

NEAR REAL TIME

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From: alice angus

To: lil angus

Uncle Robin was telling me on the phone that he remembers taking the week long steamer to Scotland and how exciting it was to finally be able to fly, which took twelve to sixteen hours then. Now it takes about four and a half – all in one lifetime. Apparently the speed of the trains hasn't changed at all.



In the winter of 2001 I travelled across Canada for five weeks to try to understand how perceptions of geography are changing and to meet with artists and see my Scottish Canadian family in Nova Scotia. Uncle Robin's visits to Scotland many years ago had conjured a mysterious vision of Canada. I had been to Canada several times but I had always flown, crisscrossing its expanses of prairie, towns, cities, farmland, black frozen rock, wilderness, and of course, the Rockies. Never having gone from place to place by land, I wanted to experience it from the ground, travelling against the historic flow, west to east by railroad.



From Vancouver's Pacific Central Station I took the railroad east to Winnipeg. The Canadian trains are behemoths and shattered my British conception of 'train'; they cruise with a geological certainty like the world turning and the metal groans as they climb the mountains. The Transcontinental has a pink Formica 1950s dining room with brass up lighters and birds etched into sandblasted glass partitions. It has a bar and lounge with a glass ceilinged 'salon panoramique' perched on the carriage roof. The lounge is straight out of Flash Gordon, all stainless steel and blue curves, perspex and chrome. For someone used to the suburban trains of England and Scotland, these trains retain the (fading) cinematic glamour of Hitchcock movies and those gritty train dramas of the 1960s and 1970s.

Climbing from Vancouver up through the Rockies the train then swoops down over the prairies and on to Winnipeg halfway across the continent, eventually arriving in Toronto. But, wrapped in the magnificent vision of the trains, is the knowledge that the coming of the railroad tore through history and ruptured time.



© Antonia Hirsch 2000

The development of the railway in Europe and North America synchronised clocks and regulated the rhythm of lives with the introduction of Standard Time zones. Places 'gained' and 'lost' time in the process. Winnipeg, for instance, was 29 minutes 'behind' Standard time. Antonia Hirsch's film *Recovery*, shot on December 2nd 2000, 'reclaims' the 29 minutes lost when at 10.31 am on December 2nd 1883 local Winnipeg time was changed to the new Standard Time and the chronometer was moved ahead by 29 minutes.¹ The film shows a stationary view of 29 continuous and uneventful minutes in Winnipeg's rail yard. Its absurd attempt to 'recover time' reveals that technologies for measuring time leave time itself untouched. *Recovery* is an attempt by someone whose perception is informed by living in Vancouver, on the western end of Canada's 'Highway of Steel', to interpret the bureaucratic, economic and geographic role of time.² Alongside the railway, the invention of the telegraph, cinema and rationalisation of the postal service transported information with greater speed than ever before. For the first time many places became connected and the mobility of populations and transience of movement began to disrupt local identity and change the way people thought and felt about their time and sense of place.

As the space between the points – the traditional travelling space – was destroyed, those points moved into each other's immediate vicinity, one might say that they collided. They lost their old sense of local identity, formerly determined by the spaces between them.³

In *The Story and the Fable* Scottish writer Edwin Muir relates his experience of moving from the rural Island of Orkney to Glasgow in 1901 at the age of fourteen. He felt a profound impact

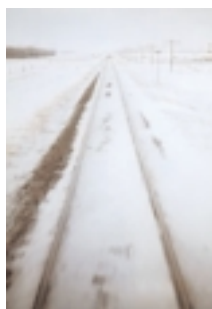
travelling a few hundred miles out of Orkney (which in 1901 was relatively free of the influences of industrialisation) into the height of Glasgow's industrial age.

