunting and dreamlike. That night, as I'm trying to fall asleep, I'm thankful for the utility pole light that shines in through my window[73]; it makes me feel like there are

73 Is it possible to have street lights without streets?

other people and things out here, even though I can't see or hear them. At some point in the night, I get up and look out across the harbour to where a few windows are starting to brighten; it's 4 AM and the lobster fishers are getting ready to check their traps.

Looking back, I realize that I was watching almost-ghosts taking some of their last trips down the coast, mowing their hilly little lawns the almost next to last time, making a final run to the wharf to greet the ferry, hoping that someone new might be coming for a visit. I was seeing a town on the edge of abandonment; it was as if I'd been in Jeffrey City, Wyoming a few days before the mine shut down. What's different in Grand Bruit is that there was no 'last person', nobody hanging on, no one hoping for some kind of turnaround, or maybe just waiting to die. Here, the town had voted to disband, its remaining inhabitants were all leaving together—as of June 2010, everyone will be gone from this place. A strange and eerie moment—to look back on one's home with the knowledge that return is impossible, to really *never go home again*—the resettlement of Newfoundland's outport communities may, in fact, be the one of the most fitting uses of that overwrought phrase.

Grand Bruit: beginnings, endings

Abandoned wharf, Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

"Place is a pause in movement."
-Tuan, *Space and Place*

Grand Bruit began in the early 1800s as a small fishing outport with a few families living along the shore and fishing for cod, haddock and skate in the surrounding ocean. The name of the settlement comes from the French[74] for "great noise" because of the large waterfall that rushes down through the centre of the village. While Beothuk and French fishermen had plied the waters around Grand Bruit for hundreds of years, the area was permanently settled by English colonists in the early 1800s. The village was first recorded in the 1836 Newfoundland census at which time it had a population of 9. By 1869, this number had ballooned to 84 (more than 5 times the current population) and was followed by further increases in 1891 (pop. 117) and 1901 (pop. 166). The village continued to grow, and by 1945 it had a permanent population of 239. Soon thereafter the numbers began to wane as a result of outmigration with a noted decrease in 1951 to 199, followed by another drop to 132 by 1966. Throughout the 70s and 80s outmigration led to further population declines as the local fishing economy became less profitable and young people and their families moved to larger, less isolated centres to find work (Smallwood et. al. 1994). The final blow to Grand Bruit and many outport communities just like it came in 1992 with the implementation of a moratorium on cod fishing that resulted in the elimination of a number of jobs in cod fishing or processing (Kennedy 1997).

As the population continued to dwindle, that its residents would abandon Grand Bruit in favour of government-assisted resettlement became an increasingly likely scenario as the villagers got older and support networks within the community began to evaporate as people moved away. The elementary school shut its doors in 2007 after both of its remaining students graduated and left the outport to attend high school. The store had been closed for over two years at that point. Anticipating the need for resettlement, some people put their houses up for sale; not far from where I was staying, a fully-furnished house was on the market for $5 000 and had been unoccupied for some time. Slowly but steadily, the people of Grand Bruit have been leaving and not coming back. Now, the few people that remain feel the accumulated pressure of living in an isolated community while a world that centres itself around immediate connectivity and 24-hour access to everything is leaving them behind.

The resettling of Newfoundland's over 3 000 isolated villages began soon after the island became Canada's tenth province in 1949. During the 1950s, almost 90% of Newfoundland's 415 000 people lived in remote coastal settlements. Newfoundland's first premier, Joey Smallwood, was the key player in the push toward the centralization of isolated communities in the hope of

74 The southern coast of Newfoundland is sometimes referred to as the French Coast and bears many French place names due to the significant French presence in this part of Newfoundland since the early 1500s.

increasing the industrial prowess and economic viability of the province. By cutting back government services to isolated outports (telephone, electrical, ferry service, medical), Smallwood had attempted to alleviate overspending on outport subsidies such as ferry service, mail delivery and medical support. Smallwood's aim was to promote the development of so-called 'growth centres' by establishing a larger population and a more diversified economy (Kennedy 1995).

The resettlement project was first enacted by the provincial government in 1954 and, over the next 11 years, 110 communities were abandoned. In 1965 the federal government took control of the resettlement effort in what was initially called the Canada-Newfoundland Fisheries Household Resettlement Program whereby another 143 communities were relocated between 1965 and 1970 (Copes 1971), with a further 30 outports resettling between 1970 and 1975 when the resettlement program effectively ended (Mayda 2004). In return for agreeing to move, the provincial government paid each family upwards of $600 to help defray moving and relocation costs (this was increased to approximately $1 200 when the federal government started to oversee the program) (Smallwood et. al. 1994). Over the next three decades outports like Petites (resettled in 2003) and Great Harbour Deep (resettled in 2002) were dissolved with government assistance; as with previous resettlement agreements, 90% of the residents had to vote to move and were compensated in amounts ranging from $80 000 to $100 000, depending on the number of people in a given household.

Today, isolated outports without road access are rare. In fact, by 1973 approximately 95% of Newfoundland's settlements were connected by roads and received reliable telephone and electrical service (Grand Bruit did not have diesel generator-produced electricity until 1970, and was not hooked into the main power grid until 1988). Grand Bruit, along with a handful of other South Coast outports such as Lapoile, Grey River and Francois, have become the exception, a kind of snapshot of life before Newfoundland's confederation into Canada. And while the community maintains global linkages via satellite television, telephone service and an internet connection, it is still without any road access and requires a great deal of monetary support from the provincial government to maintain its aging population of 15.

When I visited Grand Bruit in June of 2008 the community was about to vote on whether or not to resettle. The residents had been thinking about it for some time and were making the first step in the process. As was the case in the resettlement of Great Harbour Deep, each family would receive between $80 000 and $100 000 to help with moving costs and buying a new home in another community. When I asked people in the village if they wanted to move, many seemed in favour of leaving Grand Bruit, but there was always some element of sadness at the edge their voices; most followed up their answer with a story about

how the community used to be so vibrant, back when there were more people in the village. In the same breath they'd tell me it was time for them to move on, but that they couldn't imagine leaving this place.

There are people in Grand Bruit who have rarely left the confines of this little bay and the strip of ocean along the coast where they drop their lobster traps. Two of the lobster fishermen I spoke with—both in their late 50s—had only left Grand Bruit once. One had gone to a hospital in Corner Brook (a 3 hour ferry trip and a 2 hour bus ride away) and the other had gone to Lapoile to visit his sister. I had to wonder how they would exist outside of this setting, as if their very being might be predicated on their geography, a body whose organs were made out of spongy tundra moss with blood that was forever infected with seawater. As we sat silently along the wharf, in the sloping afternoon sun, these two men were like deeply rooted and essential elements of the village, like a necessary component of place. It was almost as if, when they left, something—or everything—might quietly tumble into the sea. They were like the thick, waterlogged pilings that held up the wharf; the absence of their human supports would open up a hole in the story of Grand Bruit and the water would rush in, flooding and drowning the place and its weary memories. And now, when I think about this small outport on the south coast, I wonder if they'll even exist when there is no one left to see the ghosts.

One of the main differences between the ghost towns that I visited on the Plains and Grand Bruit is that, once abandoned, Grand Bruit will become almost completely isolated. When the ferry stops running, the only way for people to reach this place will be to charter a boat. On the Plains, ghost towns see a few intrepid visitors every once in awhile: wayfaring motorists lost in the maze of dirt roads, postcard photographers, crystal meth producers in search of a hide-out, relatives and nostalgics looking for a connection to places of birth. Grand Bruit won't have the same opportunity for accidental discovery, and I wonder if the ghosts of this place will get tired and resettle themselves in other spaces.

As I sit in my rented kitchen with one resident, she told me how tough it is to live in Grand Bruit during the winter, when all of the summer-people have left, how on some February days, when the ferry makes its weekly trip to Burgeo and almost everyone has gone shopping that there might only be two people in the entire village. She tells me that now that the children are gone, the place seems more lonely than it ever has before. She gets a faint smile on her face and her freckled cheeks raise themselves in contented remembrance as she tells me about how, in winters passed, the villagers would light up the frozen pond behind the church with the headlights from their snowmobiles and the children would skate and play hockey well into the night. She tells me that that hasn't happened in years and that now it's only the old people who are left in Grand Bruit. Before

long she's telling me more stories about the halcyon days before anyone ever thought about resettlement. For hours, in the always-getting-dark, she piled the stories of this place in thick layers, like carpets for sale at some imagined Turkish bazaar, each one carefully woven with colours and patterns that belonged only to Grand Bruit's people. These narrative carpets begin to unwind at the end of every sentence and I imagine the forest of dangling threads that will remain when the last ferry leaves next summer[75].

