Infrastructural Ruin as Placeholder in Giscome, B.C.

Sarah MacDonell

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In the semi-abandoned, formerly booming sawmill town of Giscome, British Columbia (pop. 50), a (very) small turf war for its extractive future is taking place. Supported by the Lheidli T’enneh First Nation counsel, the Canadian mining company Graymont has received an extension for its market assessment to determine the economic feasibility of a new open pit lime quarry mine in Giscome and the future of a lime market in North America. While some residents support the opening of a new mine in Giscome for the new flows of capital it could bring to the region, others worry about the health risks such a mine would pose to the school children in the two-room school 800 meters away (Trumpener, 2017). In a community of 50, the promise of 15 to 30 permanent jobs and 215 temporary construction jobs means potential economic growth and a return to an operational resource economy, if not the possibility for the return of public goods the sawmill companies used to provide. As one commenter during a Graymont public consultation meeting said, “this project will have economic and community enhancement spinoffs for the area of the East Line” (2015). Comments like these demonstrate the kinds of imaginations and desires for renewed working-class life bound together by infrastructural proposals. These desires are similarly being advocated by the Lheidli T’enneh, the stewards of the land, who have considered the project’s economic potential within their right to economic and political self-determination on their territories (see Barney, 2021, pp. 230).

The opposition to the project, on the other hand, cites environmental degradation and health concerns, particularly around the air quality degradation that normally follows lime mines. This latter group would rather see the community commute to the neighbouring city of Prince George for work, what CBC News condescendingly

describes as remaining a “bedroom community” (2017), than risk permanent pollution and adverse health effects.

While there’s much to say about these competing desires for futurity, with job creation and children representing two distinct visions for a reproduced social order, or even how Indigenous communities and First Nations become proponents of extractive infrastructures (LaDuke and Cowen, 2020), I'm interested how Graymont has relied upon the extractive legacy and aesthetic of Giscome to petition B.C. to lease its crownland and get permission to use former sawmill and quarry company land for mining. In their application, Graymont describes Giscome as one of a few “once thriving timber harvesting and mill towns that have seen significant population losses since the 1970s when a downturn in the lumber industry resulted in widespread mill closures” (2015). Throughout their appeal, they rely on this East Line infrastructural legacy of loss and ruination to advocate for a new extractive future for Giscome. The community’s extractive past (logging) therefore secures its extractive future (possibly lime). Appealing to a long legacy of infrastructure as a developmentalist strategy to either build or preserve rural areas (Howe et al, 2016), Graymont Industries positions lime as a cultural and economic saviour for Giscome. They routinely invoke the community’s history as one of the largest sawmills in the English empire (Kusch, 2008) and an impressive logging frontier to make their case. The ruined sawmill infrastructure still holds the promise of extraction and financial gain it did at its creation. Only here, the resource frontier is made slippery between extractive forms, the sawmill, the vacant lot, the imagined lime plant, and all those earlier colonial prospecting patterns. Like much of northern British Columbia, this region has long served as an extractive zone (Gómez-Barris, 2017). Viewed from the temporality of infrastructure, which Geoffrey Bowker reminds us “do not inhabit human lifetimes” (2015), each extractive industry of Giscome—fur, gold, coal, logging and now, potentially lime—emerge less as individual sites of extraction and more as a single, networked resource frontier held open both by each extractive iteration and the gaps between each one.

The proposal and its albeit limited coverages invoke an image of Giscome as fragile, vulnerable and abandoned. These documents emphasize an absence of logging, which is experienced materially in job losses, relocations and dwindling populations, but also affectively as surrounded by conditions of abandonment, shuttered stores and services, rotting sawmill infrastructures, semi-abandoned forest roads. Graymont describes these previous extractive networks and then petitions B.C. for the use of the land it described as wasted. In their planning documents, the thin, grey lines of previous logging nodes and long shuttered CN rail lines promise new connections to bring lime to market and bolster B.C.’s and Canada’s export economies. It’s worth noting here that the crownland for which Graymont is petitioning for access was acquired (i.e. stolen from the Lheidli

T’enneh) in the late nineteenth century by the Canadian state to secure a path for rail and facilitate the communication of interior plateau resources into global markets (Innis, 1923). Those train lines have long since shuttered, closing when CN Rail was purchased by Via Rail and globalization made Canadian resources less competitive. However, the crown still maintains its firm grasp on the plots acquired for the rail project (Sedgwick, 2010). When Graymont petitions the B.C. government for access to this land, they rely on an absented form of infrastructure to advance their extractive imaginations, thereby transforming infrastructures in ruination or abandonment into infrastructures in waiting.

Looking at the sparse documentation for Giscome after the dissolution of its sawmill, it becomes clear that it’s not just activities of repair that solidify the narrative power of infrastructure, but processes of rust, desertion, and rubble, which bind people and lifeworlds together at infrastructural sites (Berlant, 2022). This mediating role of ruined infrastructure is what I want to think through as infrastructural. According to theorizations of infrastructure by Lauren Berlant, Jennifer Wenzel, Judith Butler, Hannah Appel and Rafico Ruiz in which infrastructure characterizes the political or social relationship of people to ideas and spaces, the extractive sociality produced by the abandoned quarry, rail and mill is infrastructural. This suggests that the afterlives of infrastructure (Appel et al, 2018) function as infrastructures in their own right. This happens, not in the way we might come to expect as zombie or ghost infrastructures, which implies that the infrastructure has died or been discontinued, but rather as what I’ll call placeholder infrastructures whose function is to partially determine, and provide structure for, a place’s continued existence between extractive forms. Even though the sawmill closed in 1974, its ruins (McNeil, 2021) and rubble (Gordillo, 2014) continue to produce a narrative of extraction and dependence for the town, upon which future extractive industries, such as Graymont’s proposed lime quarry and plant, can lay claim.

Giscome, B.C. represents one such case of rural placemaking where capitalist refurbishment depends on first cementing disparate sites of infrastructural ruination into an overarching narrative of abandonment from which a place can be rehabilitated. When Graymont envisions their extractive planning on previous extractive networks, they arguably turn the abandoned infrastructure into placeholder infrastructure, holding out space to preserve extractive forms of life. This infrastructurally realized technique seems to be how rural places are laid to waste for successive and compulsive waves of industrialization which build and expand on previous forms, even if those forms include long absences from industrial activity. Frequent references to abandoned logging positions Giscome as doomed, unenterprising, and provincial so that Graymont may imagine new infrastructural patterns of extraction. Like many rural places emerging out

of deindustrialization, Giscome can be made and remade into a site of enclosure from which new commodities are made to emerge.

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Sarah MacDonell is a PhD student in Communications at McGill University. Her research explores deindustrialized or abandoned extractive zones and infrastructures. Her dissertation focusses on the legacy of coal and steel in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.