I was born before the industrial revolution, and am now about two hundred years old. But I have skipped a hundred and fifty years of them. I was really born in 1737, and till I was fourteen no time accidents happened to me. Then in 1751 I set out from Orkney to Glasgow. When I arrived I found that it was not 1751 but 1901, and that a hundred and fifty years had been burned up in my two days journey.⁴

In Britain the new railway more or less linked existing communities. Conversely the Canadian railway was instrumental in the creation of communities, cities, farmland and industry. Heading out from the east it mapped lands in the west unknown to the new immigrants: "Half a continent, largely unexplored, waited beyond Winnipeg when the CPR began to lay tracks."⁵ The new railroad opened up the land for industry, agriculture and trade. It drew a line from coast to coast, an indelible emblem of the conquest of nature and a galvanising force in the creation of the new nation. From the late 19th century the Canadian Pacific Railway company promoted travel, immigration and settlement both at home and abroad. Early posters feature blissful images of farmland and mountains proclaiming "Canada The New Homeland". The CPR also pioneered another technology collapsing time and space – cinema. They produced some of the earliest examples of Canadian film: promotional shorts to attract immigrants. In many of their films;

There is no reference to native people – it's just empty land. The implication is that they are long banished." (or) native people are represented as passive, friendly and harmless. In either case, the CPR was "making a powerful argument that there are no real impediments to coming here."⁶

For many early European immigrants these visions might have been their only, or at least the dominant, knowledge of Canada's social and physical geography. The cinema, railway track, carriage window and telegraph all cut back and forth through time, marking and framing the world in new ways.



Crossing the prairies at night, light from the carriage windows floats across the snow and makes it liquid, as though we are drifting over a calm midnight sea. The train's green and red lights reflect off its steel skin as it snakes into the darkness following the pool of its headlights. We pick up speed; train spotters, railway enthusiasts, older people, tour groups, tourists, people afraid of flying, a train driver going home: all heading east. Watching the track out of the last rail car – thousands of miles, thousands of tonnes of wood and metal cutting across a continent is a mere line in the snow, the trace of an idea – it reminded me of Ursula le Guin's opening to *The Dispossessed*:

It was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared; an adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of a boundary. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. Like all walls it was ambiguous, two faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.⁷

Two days out from Vancouver, I detrained from The Canadian in Winnipeg and took the Northern Spirit to Churchill.

My train rolled out of the night into a dawn blizzard, a cloud of powdered snow. I felt cut loose from time travelling on a voyage through the forest, watching the trees shrink as we headed into the tundra. Emerging from above the tree line after two days, I tried to imagine from within the hot, parched interior how cold it would be outside, but already it was the end of the line. We spilled out of the train onto the platform of Churchill Station and into a bitter wind.

This was my New Year arrival in the port town at the edge of Hudson Bay, where the railroad greets the sea. Churchill is where the Boreal Forest peters out and the tundra begins its thousand mile journey to the Arctic Ocean. Only accessible from the South of Canada by train or plane, Churchill's massive grain stores and port lie dormant for several months of the year, petrified in ice. The silent port is a forlorn sight, reminding me of the structures on the Clyde that now sit abandoned and of the poverty the docks' closures brought. Here however, industry is only hindered by ice for several months a year while the polar bears who have waited hungrily for the freeze set out to sea once more. So frozen is the river and port, so solid the wind sculpted snowdrifts at the doors of the workers quarters, that it was impossible for me to imagine this sleep could end.

From Churchill I set out for the Centre For Northern Studies which sits alone on the wind-polished tundra. The sun rises and sets over a horizon that has the same flatness in all directions: it bestowed on me an acute awareness of the passing of time; the cycle of night and day. I became aware of the movement of the Earth through the clarity of the night sky, easily discerning the change in the stars' positions as time passed.⁸

It is dry. Snowdrifts freeze into drums, breath turns to ice in your nose and crystals form on eyelashes. Alone in the dawn the cold parched air and open space are daunting, unfamiliar, destabilising. I drifted on the edge of vertigo. I wanted to walk, but where to? Used to having distinct directions to walk in – up that hill, along that valley or over that ridge – here I would be casting myself adrift with no landmarks for my inexperienced eye to recognise. So I remained tethered, never leaving sight of the centre.