She's already nostalgic for a place that she still occupies. Perhaps more than anything, she's *pre-nostalgic* for place and nostalgic for history; for her, it seems as though they're not always connected. She's built up a dreamworld, and in a way she's populating her own private museum of Grand Bruit with exhibits on daily life, food, village politics and key figures in the community. As the day of resettlement approaches on the horizon, I'm sure that many of the other residents are preparing their own miniature museums that they'll be able to visit when their real-life town is no more, what Allen Shelton (2007:38) called a "soft museum of decaying memories". Like plutonium, memories have half-lives that are reached when they've faded to the extent that sometimes they're confused with fictions and we begin to ask ourselves if this or that ever really happened.

When no one remains the place-based memories will be wiped clean from these houses and their miniature museums. There will be no one left to describe the day that James decided to build a greenhouse and everyone thought he was crazy, but a month later everyone had a clear plastic sheeting and wood shed just off of their house. Here, the immanent abandonment of Grand Bruit begins to answer Shelton (2007:39) when he asks "what if spaces had their own architectural specters, or if objects like a refrigerator could act as a medium to the dead"; in this tiny outport, it seems as though the answer is always a provisional 'yes', but only as long as there are keepers of memory. This mnemonic connection to place is exactly what Tuan (1990:4) describes as "the affective bond between people and place or setting", that tie to personal geographies, to mapped

75 As we're coming back into the harbour, he turns away from Grand Bruit and slips the old motorboat into a small inlet on the island they call Harbour Island. He's pointing out where people used to have gardens, where they used to have picnics and where the house of the family that used to live out here used to be. Forty or fifty years ago one family lived on the island, at the end of the inlet. From the boat I can barely make out the square spectre of the house's foundation. He tells me that people from the village always thought the island family was a bit strange and a kind of mythology developed around them and the little wavering light from their windows across the water. People were suspicious of the family because they chose to live on an island off the coast instead of in the village. The mother had drowned before the two daughters could walk and the father was left to raise them on the lonely backside of the island. He tells me that people would often see the young women wandering aimlessly around the edge of the small island, their wild, dark hair and skirts fluttering in the Atlantic wind. This story and its ghosts are bound to this place.

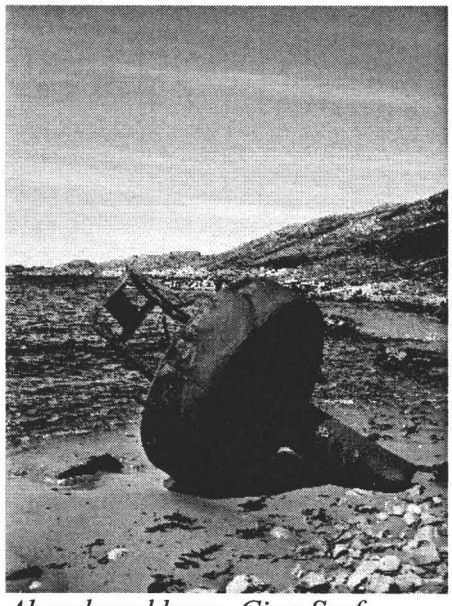
out memories on space. The museums that these people carry with them are their nostalgic—and thereby somewhat mythological—connections to this place.

Her husband comes to the door and she tells me that she'd better get going. They have to get up early to go check their lobster traps and it's getting late. I see their silhouettes cross the footbridge above the waterfall and disappear over a little hill, and then I'm alone among a growing chorus of ghosts. The spectral presence of children, heartbreaks, tears, summer, dead dogs, parties and other dreamworlds hover at the edge of the lamplight as I scribble down fieldnotes about living in a just-before-ghost town. I imagine what it would have been like to be in Orkney, Saskatchewan when the school drew it's blinds for the final time, when the last store closed, when the grain elevator got torn down or when the final rail car rolled through town. I realize that this is almost what I'm seeing and hearing in Grand Bruit. These are the final moments of the dreamworld, the few remaining fragments of a way of life that will evaporate when the last person leaving on the last ferry looks back as the brightly painted buildings slip out of view. Of course some people might come back in their own boats, they might even stay for a few months while they fish their old grounds, but no one will ever *live* here again and this space will begin its slow fade into abandonment. The village geography[76] will become haunted by ghosts; in a way it will become an overcrowded city of spectres (Stewart 1996).

76 The village's geography extends beyond the buildings and paths, out into the ocean. He's pointing out the islets, rocks and ledges, giving me their common names as we pass: Western Arm, Bad Neighbours Rocks, Harbour Island, Grebe's Head. Naming these places gives them agency, it lends them a power within the landscape and allows them to become actors in the lives of the villagers. Here, places become yet another set of characters that populate the narrative of Grand Bruit's isolation.

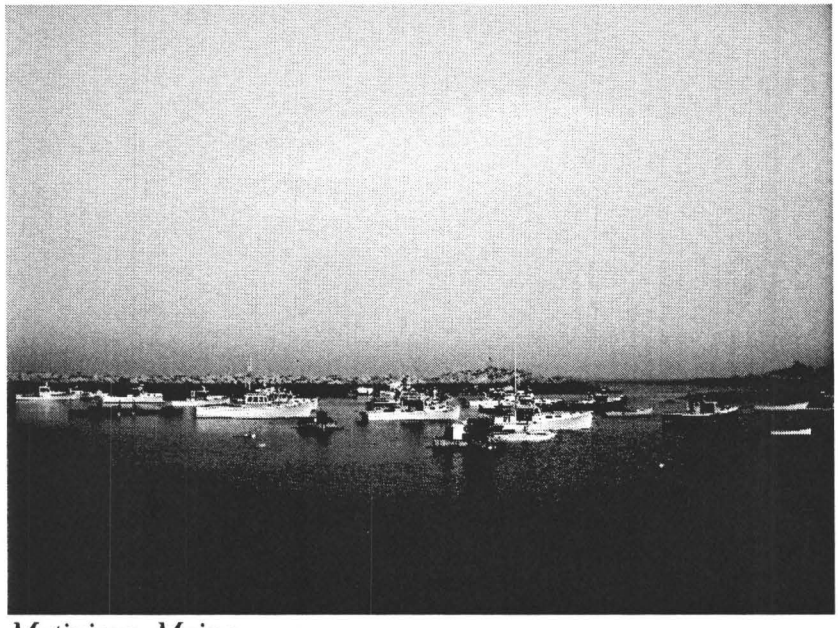
James, Grand Bruit

I'm sitting in another living room, amongst crocheted blankets and layers of magazines and mail piled in every available corner, drinking home-made wine and she's flipping through an old album of photos of boats that her father built when they lived up in North Bay, another outport north-west of Grand Bruit that was abandoned in 1968—more ghosts, almost erased time that hovers on the edge of unremembering. One more "soft museum" (Shelton 2007) made out of flimsy paper and cardboard, ready to vanish. North Bay is a view to the future of Grand Bruit; she tells me that she's the only person left who really remembers it and that these are the only photos she knows of. Grainy, square photos of families standing around newly built boats; women whose names she can't remember in sensible 1940s dresses with waves of black hair bobby-pinned around their ears; a wider shot of standing-straight schoolchildren in front of a white clapboard building, all but a few of their names erased from her memory. The soft museum becomes less solid by the day.



Abandoned buoy, Cinq Serf Beach near Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

Matinicus: arrivals



Matinicus, Maine

The woman in the little office that serves as both check-in and dispatch for Penobscot Island Air points to a tiny two-seater Cessna and tells me that the mail run to Matinicus is about to leave. I grab my backpack and the cardboard box of food I've brought with me from New York (there aren't any stores on Matinicus[77]) and rush out onto the runway where a burly, jovial man in a green golf shirt waves me into the passenger side of the aircraft. Before I know it, we're taxiing down the tarmac and he's handing me a pair of oversized beige headphones with a wiry microphone poking out of the right side. A quick stop at Criehaven Island to drop off some parcels, and then we're up and over Ten Pound Island and dipping back down through dry-as-bone spruce onto a frighteningly short gravel runway.

