

Unfixed Maps for Unfixed Geographies in the Pacific Northwest

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Reid and Bringhurst's The Raven Steals the Light and Marlatt's Steveston both involve unfixed geography - landscapes and environments that move, change, or flow. This paper explores the roles of such phenomena in both works, and investigates their properties and problematics. Ultimately, it asks how these spaces can be mapped, and answers that question by arguing that unfixed maps are necessary for the cartography of unfixed space.

In The Raven Steals the Light, particularly in an individual story early in the text, unfixed geographies are significant. The most salient image is that of the Raven rolling up the inland countryside and carrying it in his beak back to the islands of the Haida. This image involves changes to the landscape that are not only geographically but also narratively significant, and problematizes the notion of geography as a fixed background for activity. Using this example, unfixity can be theorized as a state of geography in which absolute location is difficult, if not meaningless, and in which changes in human activity and physical landforms influence one another.

This theory of unfixity also applies to modern geographical issues, such as the ecological problems caused by erosion taking place on the Fraser river. These problems provide very different perspective for viewing unfixity, but one from which the same conclusions arise.

Marlatt's Steveston, also addressing unfixity along the Fraser, provides a third lens to view this issue. Particularly, her poem In time addresses concerns of moving landscape and the codependent flows of water, land, and humanity. These various subjects move westward with a common momentum, and this motion, like that of the land carried by the Raven, problematizes absolute location and alters the geographical character of Steveston.

As a writer, Marlatt is concerned with contemplating and describing Steveston, and this includes its unfixity. How does she deal with the issues this presents? Specifically, how does she map a changing geography? She uses a changing map. In her poems, particularly In time, she employs an unfixed map to

relate to an unfixed territory. Specifically, she uses Moncton Street, the 'main street' of Steveston, as a sort of mobile anchor or reference point. She describes the rest of the town in terms of positional relationships to Moncton St., but at the same time denotes Moncton itself as inherently in motion. This provides her with a mobile ground for cartography - an unfixed map for an unfixed geography.

The Raven Steals the Salmon from the Beaver House¹ describes a scene of extreme geographical unfixity. The Raven lifts the landscape itself, rolls it up in his beak, and carries it in the sky from the mainland to the islands. Upon his return, he drops the rolled-up land and allows the water, containing the desired salmon, to fall and transform the geography of the islands, leaving them as they are today. This is a creation myth, describing the origin of natural landforms through supernatural activity. It is also a story of changing land. The way this narrative describes issues of destabilized place lead to two conclusions about the nature of unfixed geographies. First, in unfixed geographies, location becomes an unclear concept. Second, humanity and landscape are able to mutually interact and change one another.

The issue at hand arises in this story when "the Raven pulled at the ground near his feet, and he found it came loose from the bedrock quite easily."² This passage makes the essential move of unfixing geography: it calls into question the status of landscape as an inert, immovable background. 'Ground', in electrical engineering, means a reference material, an "arbitrary zero" or neutral charge that functions as a contextualizing point of return for the flow of current. In argumentation, it is "a basis for belief, action, or argument;" generally it is "material that serves as a substratum"³. That this can actually be removed from 'bedrock', the material substance of the Earth, is very strange. The ground is a reference frame by which the movement of actors can be judged, so how do we judge the movement of ground? The ground provides absolute coordination of position, so is it possible to talk about place when the ground itself changes? When the Raven picks up the ground and unfixes geography, he also problematizes the idea of location.

We see this questioning of location primarily in those things that are brought along with the ground the Raven carries: water and fish. It is unclear how much these things act in the rolled-up reference frame

¹ The Raven Steals the Light, p. 27

² Ibid.

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ground>

of the ground, and how much act in the reference frame of the ocean the Raven is flying over. "...a lot of the water from the rolled-up rivers had drained away, but many of the streams and the little lakes remained. And most importantly, the fish were safe."⁴ It is impossible, in an external reference frame, to imagine a way that land could be physically bundled like a rug without crushing the salmon, deforming the topography, and allowing all of the water to drain out. But if the rolled-up space occupied by the fish and the small bodies of water is considered with reference to the rolled-up ground, there is no difficulty in understanding how those things could be transported intact. The fish still occupy the same relationship to their geography; for them, nothing has changed. What, then, is the salmon's location? Is it in the sky between Haida Gwaii and the coast of what is now British Columbia - the answer a GPS would give? Or is it in the same streams on the exact same ground in which they were born and in which they will die - the answer the salmon themselves would give? As some water does drain out from the larger rivers, GPS-location has some importance. But it is not the only important thing: the smaller streams act according to landscape-location. There is no clear solution. By ripping the ground from its bedrock, the Raven decoupled landscape from location, making it impossible to give a simple answer to the question "where are the fish?"