Blowing Snow
Temperature: -20.3C
Wind Speed: NW 37.1 kmh/h
Windchill 1992W/m2 (-42.7C)

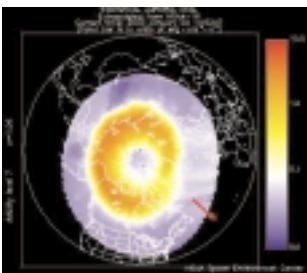
I found myself early one morning on the tundra in a windchill somewhere below -40C in the early morning, face to the dawn sky. As a child in Scotland I had only ever seen the Aurora Borealis through chance glimpses at the sky. For more information my only sources were books which, although new, contained information already years out of date. In Churchill I discovered that it is now possible to predict the arrival of the Aurora. Numerous websites present 'Near Real Time' satellite data mapped onto diagrams of the globe which give a visual representation of the Aurora. The combination of advances in geographic sciences and the internet mediate between us and something invisible to our human senses, making the invisible visible.

Some nights the Aurora are so faint that it is easy to imagine you have just conjured them in your imagination and tossed them into the deep night sky.

Computers and the internet are the latest in a long line of technologies (like the railroad) which affect our experience of the territories we inhabit and how our concepts of identity are constructed and defined. Just as the railroad brought a standardisation of the perception of time

with it, so the accessibility of scientific data can disrupt the lived experience of geography through the technologies that also make this information accessible. It can reveal the connectedness of where I am, what I do and the effects of my activity on the planet, but ultimately it is no more than a representation of phenomena observed by others for their own ends. It does not, as the railroad does, bring me nearer to the experience of it, but it does allow me a window onto how it affects my world in a way that going to the place would not.

Real geographies are being changed through virtual communications while virtual geographies are being invented over the net which have little or no resemblance to the geography of reality.⁹



courtesy of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Space Environmental Centre

Network and wireless technologies are changing the boundaries of communication but they are still contingent and their 'truth' is governed by the way that information is mediated, its provenance, ownership and value. It is not just the scientific data we have access to, but the way it is mediated to a broader public that affects our perceptions of geography. Even traditional maps are models of real spaces imagined and filtered through the cultural and social background of the cartographer.

Actual travel can change our sense of identity and relationship to the world yet these new technologies allow us vicarious journeys through time but not space. The real use of such online journeys to us may lie in how we learn to blend phenomenological and mediated experience – offering an understanding of ideas outside our lived experience and broadening the sources of knowledge available to us.

My mornings are frequently greeted by *Good Morning Canada* a breakfast TV show broadcast across across the continent; cooking, teenage manners and news. It has become a thread of continuity in my journey.

* * *

Joyce Majiski, a biologist, artist and wilderness guide in Canada's north west Yukon territory, is concerned with ideas of truth and fantasy – wondering how people remember and convey the experience of wilderness after they leave; how they make it part of their daily lives. I look at the world map through the lens of Scotland and my cultural conception of 'North'. Churchill isn't very far 'up', it is as far as the north coast of Scotland, but for many people most of Canada is an indefinable North of ubiquitous cold and ice.

Throughout the history of polar exploration the North has often been portrayed, in paintings and latterly photographs, as a landscape of sublime desolation. Such images of emptiness and absence of life were important in valorising early explorers and often ignored the fact that aboriginal peoples had lived out their domestic lives within culturally rich civilisations for more than four thousand years before the first Explorers arrived. The history of early polar 'exploration' turned on a Eurocentric experience of travel and the building of its empires and commerce.

In recent decades local voices have been raised to challenge such dominant sources of knowledge about geography by sharing local knowledge. A contemporary example is Igloodik Isuma Productions, Canada's first Inuit peoples' independent production company, which has a 20-year history of using contemporary media art to serve community cultural and political needs and present these issues to a wider population. Based in the northern town of Igloodik, their

projects include films (such as *Atanajurat*; *The Fast Runner*) television programmes and innovative webcasts in the language Inuktitut. Zacharias Kunuk, producer-director, talks about the importance of artists' interpretation of place and culture through their contemporary life experience: In our time we have new technologies so it's our job to adapt digital filmmaking to continue our elders' tradition of passing on information to future Inuit from one generation to the next. It's a bonus when the rest of the world sees our work and appreciates our Inuit point of view.¹⁰

Isuma Productions work expanded not just my vision of Canada's North its cultures, landscapes and its people but my understanding of the relationship of language to geography. Their work communicates in a way that has value to people near and far and so it reassesses notions of 'centre' and provides a platform for physically distant or dispersed voices:

1999 marked a major event for the Inuit in Canada. In April of that year, Nunavut ("Our Land") (formerly part of the North West Territories) became a geographic and political entity - effectively redrawing the map of the country. It seems justified that Canadians will turn to the North more than they have before, in an attempt to understand what, for the most part, they've never seen or experienced. Arnait Video Productions (The Women's Video Workshop of Igloodik) intends to be among the voices heard in Canada and elsewhere while attention is turned toward the Arctic."