Again, I'm alone on an island 30 kilometres out to sea, living in a rented house for the next two weeks. There are 50 people who live on this island with only a post office[78] and a battered phone booth as centre points[79]. Here and there, narrow dirt tracks lead off the main road into the woods, down toward the water; well-spaced houses tucked into trees. Around the harbour, a cluster of collapsing sheds filled with lobster traps and parts for boat motors that will never run again. Up and down the island the wreckage of other times accumulates in mounds of

77 In 2009, a small general store was opened on the island to serve the community throughout the summer months.

78 The original post office burned down in April 2008 and has since been relocated to a private residence.

rusted metal and rotten wood. Old fuel trucks without engines, like toothless old men, lay tilted and silent among a small stand of evergreen trees, a land-bound boat called the Sea Duck languishes in an overgrown field on the south end of the island—now a home for bald-faced hornets; twenty chewed-up styrene lobster buoys hang in trees like some kind of marine shaman's talismans; below, a car's window has been replaced by a blue flowered bed sheet that's attached with duct tape. More accumulations of things wash up on the beach, layering twisted lobster traps, yellow rope, a broken lawn chair and the corroded engine block from a vehicle that no one wanted anymore[80]. In this way, history accumulates in materiality, in things left in place, discarded and half-buried.

Even before I left the mainland, I'd been warned repeatedly about the hostile and insular nature of the islanders; people would ask me what I was going to be doing out there, and would encourage me to be careful, reminding me that I'd been warned. When I arrived on the island, I found a tightly-knit group of people concerned with maintaining a unique economic and cultural way of life based primarily on lobster fishing. What many visitors and critics of Matinicus may have read as hostility and insularity, I interpreted as signs of resistance to outside interference and of well-established interpersonal relationships that had, in many cases, been developed (and often 're-wired') over multiple generations. One woman I spoke with told me that the state ferry only came to the island 24 times a year, and that the residents had voted not to increase that number of trips as a means of keeping Matinicus from being overrun the way that some of the other, more tourist-oriented Maine islands, such as Monhegan, had become in recent years.

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79 I'm walking down the road, making my daily two mile trek to the harbour to call my wife on the pay phone. As I pass a long, narrow house with beige vinyl siding, a man asks me where I'm going. Without thinking, I tell him that I'm headed downtown. He and his wife laugh loudly and tell me that there's no downtown on Matinicus, just the harbour and some old sheds. He tells me that I look almost exactly like his cousin who lives over on Vinalhaven—an island just north of Matinicus—and he asks me my last name, wondering if maybe we're related. He shakes his head when he hears my name and remarks on our resemblance again. He says everyone's got a twin somewhere in the world. As I'm walking away I wonder if my twin is out on some lobster boat, hauling traps with my other hands, saying things in my other voice. The man on the porch wants to tie me to this place, to situate me in the *genius loci* of the island. He does this by connecting me to a person who is already attached to this space, framing me as a parallel version of someone who belongs here.

80 When I asked one of the fishermen's wives what happens to all of the vehicles once they were beyond repair, she told me—in a very matter-of-fact voice—that they simply drive them into the ocean with the hope that the current will take them away. If, as Derrida (1994) claims, the ghost is, itself, the manifestation of *return*, then the motor I found rusting away on the beach forms a strange kind of industrialized return, it is the ghost of the forgotten automobile that resurfaced to haunt the place of its death.

Matinicus is a working island with a deeply rooted sense of place[81] and history. The local history of the islanders is not laid out in historical texts and carefully kept records, but rather in the oral history of known interpersonal connections. Lines are drawn between people, their boats, their fishing grounds, their homes and their actions; the ghosts that populate this island are the ghosts of connections, the spectral reverberations of memories that tie people to the island and to one another. The people who used to fish out of this harbour drift through stories of the ocean, life, death, marriage, joy and sadness. The things he tells me as we sit on the porch of my rented house are made out of layers of inhabitation and lines of being-in-place. The stories I hear seem wound up and tangled like the nets I often see mounded in spidery piles all over the island: without an observable beginning or end. Still, the older people do speak of a time before television and high-speed boats (Thorndike 2009) when the community was tighter, of a time when lobster prices were higher and there were no vacation homes on the island. Just as in Grand Bruit, global time and capital have exerted their force on this island; for the moment the inhabitants have managed to maintain their way of life, but there are always holes that begin to widen in the fabric of this kind of wilful isolation.

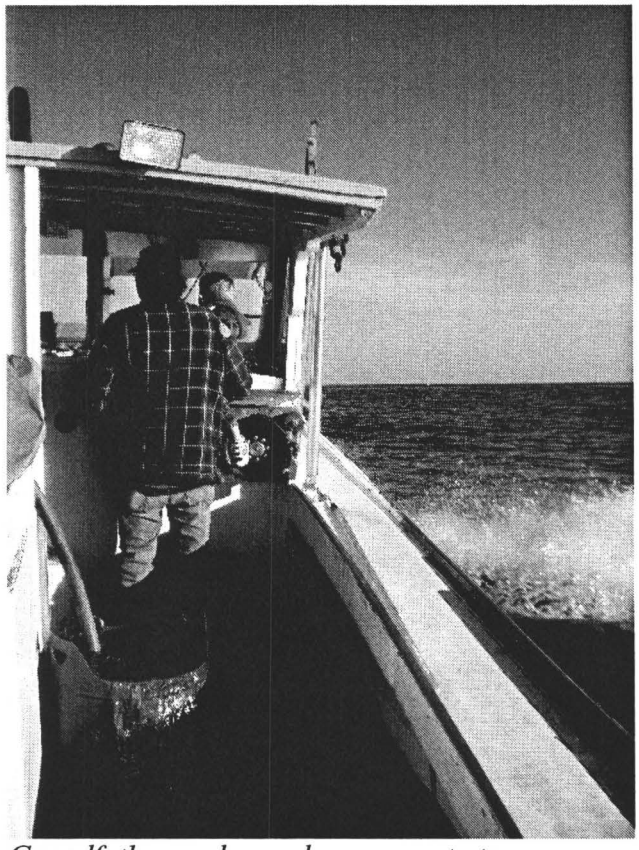
Two years after I visited Matinicus, an island man got shot in the neck with .22 calibre pistol as a result of a dispute over rights to trap lobsters in the waters around Matinicus. Officially, Maine's fishing laws allow anyone to trap lobsters in any part of the state, but local waters around many of the islands, including Matinicus, are off-limits to anyone but islanders. While these boundaries are not state-imposed, they are vehemently enforced by local lobstermen. Usually this enforcement involves the cutting of the offender's lobster traps, effectively ending the intrusion (see Acheson 1988). The altercation that occurred between the lobstermen in this case, was the final straw in an ongoing feud between local fishermen and a mainlander whose traps had consistently been found in the ocean off of Matinicus. Apparently, someone from the mainland had been fishing in the area against the wishes of the local lobstermen (Goodnough 2009). This infringement is no minor concern, because

81 One of the most prevalent notions of Matinicus—from both inside and out—is that it is a kind of self-styled 'pirate island', separated from the mainland, not only by water but also by a politics of self-regulation coupled with a Wild West bravado that trickles down to most aspects of life on the island. Many of the lobster boats in the harbour fly the Jolly Roger and more than one of the decrepit pick-ups seen parked at the wharf sport crudely painted skull and crossbones. Duncan and Fenn's (2002) sailing guide reminds pleasure boaters that Matinicus makes no attempt to cater to visiting yachts. The islanders tend to foster this reputation of strong-willed and hard-boiled lives lived at the edge of the world, keeping tourists and would-be summer-people at bay with the careful construction and maintenance of an outlaw mythology.

the fishing grounds surrounding the island are ardently protected against outside fishing; if a person does not own land on the island, they cannot fish from its harbour (Acheson 1975, 1988). Intrusion into foreign territory is seen as an attack on livelihoods, and cannot be tolerated if lifeways are to remain intact on Matinicus. As the fabric of social cohesion is stretched to its limits in times of economic hardship (the per pound price of lobster dropped to almost record lows in 2009 [Corsen 2009]), connections break down and people begin to drift apart, eventually having no choice but to leave behind their once viable home places in search of a more sustainable future. In this way, perhaps Matinicus is not so far from Grand Bruit after all; if the price of lobster continues to stagnate or drop, the residents of this remote island may have no choice but to pack up and move on. As is the case with many single resource settlements, the evaporation of the resource leads to the evaporation of the people[82]. It would seem that the global financial crisis that has recently led to the creation of suburban ghost-spaces in California and elsewhere may also have its reverberations felt on this small island off the coast of Maine. Without disposable income, there is no market for luxury foods such as lobster; here, the island's once lucrative economic base may soon become its ultimate downfall. I have to wonder how long Matinicus will survive as a viable community. What will happen if tastes change and lobster becomes as unfashionable as it once was (Acheson 1988), or, if mirroring the numerous villages affected by the cod stock depletion that has plagued Newfoundland for the past 20 years, it simply vanishes as a result of over-fishing and/or changes in the supply and demand for lobster? How long can a resistance to mainland ideologies and a desire for independence last once the lobster fishery is gone? If it comes to pass that Matinicus loses its year-round residents, a certain sense of place will go with them; the island will become the domain of a few wealthy summer-people and the *genius loci* of stalwart lobster fishermen and their families will be only ghosts and fading memories.