Mutual interaction between geography and humanity is also a critical aspect of this passage. If the Raven is understood as, at least in some senses, a human element, it is clear that the unfixity of geography includes the ability of humanity to enact changes to its landscape. At the end of his flight home, the Raven "was happy to drop the roll and let what remained of the streams and lakes fall where they might. That's why today nearly every one of the Haida Islands is spattered with little lakes and small but very rich streams"⁵. The Raven alters the very face of the Islands. It is not so much that doing this the Raven unfixes their geography, but that he - and therefore Reid and Bringhurst - treat the geography as unfixing.

The human alteration of the landscape is reciprocated. Having been changed, the Islands now treat the Raven differently: they "provide welcome meals for the Raven and all his relations"⁶. This can be understood as also referring to humans, the Haida who inhabit the Islands. By beginning to provide salmon,

⁴ The Raven Steals the Light, p.29

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

the Islands become more suitable for human settlement, allowing or causing the Haida to live in the way that they do.

The Raven Steals the Salmon from the Beaver House is mythological, and provides an extreme example of an unfixed geography. Unfixity of this degree is rarely if ever seen in the world around us, and only slightly more often in modern literature and poetry. Still, Reid and Bringhurst provide an example that is critical for theorizing unfixed geographies. By enlarging such phenomena, their characteristics become more visible, and it is clear that the two most important of these are the destabilizing of location and the mutual mutability of the human and the environment.

That is not to say, though, that unfixed geographies are unique to mythology. In fact, to varying degrees, they surround us - in fact, to some extent, all geography is unfixed. As Nigel Thrift would have it, "every space is in constant motion"⁷. One example is the erosion of the Sturgeon Banks, 500 miles southeast of Haida Gwaii. They are found on the west coast of Lulu Island, near Richmond, BC in the Fraser River delta. These banks are a designated Wildlife Management Area⁸, composed of marshes extending a little more than half a mile from the edge of solid land. They are the result of a delicate natural equilibrium: the banks are constantly eroded by the waves of the Pacific Ocean, but constantly maintained against this erosion by the deposition of sediment that billows out from the mouths of the Fraser River. Until relatively recently, the deposition had been winning out. In fact, "Lulu Island is composed chiefly of delta deposits laid down during the post-Pleistocene by the Fraser River debouching into the Strait of Georgia"⁹ - meaning that the island has been created by a steady westward growth through this process of sedimentation starting about 12,000 years ago.

Now, though, the situation is reversed. Erosion from the sea is winning out over deposition from the Fraser, and the Sturgeon Banks are shrinking. The cause is anthropogenic. Routine dredging (deepening) of the Fraser to facilitate shipping reduces the sediment output by two-thirds, resulting in a corresponding

⁷ Nigel Thrift: *Space (Theory, Culture, and Society)* 2006)

⁸ http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/fw/habitat/conservation-lands/wma/sturgeon_bank/

⁹ Hansen, H.P.. *Paleoecology of Two Peat Bogs in Southwestern British Columbia*. *Amer. Journal of Botany*; citing Johnston, W.A. 1921. *Sedimentation of the Fraser River Delta*. *Geol. Surv. Can., Mem.* 125. Pp. 1-46

decrease in deposition on the Banks. In the last twenty years, the Banks have eroded by about 40 feet annually. This is an important regional issue because the salmon for which the area is so widely known are ecologically dependent upon the marshes, which serve as a nursery that provides billions of insects as food to juvenile fish. While causing this harm to the environment, deepening the Fraser poses another threat: “dredge too deep and parts of the river and the city land could collapse inward,”¹⁰ says a retired marine biologist of Richmond, BC’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Furthermore, if the marsh is depleted altogether, as it may be within 100 years, the face of Lulu Island itself will begin to be altered by the erosion, including human construction (like the popular West Dyke Trail) along the coastline.

How can the landscape of the Sturgeon Banks be identified as unfixed? First, the historically mobile composition of Lulu Island as a moving accumulation of sediment disrupts ideas of absolute location in much the same way as the Raven’s uprooting of the ground from the bedrock - this will be considered in greater depth during the discussion of Steveston. Second, the risk of municipal land collapsing into the Fraser as the result of dredging destabilizes such ideas in a different, more concrete way: the “city land”, considered by its residents and administrators to be the fixed background and context for activity, is made precarious. Finally, and most clearly, human and natural environments are mutually mutable. Human dredging alters the form of the river and the banks, and natural erosion by the ocean slowly moves toward settled land, disrupting economic activity by reducing the marshes that feed salmon (changing, perhaps, the industrial landscape of fishing areas).

