Among the Ruins

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How many hands moved these shovels? How many bodies, bent and burdened, how many shovels of coal, in a day, in a year, in a lifetime? Lifetimes of work. On the shovel.

Amid vestiges of old industry, spectral visitors, those who lived, worked, and died here. A rumble of tumbling echoes follows you around. Machine sounds. Ghost cries of children who played at the water tower, still resounding decades later, as their houses crumbled and the living went other places.¹

¹ The sites depicted in these images are within and around the traditional territories of the Ojibway First Nations of Pic River, Pays Plat, Pic Mobert, and Michipicoten. I thank these nations for the use of their land while making these images.
In their entropic state, embracing light and weather, transformed as archetypes of some other lost culture, what remains of their once serviceable structures, now only relics, recorded as artworks.

On this topographic myth, a path, once again homeland, true north, not quite freed of extraction, transmutative spectacle, repository of extinctions. Is this tomorrow in a land of becoming-with (Haraway 4; Wright 278-280)? How do we become with any other?

Histories embedded with loss are shared among ruins as their fragmenting remains dissolve into familiar shapes. Whether poignant signposts or abject monuments, ruins are loaded with familiar stories. Artworks of ruins are more than depictions of melancholy and mourning, unveiling unfulfilled temporal possibilities in their unfinished state (Dillon 18). As the built disperses itself into the organic, our memories of former architectures too may fall into ruin, although ruins themselves, as Rebecca Solnit reminds us, “like other traces, are treasures” (355).

Human relationship with land and landscape is mediated by labour and community, class and gendered practices, values, myths, and narratives, constantly shaped and reshaped, coded and recoded, on topographies and psychic spaces. Among the embedded histories of a site are ongoing erasures of built material markers. In his essay “The Riddle of the Apostle Islands,” William Cronon argues for the preservation of ruins “as cultural resources in their own right,”
offering encounters with complex histories and meanings of dwelling, dispersing traces of toil, settlement, and production into the wild places still holding their accumulated residues.

Photography’s capacity to reproduce “place as other place” (Keiller 31) helps to memorialize sites, but the intervention itself is an experience of loss in the knowledge that the produced image will never quite deliver the promise of its perception.

These images were recorded in two locations on the north shore of Lake Superior: the former industrial site of Michipicoten Harbour near the town of Wawa, Ontario, and the ghost village of Jackfish, Ontario. My childhood was spent in the Northwestern Ontario community of Manitouwadge, a former mining town located about halfway between these two sites. These are places where extractive industries once boomed, in small company towns where men gave their lives to dangerous work and families struggled to find solidarity in rough conditions.
Michipicoten Harbour

In the days of the fur trade, Michipicoten Harbour served as the junction between James Bay and Lake Superior, joining with the main trading routes from Montreal along the north shore of Lake Superior, westward toward Winnipeg. The harbour was a key port for shipping ore and timber south to Sault Ste. Marie and the United States for processing. Large wooden docks and conveyors were constructed, and vestiges of these early structures remain.

I was introduced to this location in 2012, while filming a documentary about regional environmental activism against a proposed aggregate quarry development on this site, a project now abandoned by its proponents. Local conservationists continue to work to protect the land and water, while mining claims proliferate for the remaining reserves of the Canadian Shield.
Since the late 1800s, the Canadian Pacific Railway used Jackfish Harbour to unload coal for the steam engines, with a large tower supplying water for steam power. In 1926, Group of Seven member Franklin Carmichael produced his painting *Jackfish Village*, which depicts an active, flourishing community. By the 1940s, the steam engine era was over and the Jackfish coal docks were closed. Then in the 1960s, the invasive sea lamprey destroyed what was left of the Jackfish fishing industry and the once vibrant settlement slowly became a ghost town.

A former Jackfish resident guided my journey to the remains of her early home in the village, and I recorded these testaments to human labour, discarded and open to transformative interpretations.
Works Cited


EDIE STEINER is a filmmaker and photographer who earned her doctorate in environmental studies at York University (2015). She is a Canada Council for the Arts grant holder for the research and creation of her new media project, *Borderland Memories in Lower Silesia*. A version of this visual essay was first presented at the 2011 Green Words/Green Worlds conference in Toronto.