
No stranger to the semiotics of nuclear landscapes, Peter C. van Wyck is also author of Signs of Danger: Waste, Trauma and Nuclear Threat (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), which looks at attempts to plan for nuclear waste storage in the American West tens of thousands of years into the future. With The Highway of the Atom, winner of the 2011 Gertrude J. Robinson Book Prize awarded by the Canadian Communication Association, van Wyck moves closer to home, but to a situation no less thorny and no less complicated—the story of the relationship between the Sahtu Dene of Great Bear Lake and the radium and uranium ore mining operations that took place there in the twentieth century.

In the tradition of Harold Innis, van Wyck looks at how Empire, transportation routes, and lines of communication are produced in relationship to “staples.” Whereas Innis was concerned with the fur trade, van Wyck traverses the paths of the twentieth-century staples of radium and uranium. Through this investigation, van Wyck discovers that the relationship between the interior and the hinterlands is a loop that repeats throughout Canada’s history—why create a new path when one has already been worn?

Highway follows uranium from the mines of Great Bear Lake to Port Hope, Ontario, then to the main processing centres of the Manhattan Project in the United States: Los Alamos, New Mexico; Hanford, Washington; Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The story of the emergence of the Atomic Age has been told from many angles, but Canada’s place in the nexus of atomic modernity has often been circumvented. By drawing a roadmap of the uranium route in The Highway of the Atom, van Wyck makes an important intervention in and contribution to literature about the Atomic Age and to Canadian history. Highway contributes to the fields of communication studies, Canadian history, memory studies, ecological studies, and the study of disaster (the last two categories sadly becoming increasingly linked). Van Wyck’s text is also an engagement with what he calls “ethical theory.”

With Innis’ notebooks tucked under his arm, the author calls for a “renewed engagement with place” (p. 7). At times, however, van Wyck’s route can be difficult to trace—radiation and memory refuse to stay put. Even more, the Highway seems to be destroying itself through disease, death, indifference, and incommunicability at every turn. Social memory, already difficult to maintain, is complicated by the lack of information that those most affected by the radioactive mining operations were given from the start. The white miners and the Dene community were not trained or made aware “[about] the dangers of the materials they were handling, the radon they were inhaling, or the wastes that were strewn about at the mine and at other points along the Highway of the Atom” (p. 39).

Strikingly, as more information came to light that connected the Canadian mines to the Manhattan Project, the Dene began to see themselves as both accomplices and victims to the horrors of the Atomic Age. Even though they were
completely unaware that the uranium dug out from their landscape would be used for the development of atomic bombs, in 1998, on the anniversary of the bombings of Japan, a delegation of ten Dene went to Hiroshima to formally apologize to Japanese and Korean survivors. Through this example, van Wyck illustrates that memory has an ethics.

Yet, back at home the Dene still struggled for answers to what exactly had decimated their community and destroyed their land. They were left with the impossible task of writing “the history of their exclusion using the very documents that excluded them” (p. 40). After years of calling for an explanation, acknowledgement, and compensation, the Canadian government finally agreed to a “fact-finding” mission, which came to be known as the Canada-Délina Uranium Table (CDUT). After the five-year inter-jurisdictional investigation concluded in 2004, the Dene were little better off than when they had started. Most egregious, was the fact that the person in charge of the study, Walter Keyes, was a prominent figure in pro-nuclear and anti-regulation circles, hardly an unbiased choice for a fair assessment of the effects of the mine. The story of the mine at Port Radium and the suffering of the Dene has mostly fallen on deaf ears due to the sheer lack of interest from the south. This is a story of how communication breaks down, from the centre to the margins, from the past to the present. The Canadian government simply did not inform the Dene of their operations in the region or of the effects of radiation, and this initial lack of communication created a lasting silence that stretched not only geographically, but also temporally.

There is a point in the narrative where van Wyck stands on an unusual atomic ruin, an abandoned tennis court paved with uranium mine tailings; here we can see the risk of incommunicability from the past to the present coming into full view. Tennis, of course, is a game of communication. If there is no back and forth, no serve and volley, no calling out and settling of scores, the game does not exist. Tennis is also a game where the farther out your shot lands, the harder it is for the other player to return; it is a game played from the centre to the margins and back again.

The Innisian theme of the stamp is appropriate here, even after the staples of radium and uranium ore have been removed, their effects on the route continue to be experienced long after. The radioactive stamp can be seen and felt through ruins, such as the tennis court, which sets van Wyck’s Geiger counter ticking, but more profoundly, the stamp is demonstrated through the cancers, stories, addictions, and depressions experienced by the Dene. Without a community to remember the radioactive transmissions, their effects will continue, and the Geiger counters will still tick, but these communications will lack social content and all meaning will be forgotten.

Whereas, van Wyck tells us, “Innis is not good company” (p. 200) the author of *The Highway of the Atom* is a boon companion leading us down a convoluted route where historical fact, myth, prophecy, memory, and forgetting converge. At the surface, *Highway* illustrates the centrality of the “marginal history” of the Dene in the development of atomic modernity. But, the study is also and perhaps
equally so, a meditation on methods and how one goes about studying culture and dynamic cultural objects. Van Wyck tells us that Innis did not spend enough time thinking about methodology, whereas perhaps the opposite complaint could be lobbed at the author. Although, I confess I found this method of obsessing over methodology charming and enlightening, it was almost like reading a work turned inside out and then back again, but not fully so.

There is method, yes, but theory too. The usual suspects appear: Barthes, Benjamin, Deleuze, Derrida, Freud, Innis, Lyotard, and McLuhan. Along with this cast of characters, prominent theorists of memory are also invited to the conversation: Nora, Halbwachs, and Yates. Mostly, the author’s use of theory illuminates, giving the reader an intellectual map to the author’s journey on the Highway. Sometimes, though, theory obscures and complicates an already knotty problem or creates too long a diversion. Van Wyck’s The Highway of the Atom is a text not sewn completely together, and this is the author’s intention; it is “an argument against the certainties of academic work” (p. 7). The positive is that we are left with much to think with. The negative is that we are also left, like van Wyck, searching for an “art of memory” that can bring justice, or at the very least offer some testimony to the wrongs committed at Great Bear Lake. Yet, rather than the refusal to come to any conclusion, the major issue with Highway is its repetitive nature. Ideas, insights, and even phrases repeat, or are so closely related that it seems as if you have just read them. This could easily be a reflection of the reflexive communication at work in the book, but at times I wished for some tighter editing.

As a traveler on the Highway of the Atom, van Wyck describes himself as “a bewildered stranger” (p. 5) but his text should bewilder us all. The ‘hot’ materials of atomic modernity are still very much with us, even as we move through the post-nuclear landscape. The issue and the danger is in the possibility of forgetting this fact. The Highway of the Atom should be read as a warning that witnesses to the atomic past and their memories are in danger of being forgotten. The task is to write the terrible history of the Highway before it is too late.

Lindsey A. Freeman, The New School for Social Research