82 This was exactly the case in Jeffrey City, Wyoming, a town with a one-time population of 10 000 that became a virtual ghost town overnight when the uranium mine shut down and 90% of the inhabitants left.

Islands and Sense of Place



Grandfather and grandson en route to Matinicus, Maine

As long as I can remember I've been attracted to islands. At first it was simply the idea of an island, the notion of a miniature universe, self-contained and unreachable by land. Something always drew me to the isolated dreamworld that islands represented in my mind. When I began to travel as a teenager, I would visit islands whenever possible, slowly constructing a parallel world made out of islands and lives lived outside of the everyday flows of time and space. For me, the island has always been coloured by a romantic vision of self-reliance and robusticity; in this way, the island represents—geographically and ideologically—the ability for people, places and things to exist in isolation. Much of this fascination emerges from a childhood spent in relative isolation on my family's homestead in the Canadian wilderness (see Chapter 1), where I often imagined our small log house as a sort of island from which we would make weekly forays to the 'mainland' (the city of Thunder Bay, Ontario) to buy groceries, to get parts for ailing machinery and to reconnect with friends. The

sense of place I had about that little patch of woods and gardens has followed me throughout my life, leading me to seek out other examples of isolation to better understand how and why people live outside the prescribed loops of temporality and geography, at different speeds and in lower population densities. In much the same way that my search for abandonment across the Plains is rooted in my experience of seeing my childhood home fall into ruin and desertion, my pursuit of islands emerges from my desire to trace the paths of people who wilfully separate themselves from the mainland with watery boundaries. To live on an island is to put one's life-orbit at a distance, it is to live somewhere beyond the asteroid belt in a wobbly circumnavigation of everything else.

The *genius loci*, or spirit of place (Patterson 2007) describes a space's ability to maintain certain historical-human resonances; it is an embedded memory that persists beyond its human authors and agents. D. J. Waldie (1997) describes this understanding of human surroundings as "a 'sense of self' [that] is part of the equipment of a conscious mind", implying that we, as sentient beings occupying a world of spaces, are somehow hard-wired to perceive these senses of place. The spirit of these island locations is fluid and ever changing, always adding new layers of affect to the sense of place. The fabric of space becomes a collection of fine threads that weave themselves in and out of time and place, resulting in what de Certeau (2002:132) calls "a scriptual economy" whereby narrative is written and rewritten into space through an "endless tapestry" of accumulation experiences, histories, presences and absences. These loose threads offer unique insights into the spirit of place by exposing the various layers of temporal and spatial accumulation. In Grand Bruit, the absence of certain buildings (stores, fishing sheds, houses) exposes the story of the gradual decline of the social and economic base of the community; the villagers point out the rough square where a house once stood and tell me the story of the woman who lived out here, on the far side of the cove until she was in her eighties. The absences (which exist only in relation to the remaining accumulated presences) and broken threads allow for the participation in the "scriptual economy" of this place by circulating stories as trade goods that are used to patch up missing pieces of history. Like the Trobriander's *kula* ring, these mnemonic artifacts eventually return to their author, only to be retold and re-wired with every subsequent retelling. Yet even within these exchanges, it is difficult for an outsider who is *from away*[83] to truly engage with the vast accumulations of history and memory in a place such as Grand Bruit. On this topic, de Certeau (2002:108) claims that

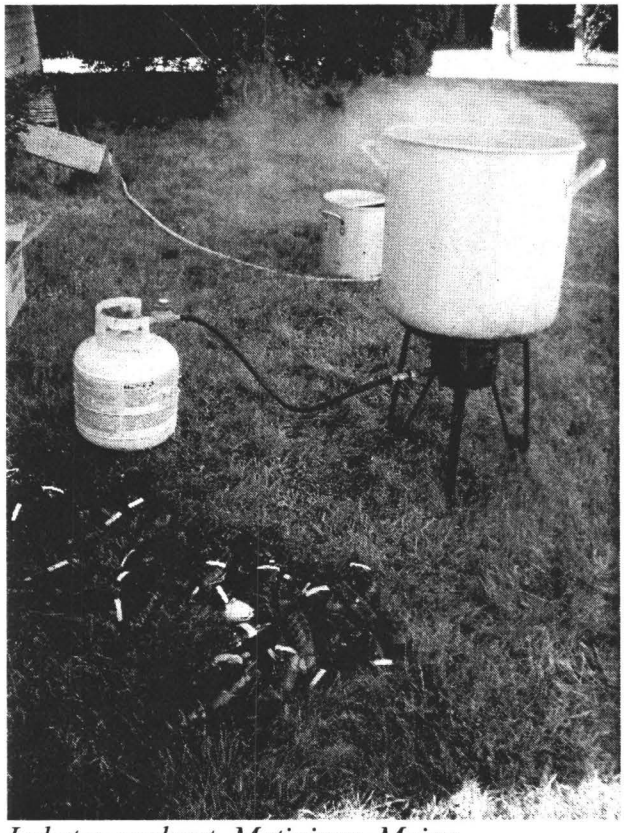
> "[p]laces are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not

83 A term commonly used throughout the Atlantic regions of North America to describe the condition of having come from elsewhere. *Away* is often synonymous with the mainland.

> allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reverse, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain and pleasure of the body".

And it is in the flesh and blood of these island people that the truest sense of place resides; it is a location that is even harder to access than an isolated fishing village on Newfoundland's southern coast. A sense of place is written in the bodies of these people, in their cracked-up hands and sunburned faces, in the feeling that they get in the bottom of their stomachs when they see the ferry coming into port with a long-absent loved one on board. These are senses that aren't available to me, the ethnographer; I know they're there, but I can never know *that* feeling for this place, just as they can never know the true spirit of my home-place.

Connections



Lobster cookout, Matinicus, Maine

> "Dreaming of islands—whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter—is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of

> being lost and alone—or is it dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew."
>
> -Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands*

Islands are islands because they are always, in some way, disconnected; there is an unbridged space between us and them, a separation is never completely traversed. Still, islands are also undeniably connected to the rest of the world, be it through telecommunications, global economies, shared experiences or a basic understanding of the human condition in which we are all participants. During my stays in these two communities, I began to understand how islands function as microcosms, as social and political entities in miniature. I say this not to diminish the lifeways of their inhabitants, but to reaffirm their ability to function as small-scale societies in an increasingly large-scale world system.

Matinicus is neither a village nor a town—it occupies a unique municipal designation found only in Maine known as a *plantation*, somewhere between an unincorporated settlement and a town. The governing body of a plantation is composed of a group of town assessors who meet on a regular basis to organize the day-to-day workings of the community, including practicalities such as taxation, trash collection, mail flights and ferry service (Haag 1973, Thorndike 2005). This mode of governance allows the island to be relatively self-reliant and to deal with many of its issues internally, something that the residents take very seriously. This desire for independence forms a different kind of dreamworld, a place where *America* remains eternally peripheral and where Matinicus becomes an alternate universe, a strange kind of lobster republic in the middle of the ocean. Again, the geography of isolation provides the opportunity for a disconnected connectedness with the rest of the world.