On the southwestern tip of Lulu Island lies Steveston. Formerly an independent town with an industry dominated by salmon fishing and canning and sustained by immigrant and seasonal laborers from Japan, China, and First Nations communities, it has now been absorbed into Richmond as a residential suburb of Vancouver. The town was founded in 1878 by Manoah Steves, a native of Moncton NB, after whom it was named. The salmon-canning industry there was an immediate success, with about 20 canneries within its borders and as many again elsewhere on the Fraser as of 1900. This industry peaked in

¹⁰ <http://www.richmond-news.com/news/richmond-s-sturgeon-banks-eroding-at-an-alarming-rate-1.1271973>

the early 20th century, gradually declining until the last cannery closed in the 1990s¹¹. The town and its people are the subject of Daphne Marlatt's book of poetry also called Steveston.

Marlatt, writing in the early 1970s, was unaware of the current ecological issue of erosion of the Sturgeon Banks. She was very conscious, however, of the gradual movement westward of Lulu Island through the accumulation of sediment over time, and this unfixity of geography is discussed in several poems, most notably In time¹². She was also very aware of the unfixity, not not just of the natural environment, but also the human. A main focus of many poems is the transience and change of the Japanese-Canadian experience and presence in Steveston.

Marlatt's concern, compared to Reid and Bringhurst's, is contemplation rather than narration. She chooses as an epigraph and statement of purpose the final clause of a quotation from James Agee in his own exploration of people in place: "For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and central and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, *seeking to perceive it as it stands*"¹³. As such, she faces greater difficulty in dealing with unstable landscape than Reid and Bringhurst, who must only describe its role in a story. She must describe its role in a town. In her poetry, she must draw for the reader a chart of town built on a moving island; she must map unfixed geography.

The destabilizing effects of an unfixed geography make conventional mapping inadequate. Certainly ordinary, static maps can be drawn of Steveston, but they lack any description of the movement, natural and human, that is an essential feature of the town. Marlatt, in her writing, confronts this problem. She shows how the land and water, as well as the history and economy of Steveston are unfixed, and how this character of the town makes conventional mapping insufficient by destabilizing absolute location and allowing the natural and human environments to influence one another.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steveston,_British_Columbia

¹² Steveston, p.29-31. All future uncited quotations are from the same source.

¹³ James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

The first section of the poem concerns the river. Marlatt uses the verb 'wash' repeatedly, along with 'flow.' These are verbs of movement, and the movement applies not only to the river itself but to what it carries along. She describes, starting in the very first line, the way in which the Fraser picks up sediment: "how the river washes them [the roots of trees] bare... how the river flows, washing its filth downstream". The repetition of 'wash' creates a sense of constant motion, applied not only to the water but to the sediment - tiny pieces of land - that it carries. The river carries more than sediment, though, it also conveys human objects. Marlatt mentions a specific boat ("This chugging of an Easthope [engine-powered fishing boat]¹⁴") and the more general objects of human life ("the river runs away with them, flood, storm, all manner of lost belongings gone"). If these objects are constantly moving, how can they be located in a map? The movement of the river also results in movement of sediment and therefore in slow, inevitable, shifting of land westward "1000 feet per century". This unfixity of Lulu Island itself underlies and contextualizes the instability of human settlement there. In this sense, it is impossible to draw a static map of Steveston, because the town's basis is gradually shifting - in just a year, the map will be wrong by 10 feet.

Second, the history of Steveston is one of motion and unfixity. Marlatt connects the westward-steering boat just mentioned to another boat, 100 year earlier, conveying Manoah Steves and his wife toward the Pacific to the corner of land where they would settle. The movement of these founders, though, is greater than the length of that river. In fact, they came from Moncton, NB, one of the easternmost cities of Canada. The history of Steveston began with movement channeled into settlement, and since then has been perpetually carried "anchorless on out to sea". For Steves, as for the later Japanese immigrants, that land is "[t]he edge, the edge." Their history, too, is movement channeled into settlement (or "stray[ed] into settlement") starting with temporary encampments for temporary seasonal laborers who eventually, gradually, came to live there permanently. This is equally true for the First Nations citizens of the town, whose motion - "coming to fish" - "all settles down into an order of orders". Even this settlement, though, is still unfixed - in fact, powerfully unfixed in the 1940s, when the Japanese citizens were uprooted to a camp at New Denver. A map of the human geography of Steveston will grapple with the same issues of place that apply to every unfixed geography - how can these fluxes of settlement be described? Census data is always

¹⁴ <http://easthope.ca/>

out-of-date, and no page in an atlas can capture the inertia that has been with Steveston since its founder departed from Moncton.