On my penultimate day in the tundra the snow blushed pink in the dawn light. I went into Churchill where Starman (nickname of the astronomer Roger Woloshyn) offered to guide me onto the pack ice of Hudson Bay. Certain of my inability to navigate by wind and snowdrift I accepted this offer of celestial navigation. Ice and snow are transparent and colour is created by the refraction and reflection of light rather than the absorption. Consequently the colour is transient, changing as you or it moves.

After only a short time on the ocean of ice that had nothing familiar for me to fix my eye upon, I had a sense of vertigo as though I was in a place with no topology, no history marked in the landscape, no evident signs of the people who inhabit the territory. Without a connection to the people and place, to a culture and history I was as lost on the ice as if I had no guide. It was all foreign to me but, more crucially, I realised that I was foreign to it.

From: alice angus

To: lil angus

I have just spoken to Uncle Robin. They are driving to Halifax from Annapolis (200 miles away) and we are spending the day together.



Sundogs followed the sunrise, reflections of the sun in ice crystals creating three 'suns', a glorious indication of bitter cold on the I day boarded a twin engined plane, which circled above Hudson Bay and headed south to Winnipeg. Picking up the Transcontinental again, I headed East to find Uncle Robin and my family in Halifax.

There's a small stick of pink on the sky above the distant horizon, evidence of a sunrise far away, someone's day has begun. We roll over the edge of the world and into morning.

From: joyce majiski

To: alice angus

When I saw the park was near Loch Lomond... I didn't know whether to laugh or not. We always sing 'you take the high road' and it makes me think that Loch Lomond is a fictional place – to hear it really exists is incredible. Beautiful light this morning. We have been having great northern lights – must be some wild sun spot activity out there.

From: alice angus

To: joyce majiski

I visited the Space Weather website last week and there had just been a large sun spot explosion.

From: joyce majiski

To: alice angus

Imagine you going to investigate sun spot activity on the web... here I just check the sky...

AuroraWatch Alert, Sun 8AM:

posted Sun 8/9/2002 08:01 by AuroraWatch Monitor

VERY HIGH local activity, possible ongoing geomagnetic storm.

This is an automatic message

* * * * *

NOTES

1. Hirsch, Antonia, *Recovery*, 29 mins, 16mm film, Canada, 2000.
2. Parfit, Michael, "Canada's Highway of Steel" in *National Geographic* vol 186, no. 6, 1984.
3. Schievelbusch Wolfgang, *The Railway Journey; the Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, University of California Press, 1987.
4. Muir, Edwin, *The Story and the Fable*, quoted in the preface to *Scottish Journey*, Mainstream, London 1999.
5. Parfit, Michael, "Canada's Highway of Steel" in *National Geographic* vol 186, no. 6, 1984
6. McMaster, Geoff, *New Book Takes Stock of Canadian Film*, www.expressnews.ualberta.ca, April 2002
7. Le Guin, Ursula, *The Dispossessed*, Grafton Books, London 1975.
8. The Churchill Northern Studies Centre is an independent, non profit research institute with a mandate to facilitate research and education in the Churchill region.
9. Batty, Michael, "Virtual Geographies" published in *Futures*, vol. 29, nos. 4/5, 1997.
10. Kunuk, Zacharias from the Igloodik Isuma Productions website 2002 on www.isuma.ca
11. Añait Video Productions webpage, 2002, on www.isuma.ca/about_us/amañait/index.html
12. Aurora Watch Alert, from Aurora Watch UK, the University of York, UK.

IMAGE CREDITS

Film still © Antonia Hirsch, from *Recovery*, 29 mins, 16mm film, Canada, 2000.

Image extrapolated from measurements taken by the NOAA POES (Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental) Satellite. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Space Environmental Centre website.

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Alice Angus is a writer, artist and curator. She is Co-Director of Proboscis.

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