Matinicus is a prime example of self-governance in isolation. Many of the people that I met told me with great pride that there hadn't been any police on the island for several years; they just weren't needed because all of the island's problems were resolved internally[84]. One old fisherman told me about an incident a few years back when the young people of the island had been reckless and inconsiderate with their use of all-terrain vehicles, driving them loudly and dangerously up and down the main road at all hours. Warnings were given by the older residents, but were disregarded—a few days later, all of the ATVs mysteriously vanished in the night. When I asked him where they'd gone, he told me that they'd been taken out on a few boats and thrown into the ocean. The islanders haven't had a problem with irresponsible ATV behaviour since. Here,

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84 This changed markedly in June 2009 when the aforementioned dispute over fishing territory led to a shooting on the Matinicus wharf and the arrival of the Maine Marine Patrol on the island.

the island's boundedness allows its inhabitants to disconnect themselves from the prevailing flows of state governance—a condition that is reflected in the islander's constant reference to the mainland as *America*, as though they were somehow excluded from the nation.

On Matinicus, interactions tend to self-regulate. External (extra-island) attachments remain largely peripheral in a place where people are unavoidably tied to one another by proximity and history; on Matinicus, the roots of people and place run deep. Connections with the outside world appear as practicalities, and are in many ways ahistorical, rootless and ephemeral. For many islanders the mainland is seen as a necessary evil that serves only as a place to buy groceries and boat parts. I remember coming back to Matinicus after an afternoon shopping trip to Rockland with a family from the island and seeing the sense of relief and comfort wash over their faces as the island came into view, it was like a child returning home to a parent after a long day at school—this was definitely one of the most pure moments of an attachment to place that I had ever witnessed. In large, the island tends to function as an extended family, complete with its own in-built feuds, alliances and outcasts.

Almost universally, I was told that these people were out here with no one but each other to depend on, and in the end, the laws of proximity and history had forged deep and abiding—if sometimes begrudging—connections.

I'm standing at the edge of the same runway that provided me with my first introduction to the island; the morning is cool and bright and there's a quiet trail of fog above the dead-dry spruce trees. Another man from the island is waiting for the same plane, and he looks over at me and asks if I'm going back to *America* today, as though it was another country, a geopolitical space apart. I tell him that I am. He sighs quietly and we just sit there, staring out into the ocean-moat that reaches over the divide.

Latecomers

Cynthia, Grand Bruit

I'm anything but an islander; born on the Plains and raised in the woods, I'm definitely not one of them. I'm not really a tourist or a summer person; but I'm also not local in any way. I'm a latecomer. I'm that person who comes into the bar or concert hall as the band is playing its final note or packing away their instruments. I'm here to see the last few patrons shuffle out, leaving behind a collection of empty glasses and swirling ticket stubs.

There are other latecomers as well; they're the people who weren't born on Matinicus; they don't have relatives buried in the cemetery. They're the people who dreamed up an island and moved there. Or else they married into the island and have been there ever since. Many of the fishermen's wives are what I've called *latecomers*, and they're often seen in that light for their entire lives. I asked one woman on Matinicus how long she'd been on the island and she told me that since marrying her islander husband, she'd been here for almost twenty years. She was quick to qualify this statement by adding that she still wasn't *from* here.

On Matinicus (and to a less institutionalized extent, Grand Bruit), people fall into three major categories: islanders, residents and summer people. Islanders are those people who were born on the island and have their surnames inscribed on a number of tombstones in the graveyard; residents are those people who weren't born on the island, but have either married an islander or put in enough time to be seen as a legitimate fixture in island life; summer people occupy the much-maligned domain of home owners who are not year-round residents and do not fish for lobster—they form a kind of vacationer class who are seen by the locals as having no real claim to the island's cultural and geographic space.

There's a new summer girl on the island this year. She's almost tall and almost blonde; the fishermen's wives have seen her jogging every morning this week and they're pretty sure that they don't like her. They tell me that she thinks she's something special because her father is a lawyer from Boston. They don't think she's anything special. At a lobster cook-out that I've been invited to attend, I hear all of the young men buzzing about the new girl, wondering what she's all about. In the background their fathers and mothers shake their heads almost imperceptibly.

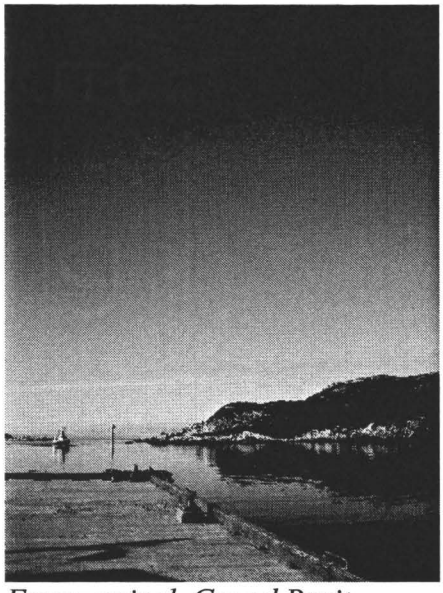
He's lived on the island for thirty years. He wasn't born here, but he belongs here now. He's in the living room watching satellite television in a worn-out recliner while I sit at the kitchen table with his wife, his step-daughter and few other local women. We're making salads for the cookout later that evening and talking and they're all telling me about life on the island. The step daughter grew up on the island, but she spends most of her time waitressing in Florida; she's got a cosmetology degree from a school in Maine and she wants to get her license transferred to Florida, then she'll probably never come back. Her mother looks down at the iceberg lettuce she's slicing and I can see a twinge of sadness on her

face. The women tell me that a lot of the people on the island spend a few months a year in Florida, apparently only the truly hard-core lobstermen stay behind to set traps out in the deep ocean. They tell me that they're not summer people because they've been here forever and they work hard while they're here. I pick up little fragments of these women's lives as we talk through the afternoon: one of them has carpal tunnel syndrome, somebody has A negative blood, someone else has four sisters in Rockland. The still-living lobsters we caught that morning are waiting to be boiled alive in a styrofoam cooler in the front porch.

Earlier in the day, paint cans, brushes and cans of Bud Light balanced on scaffolding that was held up by chunks of firewood and cinder blocks. I'd been painting the house with a few of the island women for most of the morning by the time their husbands passed by on their way home from fishing. Jane's husband leans out of the side of the black and blue pickup, "anybody want a strawberry daiquiri?". About a half an hour later he's back with a pitcher full of pink slush, a short stack of red and white plastic cups and a canister whip cream. He's still wearing the lemon yellow rain pants with the huge tear in the back as he hands out the drinks. The women cover the tops of their cups with foamy cream and retire to the shade of a nearby hedge. Jane has a tattoo of a bunch of flowers on her ankle with the letters "ND" drawn above; her daughter has some flowers tattooed on her back just above the waistband of her jeans. They're talking about the Dutch people who recently bought a house on the island. They're from Maryland and Jane tells me that they're not very friendly. "They've probably got cameras up everywhere to watch what people are doing. They're the kind of people who would tell you to get off of their property, and that's just not how it's done out here. Even if you hate somebody's guts, you won't ever tell 'em to get off your property—you just wouldn't. You might not like it, but you sure as shit won't say nothing". Summer people aren't trusted; their outsider ways of being are suspect. Jane's husband tells me that the more local people move off the island, the more summer people move in to fill their spaces, "soon it'll be just another tourist island" he tells me from behind a pink slurp of frozen alcohol.

The ghosts that take up residence in the spaces left vacant by leaving are also latecomers. In the past there were enough people in Grand Bruit and Matinicus to ward off the spectres, but now absences have opened up space for ghostly intrusions. The spirits of place have taken up residence in the hollowed out history, occupying the realms of narrative. As I wander the paths and roads in these Atlantic villages I can see the places where ghosts are filling in for absent people, squatting in the space of abandonment. The ghosts of space are the final latecomers; they are the only occupants that remain in the space of human erasure.

On Leaving Islands: sense of place and the construction of memory



Ferry arrival, Grand Bruit, Newfoundland

The sense of place on islands is unique and polyvocal, it bubbles up and seeps into both time and space. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of island time-space is an inherent plasticity coupled with a hard-wired sense of human connectivity to both the land and fellow islanders. The construction of memory therefore takes place within the context of malleable temporality and spatial understandings, but is invariably tied to the accumulated history of things-that-have-happened to *people*. The memory and haunting of these communities appears as a patchwork of sewn-together edges and re-routed wires, constantly reconfiguring themselves into other versions of the past, present and future.