The economy of Steveston, as of the time of Marlatt's writing, is just as fundamentally unfixed as the town's history. That economy is rooted in a "dream of seizing silver wealth that swims, & fixing it solid ground, land, home". But that dream does not come true. It is a "mis-reading of the river's push", a misguided attempt to convert the unfixity of the salmon in the flowing river to a stable, fixed economic life - "into 'settling down,' finally, into cash as, security". Instead of this, the conversion of salmon to money results only in an economic system just as unfixed as the salmon themselves. Marlatt draws an analogy between sediment in the Fraser and the economy of the town: despite efforts to 'settle down,' "it continues, this westward drift. Islands of it moving west, 1000 feet per century. & this is not the end, this accumulation along the way, deposits (in a bank, in the Richmond Credit Union..." Money, like sediment, can be fished or dredged out of the river, and like sediment it may be deposited but that accumulation "is not the end". This unfixity, even unfixability, of money taken from the swimming salmon is essential to the town, but cannot be depicted statically. Even the smaller businesses of Steveston are unfixed. Marlatt focuses on movement within them in latter part of the poem, mentioning how "stores begin & end" and shift, like "Tom's TV moved to Minamoru", and how the land is repurposed, unfixing the built environment: "where the tracks went farms used to lie... razed now to smoking inland freeways and North Arm¹⁵ plants". As part of global capitalism, Steveston's economy is anything but fixed - and this is highlighted in the final poem of the collection (generations, generations at the mouth), written almost 30 years later and discussing the changes over that span of time.¹⁶

Steveston is a town where water, land, people, history, and money all flow. How does Marlatt deal with this? How does she map a town where location is not absolute, where changes of humanity and nature feed back on one another? She uses an unfixed map. This map is centered, as any map could be, on Moncton Street.

¹⁵ A British Columbia-based transportation and freight company, <http://northarm.bc.ca/>

¹⁶ Steveston, p.61-62.

Moncton is the 'main street' of Steveston, the primary artery of life there. It is the medium for day-to-day activity, for Marlatt and the citizens of Steveston it "begins & ends, the day" The businesses of the town lie there, and it is the conduit for movement. In any traditional map of Steveston, Moncton would be at the center¹⁷ as a reference point, a context, a 'ground' as the concept was explored earlier. By providing a fixed reference, Moncton would provide fixity. Marlatt takes the same approach: with In time she draws the geography of Steveston with reference to Moncton St. Activity, like the visit of the health inspector to Christine's cafe, takes place contextualized to that street, and so do the businesses of the Marine Grocery, the hardware store, the hotel, and many others. The majority of Robert Minden's photographs, included in Marlatt's collection of poems (or at least the majority of those with location given) were taken on Moncton.

For Marlatt and Minden, though, Moncton St. is not a steady anchor for a map - it is itself unfixed. Steveston is "a town whose main street moves, as Manoah [Steves] did, from Moncton New Brunswick, west, in a vision of telephone poles, wires, cement." Moncton St. captures the unfixed historical inertia of its founder, and bundles it together with the westward movements of the river, the island itself, and the people and money there. It travels in "a straight line from east to west". Moncton is a "a straight line that begins & ends", and in this way is "never a river" - although it runs parallel to the Fraser and shares in momentum (a physical quantity representing speed, mass, and direction), it is not that river. It is discrete, limited to space between a farm and a hotel, while the Fraser continues indefinitely into the hinterlands of British Columbia and the Gulf of Georgia.

Moncton Street, its shadow (which "underlies the street and twins it" as discussed in the final section of the poem), the Fraser, and Steveston itself all move together westward in line, and this movement is the basis of Marlatt's poem and her mapping. Although the land on which Steveston is constructed moves at a rate of 10 feet a year, Marlatt's map moves at the same pace and alongside it. The map reflects the territory in terms of relative locations, and because it cannot describe absolute location it describes absolute movement. The poem maps the movement of Steveston as linear, east to west, like Moncton and the channel in the river that permits boats to pass by, a "channel thru, street, straight thru (west)". Marlatt

¹⁷ As, for example, <http://www.steveston.bc.ca/map.html> or <http://www.exploresteveston.com/map>

captures the essential movement of the town, and where some cartographers would draw a map on a fixed canvas of paper or GIS, she draws her map on this movement.

A citizen of Steveston is like a salmon in the land carried by the Raven: whether or not they are aware of the change and movement surrounding them, they are carried along with it in its reference frame. Their entire lives move together, in pace, even if nothing seems to be moving in relation to anything else everything is still moving. Nothing is fixed. History, money, fish, water, even solid land drifts west.

Marlatt set her map moving along with the town, and wrote a more powerful cartography. "Every space is in constant motion,"¹⁸ and Marlatt's technique could be applied far outside of Steveston. From the geological movements of tectonic plates to the oceangoing "heterotopia par excellence"¹⁹ to the receding coastline of Louisiana²⁰, no geography is truly fixed. And so every geography, like that of a small town on Lulu Island, can only be truly charted with unfixed maps.

¹⁸ Nigel Thrift: *Space (Theory, Culture, and Society)* 2006)

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*

²⁰ <https://medium.com/matter/louisiana-loses-its-boot-b55b3bd52d1e#.rrlgwwu8r>