Key among my interests in these spaces has been the question of how these places will change in the wake of resettlement, abandonment and the wild shifts in the flows of global capital and time. Here, I have speculated that the fragile 'museums' the islanders have assembled out of decades of accumulated narrative time and materiality will slowly degrade until not even the ghosts will be able to inhabit these emptied places. And while Grand Bruit is definitely next in line for desertion, Matinicus holds on tightly at the edge of prevailing global currents of time and space, always uncertain of its future. Ultimately, it is the preservation of local narratives that will prevent the erasure of a sense of place

from these isolated spaces, because without the stories and their cast of characters, Grand Bruit and Matinicus become nothing more than rocks in the ocean—perhaps a few houses and boats, but those won't last long in their current state.

On the ferry, on my way back from Grand Bruit, I'm leaning on the same railing, looking out at the same shoreline that led me to the village. It's like I'm going back in time, travelling in reverse to where everything started. The ferry captain with the worn-out tattoos comes over to stand beside me, and he asks me if I liked Grand Bruit. I tell him that I liked it very much and that I kind of already miss it a bit. He jokingly tells me that he thought that because I'd been gone so long that maybe someone out there had adopted me. He says that if I'd stayed out there any longer I'd probably get to vote on resettlement. As he's walking back up the steep metal stairs to the wheel house I think that I don't really know how I'd vote.

Father and son lobstermen, Matinicus, Maine

After: memories, by way of conclusion

Abandoned school, Reliance, Saskatchewan

> "...whenever one retraces one's steps in the imagination, an inevitable transformation occurs. One gives thought to things one did without thinking. One replaces words actually said with a vocabulary of one's choosing. Face-to-face reality is subjected by a second order—written reality. Life gets rendered as language."
>
> -Michael *Jackson, At Home in the World*

A conclusion is a form of memory-tracing, a mental catalogue of everything that has happened, everything that has preceded the present moment. It's the end-point on the map that I've drawn—a map made of paths that cross prairies and oceans, occupations and abandonments, people and ghosts, time and memory, images and words. None of these worlds are hard and fast, my photos and writings have not always been able to anchor them in time. These spaces and their remaining inhabitants (if any) continue to change shape, moving from *lives-living* to *lives-once-lived.* This project represents only a sliver of ethnographic time and space, one view of abandoned Plains and isolated islands.

Throughout my research and writing, I have endeavoured to write these

places into being, to inscribe their spatio-historic accumulation into an ethnography. This project is not about illuminating hidden meanings; nor is it an expert treatise on the political and economic realities in North America's marginal spaces. Simply, it is a rough guide to how we—as both ethnographers and humans—might begin to examine our surroundings and open up our thoughts to alternate ways of seeing and moving through space, place, history and memory. This is not to say that my research has not been rigourous, or that I have not carefully considered the significance of how these spaces and their occupants live, die and fade away along the periphery of geography and geographic imaginations. In my dissertation, I want only to share my collected memories and experiences as a means of presenting a pause for reflection, a momentary shift in the focus of our post/super/modern existence.

...

Aside from providing a brief summary and a few final reflections on my project, I'd also like to use this conclusion as a place to address the various loose ends that have accumulated throughout the research and writing-up of my dissertation, to suggest future avenues of inquiry and to answer specific questions and concerns that were raised by my committee during the oral thesis defence. These issues primarily revolve around the role of gender in my dissertation, the concrete details of my results/findings, the importance of my contributions to social science research (with specific attention to its advancement of visual anthropology), the methodological limits of psychoethnography and the presence and absence of foundational anthropological literature in my work. Below, I have done my best to address these concerns, beginning with the role of gender in psychoethnography and the voice of women in my project.

Gender is one of the ghosts that has followed me throughout this project. As a man, I approach the study of culture from a distinct and biologically bounded position—one from which I have endeavoured to maintain a sensitive and inclusive view of women that seeks a gender-neutral engagement with space and place wherever possible. That being said, many of my ethnographic encounters were made available to me solely because of my gender; many of the people and places that I interacted with on a daily basis were conceived of as male. From my place on an upturned lobster crate amongst the predominantly male clientele of the fishing shed/barroom in Grand Bruit, to the relative comfort I felt entering the home of a rough-and-tumble ex-con in Wyoming, there were many experiences and conversations that would have been either off-limits or uncomfortable had I been a female anthropologist. I am certainly aware of this issue and I recognize that my ethnographic perspective develops out of my particular positionality, a position that is, in some ways, based on my gender. Similarly, my perspective and experience of the field would have been drastically

altered if I were of another race, ethnicity, body-shape, age or if I'd had a physical or mental disability. And while these divergent perspectives are all important points of consideration, ultimately, I can only approach my research from my particular position. With this thought in mind, I would be interested to see how a similar project that used psychoethnography as its primary methodology would differ if it was undertaken by a non-white, non-male, non-(relatively)young social scientist from another discipline. A methodological experiment such as this might prove to be an excellent basis for a collection of essays on how perspective and positionality influence social research; how would the experiences of cultural space change when departing from a common point but engaging with the environment from vastly divergent positions? How might this project have been changed if I had been a woman, an African-American, if I had been 6' 8" and 250 pounds, if I was blind or deaf? Of course I cannot answer these questions, but it would be fascinating to see the High Plains ghost towns and the Atlantic islands from my work re-interpreted from these variant positions.

As a well-funded, white male anthropologist moving through a North American cultural landscape, I am aware that I maintain a relative ease of travel and interaction with local people in what Domosh and Seager (2001:113) have described as the ability to "overcome the friction of distance". The level to which this "friction" is experienced is based on a complex suite of variables and depends primarily on the unique positionality of the individual researcher. That being said, many of the spaces that I navigated during my fieldwork contained a fair amount of friction that could have been lessened if I had approached my subjects from another position. For example, had I been a dyed-in-the-wool rancher from Wyoming, I imagine that I would have experienced a lot less friction in my interactions with cowboys, farmers and roadside diner staff than I did as what was often read as a city-slicker, academic. While my position is one of the least contested, it by no means functions as an all-access pass to the people, places and things of the ghost towns and islands of my fieldwork; there is always some form of resistance that must be negotiated.

I also recognize that space is often gendered and that many of the locations where I conducted my fieldwork were often understood as masculine spaces (ranches, roadside trucker bars, fishing sheds, lobster boats; even cars—the basis of all of my travels on the Plains—have historically been portrayed as primarily masculine conveyances [see Spain 1992]), but I also made a concerted effort to engage with women in spaces that were viewed locally as feminine (kitchens at meal time, living rooms during afternoon tea, shopping trips). In the local context, the ethnographer must always be aware of how spaces are gendered and do his or her best to try and successfully navigate them in a way that provides the most detail and breadth of experience.

In a ghost town, where no one of *any* gender remains, the notion of gendered space takes on a new dimension. In these locations, all spaces are gendered only through the eyes of the observer—without a living human narrative, the impression conveyed by these places with regard to gender are solely based in personal positionality and the individual reading of a given space. It is possible that what appears initially as a masculine space to me, may convey a sense of femininity to another person encountering the same space. Still, the texts that rise up out of abandoned moth-eaten dresses in a broken armoire in North Dakota cannot help but read as gendered ghosts, just as the man's boots left to rot in the front hall of an empty house in Saskatchewan seem haunted by certain gendered histories.

The writing on my childhood home that begins this dissertation also reflects a specifically gendered space where the voices of my mother and sisters are largely absent; this is an omission that I intend to rectify in future work on this topic, but the fact remains that—at the time of my fieldwork—my father was the only person that I interacted with at the farm. My mother and sisters had neither the time nor the inclination to visit the farm and discuss its significance with me. I miss their voices in this work and I believe that their input about this project is of equal importance to that my father and me. One day I'm sure they'll tell me their own stories.

My goal here has not been to write a masculine Kerouacian road-tale (although, at times, I admit that it may read that way), but rather to outline my experiences of becoming an anthropologist, of finding my footing in the study of culture and of understanding how to write a place into being. What some may interpret as the classic tale of man-alone-on-a-journey-of-self-discovery is—at least as I have intended it—the story of a journey that unfolded on its own, unrolling in front of me and being written through unplanned movements and happenstance encounters. In many ways, my dissertation is a story of travel, movement and solitude, but this is not what I have intended as the primary focus. What some may read as a heroic adventure story is more of a by-product of a subject and methodology that centres around isolation and unpredictability. I acknowledge this interpretation of my work and I understand that there are certainly oversights and omissions that should (and will) be addressed in future writings, but I can only write the (partial) truths that I have known and the things that I have seen, touched, smelled, heard and tasted. In the end, the way that I engage with my research is predicated directly on my inescapable positionality, including my gender. And with this in mind, I apologize for my missteps and ask for patience as I continue to follow the twisted and subjective road of ethnographic research.

With regard to the end results of this project, one of my key findings was

that my experimental methodology—psychoethnography—proved to be very useful in yielding new ethnographic understandings of space, place, people and objects, insights that would likely not have been available had I pursued a more premeditated mode of ethnographic inquiry. What I find most engaging about this form of ethnography is that with the change of one minor aspect of my journey (a different road traversed, a night spent in a different town, a vehicle break-down, doing fieldwork at another time of year, etc.) the outcome would have been totally different—the spaces that I visited, the people I spoke with and the photographs that I shot would have produced a document quite dissimilar to my current dissertation. This practice forms itself around a kind of butterfly-effect or chaos theory of social research wherein one small detail can send the research in a completely new direction, and because there has been no predetermined trajectory, the project is free to wander and follow the endless echoes of happenstance. I believe that psychoethnography holds an almost unlimited number of possibilities and opportunities for further examination.

Even with all of the potential that psychoethnography offers social science research, there are still limitations to its applicability. For example, psychoethnography would not be overly useful in any research project that required a specific set of data or one in which a set timeline and/or geographic region was integral to the study. Similarly, this practice would be difficult to incorporate into a project that required the researcher to meet with interviewees at specific times and places along a predetermined route. The practice of psychoethnography also runs the risk of obscuring a certain level of cultural depth in specific spaces. The randomized movements and organic flows of on-the-spot interviews and ethnographic drifting can sometimes result in surface level readings of places and people, with the possibility of ignoring key details in an attempt to continue to along an unplanned, generative line of inquiry. One must carefully choose the project to which he or she will apply this practice—it is not for everyone (perhaps not even most) but for those whose projects fit the aims of psychoethnography, I believe that it is a viable and exciting way of approaching social research.

One of the other key findings of my research has been an understanding of how spaces and places convey their accumulated history and narrative through affect, sense of place and materiality. Here, I found that the spaces of abandonment and isolation that I encountered during my fieldwork, upon careful reflection, soon became populated with texts, narratives and affects. The cultural resonance of these spaces forms a complex suite of information about a location and its absent (and, in some cases, present) populations through its material (and human) remainders. Stories of the lives once live became clear to me as I sifted through the virtual and physical layers of accumulated time, memory and

landscape, uncovering narratives among the various strata of objects and spaces. Each deserted street, abandoned house or cast-off trinket became the starting point of a history of these places and their one-time lives.

There is very little written history of these spaces, and for that reason, one of the goals of this project was to attempt to cobble together a kind of micro-history of these largely unwritten places. Without a historical record to guide me, I was left to construct the lives-once-lived among the fallen-down buildings and disused streets of the High Plains. Every so often I would get a glimpse into the stories of these places through the voices of the few who had remained, shreds of time and memory that helped me to stitch together an image of these places, always with raw edges, lost beginnings and dangling threads, but never without a story.

One of the most common narratives that emerged from my discussions with the inhabitants of these depopulated spaces centred around the end of the world and the inevitable collapse of society. Many of the people that I encountered told me stories of biblical rapture, social decay, moral panic and the proliferation of government greed and corruption. For many of these people, their existence in these spaces was written as a warning and they often saw themselves as removed from the modern flows time and space. These people valued their isolation as a form of self-preservation, viewing themselves as the last remnants of a dying way of life—which, in many cases, is exactly how I understood them. The majority of these people spoke to me as though the collapse of their town was inevitable; they talked about their home-place as if revitalization was impossible and the powers that be (globalization, agri-business, local and national economies) were slowly erasing the lives they had known for decades. Part memorial and part cautionary tale, the stories of these people and their places became ghost stories told on the margins of everyday life.

The role of the author in these abandoned texts became a key focus in unpacking my research findings, wherein I asked how perspective changes the ethnographic understanding of authorial intent. Because these places most often appeared without their authors (the people who once occupied them), I was left to my own devices to try and patch together a reading of these spaces, an endeavour that I found equally challenging and rewarding. To be able to draw out a story from the accumulation of left-behind places and things presented me with a new and exciting way to approach the interpretation of culture, while at the same time, the holes and tears that began to emerge as I dug deeper into the cultural fabric of these spaces often left me in the presence of silences that I found rather eerie; their absence haunted my readings. Here, Barthes (1977) notion of the "death of the author" requires a much more literal reading.

Within my analysis of abandoned and isolated spaces, a consideration of the

affective depth of space and place informed how my findings might be transformed into texts and the ways in which the authors of these texts could become more or less present. In some locations, the layers of accumulated meaning seemed almost endlessly deep, while in other spaces only fleeting bits and pieces of lives-once-lived remained on the surface. Sometimes I would spend entire days in one building, picking through the piled-deep ephemera of someone's old life or chatting with retired farmers beside the disused highways of southern Saskatchewan, but just as often I would find only wisps of house foundations and town names on maps without any real-world counterpart. Some days there would be nothing, only a series of straight dirt roads and conversations with myself.

In my engagements with these spaces, the decision to move on is not one that I ever made consciously; as odd as it may sound, it is almost as if the space somehow let me know that it had given up all of the secrets that it was willing to divulge. Sometimes I saw ten towns in one day, other times I didn't come across one for days. This condition is a direct result of both my methodology and my subject matter.

In terms of my project's contribution to anthropology and the social sciences, I believe that this dissertation provides new methods and points of inquiry that are useful for rethinking ethnographic concepts of space and place as well as the practice of fieldwork. Key among these contributions is the development of psychoethnography, a methodology that I see as being applicable to a number of other disciplines including cultural geography, sociology and psychology. This mode of engagement offers a fluid, organic approach to the study of people, places and things by presenting a new method of data collection and interaction that foregrounds the already-present element of happenstance in social research. While this potential remains untested beyond the scope of ethnography, I firmly believe that there are a myriad of possibilities for the implementation of psychoethnography outside of anthropology. For example, how could a psychologist understand a patient through an unmapped navigation of personal landscapes/geographies (both literal and figurative)? How might happenstance be used to develop new approaches to environmental sociology? How could the foregrounding of chance encounters work to help analyse spatial relationships in the context of human geography? To my mind, psychoethnography is an easily translatable methodology that, if used in the right setting, holds a number of interesting and potentially useful approaches to social research.

Aside from its methodology, the subject matter of this project also illuminates unique and under-represented spaces within the North American cultural landscape. The island communities of Grand Bruit and Matinicus and the

ghost towns of the High Plains represent marginal spaces that have, until now, received little attention in social science literature. By focusing my ethnographic lens on these spaces, it has been my goal to examine the margins of North American culture, asking questions about how these spaces become peripheral and how issues of globalization, shifting economies and changing demographics work to create and maintain marginal spaces. This project focuses on a critique of a cultural landscape that has yet to be fully developed in social research. I believe that an examination such as mine offers an excellent starting point for the further analysis of ghost towns and isolated islands as case studies for how peripheral spaces can be interpreted as narrative texts as well as how these locations might function as microcosms of larger, globally significant issues. This work also contributes to current discussions of cultural history and heritage preservation by questioning how spaces are or are not conceived of as historically valuable. Here, I am interested in continuing to extend the notion of historical relevance in the social sciences to modern ruins, marginal cultural landscapes and to the study of contemporary depopulation and abandonment.

In a more specifically anthropological light, this project contributes to the realm of visual anthropology by presenting a visual narrative of abandonment and isolation, in essence, telling the story of these spaces through images. Rather than simply documenting the spaces, I have endeavoured to inscribe a sense of space into images in an attempt to write a place into being through both language and photography. Additionally, I was interested in understanding how these spaces—both depopulated and completely abandoned—portrayed themselves to the rest of the world. Through my photography, I wanted to understand how ghost towns and islands could speak to the ethnographer through their visual dimension because this is often all that remains. Here, I see my contribution to visual anthropology as the development of a way of interviewing spaces through photography.

This dissertation may appear to some readers as a work that side-steps certain canonical texts within the discipline. This is a unique project within anthropology and as such it often focuses more on the development of novel theories and practices and less on an analysis of existing literature. I am certainly aware of this issue and I intend to turn my attention to the absent ethnographic literature in my upcoming postdoctoral work. In the future, I hope to expand the project's scope by incorporating more anthropological theory into my analysis and exploring further ethnographic methodologies that may be useful in tying up some of psychoethnography's loose ends. I feel that now that I have established the basic outline for psychoethnography and an anthropology of ghost towns and islands, I can continue to explore some of the specifically anthropological aspects of the project.

This project is only the beginning, it is the record of a journey along a very bumpy road with many blind alleys, potholes and hairpin curves. I have made mistakes along the way and I have tried to correct them. I have also learned how to be an anthropologist. Most importantly, I hope to have illuminated some of the people, places and things that exist at the edges of our everyday cultural landscapes. I have tried to re-imagine a small section of our world, to write a few of its ghosts into being in the hope of changing the way that we see things in the margins of our ever-flattening world.

...

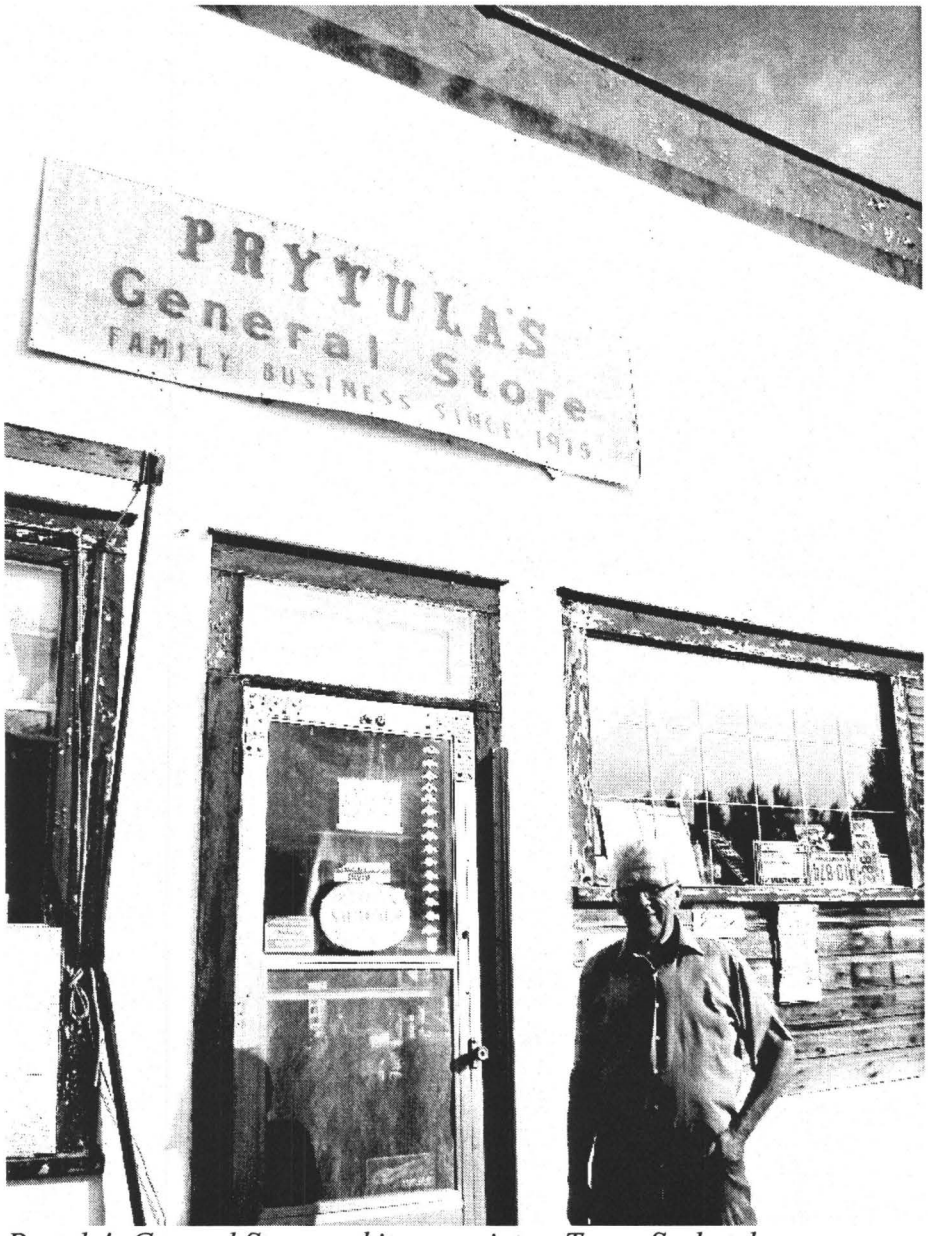
A cool, wind-blown day in Crystal Springs, Saskatchewan and I'm sitting in another barroom beside a jar of pickled eggs, floating lazily in their milky yellow brine. On my other side, a retired RCMP officer drunkenly questions me about my motivations for wanting to record the conversations I'm having with him and his sister-in-law behind the bar. A few people filter in and out, tell some stories, drink a beer and leave; all the while he's drinking white rum and asking me what I'm doing, as though I were some kind of spy. He's another point on the map, another stop along writing these fragments into being. The sister-in-law tells me that I should visit the general store in Tway, about twenty minutes down the road; she tells me that I won't believe how much stuff the owner has packed in there. Intrigued, I pay for my drink and head over to Tway (pop. 4).

A miniature universe pours over me as I enter Prytula's General Store; I'm drowning in images of objects, accumulations beyond anything I've ever seen. It's as though the dreamworld of temporal and material accumulation that I'd been hunting for three years had finally made itself known—stories and times made into artefacts. Piles, stacks, boxes and display cases reach to the top of the twelve-foot ceilings, towers made out of a hundred years of objects. Shiny new cowboy boots (size 7 ½) from the 1930s rest calmly against unboxed transistor radios from the 1970s; 1950s cookbooks share shelf space with record albums from the late 1980s. Layer upon layer of things with only narrow paths in between. The web of objects seems to suck up the pale sunlight that trickles in through dusty windows, as though this place were some kind of prairie black-hole where not even light escapes. This was not a metaphoric or theoretical accumulation of time and materiality, it was the physical manifestation of how history—in this case, a material history—builds-up in space. All the times of this store were available for excavation, all layers could be exposed and read aloud.

From the back of the building I hear a warm, gently Eastern European voice welcome me to the store, a sound that's moving somewhere just below the wash of Sunday afternoon radio. And before long he's touring me through his accumulated dreamworld, a weird forest of things, hanging, balancing and dangling in some kind of strange mercantile time capsule. He pulls out a pair of

boots that have never been purchased, brand-new, in-the-box all the way from Joey Smallwood's boot factory in Newfoundland, they're one of a hundred-thousand layers of things. I spend the rest of the afternoon with the storekeeper, talking and shooting photos. He tells me all about the town of Tway and its four remaining residents; he shows me a photo album filled with newspaper clippings that make up the narrative of his over fifty years of running this little shop. Here, I've come face-to-face with the tactile version of my project, the folk narrative of layered time in space.

The general store in Tway is kind of the conclusion to my project in itself. This store houses a wild menagerie of abandoned things in an isolated space at the end of an impossibly rough gravel road. My doppelganger doesn't live on Vinalhaven, he lives in Tway, collecting and guarding the layers of time, cataloguing the dreamworlds that have long since passed into faded remembrance; he's the keeper of more than a store, he's the curator of times gone missing in the night. In the white light of Saskatchewan's October afternoon, I wave good-bye to my parallel self. And this is how I see my dissertation, as a tour through a museum of abandoned and isolated people, places and things where I pick out particles of other times and places, blow the dust off and share them with anyone who is willing to listen. And now I've done this to myself, I'm haunted by the hauntings, pursued by memories of abandonment, trapped in a world that slowly doesn't exist. Slowly, breathing in a cold wind, further out on the ocean, into the prairie.



Prytula's General Store and its proprietor, Tway, Saskatchewan

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