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# The Nature of Urban Heritage: The View from New Westminster, British Columbia

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**Abstract:** Historic waterfronts are iconic sites of urban change, and the redevelopment of urban waterfronts – from sites of industrial work and commerce to post-industrial places of residence, retail and recreation – is a global phenomenon. Official discourses about such places are intimately related to the changes in physical land use, in material practices and in the production of publics. Using ethnographic research conducted in the post-industrial waterfront city of New Westminster, British Columbia, I examine the way that planning discourses about (re)connecting the city to the Fraser River are embedded in broader claims about heritage and identity. New Westminster, a rapidly gentrifying city within Metro Vancouver, has long taken pride in its British colonial past. As city leaders have worked to redevelop the industrial waterfront, however, they have quietly jettisoned the colonial heritage narratives in favour of ones in which local heritage is found in nature, represented by the Fraser River. I examine the ways that urban history, class, and ethnic identity are represented and contested through these discourses, and I argue that despite the very different content of the dominant heritage narratives, they each bracket social class and cultural diversity.

**Keywords:** waterfront redevelopment, indigenisation, heritage discourses, urban planning

**Résumé :** Les rivages historiques sont des lieux emblématiques de changement urbain. On observe mondialement que les rives urbaines de lieux industriels et commerciaux sont réaménagées en lieux de résidence, de loisir et de commerce au détail postindustriels. À partir de travaux de recherche ethnographique menés dans les rivages postindustriels de la ville de New Westminster en Colombie-Britannique, j'examine comment les discours d'aménagement proposant de (re)lier la ville au fleuve Fraser s'intègrent dans de plus larges revendications au sujet du patrimoine et de l'identité. Le passé colonial anglais de New Westminster, une ville du district régional du Grand Vancouver qui s'est rapidement embourgeoisée, a longtemps fait sa gloire. Toutefois, dans le cadre de leurs démarches de réaménagement des rives industrielles, les dirigeants de la ville ont discrètement remplacé les arguments en faveur du patrimoine colonial par des arguments mettant de l'avant un patrimoine local lié à la nature, représentée par le fleuve Fraser. Je me penche sur les façons dont l'histoire urbaine, les classes et l'identité ethnique sont représentées et contestées dans ces discours. Je présente comment, malgré leur contenu très différent, les principaux discours sur le patrimoine ciblent tous les classes sociales et la diversité culturelle.

**Mots-clés :** Réaménagement des rivages, indigénéisation, discours sur le patrimoine, planification urbaine

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“New Westminster Mayor Jonathan Cote Hopes to Connect More Neighbourhoods to Downtown Waterfront.” This was a headline in the 7 June 2015 issue of the *Georgia Straight* (Smith 2015), a weekly arts, entertainment and public affairs newspaper for Metro Vancouver, Canada. The story concerned the completion of a pedestrian and cycling bridge connecting the city of New Westminster’s historic downtown with its newest park: a four-hectare, multi-use recreational facility on what were, in the recent past, Fraser River shipping terminals. “Connecting” (or sometimes “reconnecting”) the city to the Fraser River is both a political goal and a piece of political rhetoric frequently invoked by public officials in this Metro Vancouver city of 71,000 people (Statistics Canada 2017). In this article, I interrogate the use of the language of (re)connecting to the river as it is discursively linked to specific local heritage narratives. I ask how the discourse about (re)connecting to the river works on residents to create shared understandings of the city, including the physical and material characteristics represented in the land and its location along the Fraser River, as well as common knowledge of local history and of local institutions and activities. At the same time, I note some of the ways that urban history and identity are represented and contested, with particular interest in the roles local planning (and politics) play in those processes. In other words, I consider what publics are produced by official heritage discourses and how those publics engage with those discourses or produce counter-discourses (Cody 2011; Fraser 1990; Warner 2002).

Historic waterfronts have become iconic sites of urban change globally, and the redevelopment of urban waterfronts from sites of industrial work and commerce to post-industrial places of residence, retail and recreation is a widely investigated phenomenon (Brownill 2013). Urbanists have shown how waterfront redevelopment is implicated in industrial restructuring (Dudley 1994; Hoyle, Pinder, and Husain 1988) and how it has

created new opportunities for private accumulation and global connection (Desfor et al. 2010; Dovey 2005; Hagerman 2007); hence, urban waterfronts are sites where planning conflicts are enacted (Atkinson 2007; Curran and Hamilton 2012; Kear 2007). Less attention, however, has been paid to the discursive work that accompanies waterfront redevelopment. Anthropologists have frequently observed that discourses, especially the discourses used by governmental and other authoritative figures, have power. Official discourses have the power to identify and frame problems in ways that call for one type of response rather than another (Ferguson 1999), as well as to create distinctions between people who are to be interpellated as proper or “sanitary” citizens and those who are thought incapable of the correct citizenising dispositions (Briggs 2003; Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2004). Hence, individuals may be required to (re)produce particular forms of discourse in order to access benefits of citizenship. Hales (2016), for example, recounts how Yup’ik social services providers in Bethel, Alaska, struggle to produce evaluative metrics of a program that they believe defies measurement in order to satisfy the funder. A different example of coerced discourse concerns a pediatric HIV clinic in Botswana. Clinic staff, employees of a Western aid agency, teach the child patients a “catechism” about the beneficial qualities of their medications, which is to be recited at each visit to the clinic. “From the Clinic-eye view, children who learned to speak properly about HIV became children who took their medications, first, because they understood why they should do so, and second, because they had positive associations with medications” (Brada 2013, 443). Significantly, the children were expected to use euphemisms such as “bad guy” for HIV, though they are eventually taught (or permitted) to say that the name of the bad guy is HIV. The name of the disease, AIDS, however, was not to be spoken to or by children. When children broke the taboo, as they sometimes did, clinic staff experienced the violation as “a sign of unassuageable grief and horror” (Brada 2013, 447), a counter-discourse that disrupted the orderly business of the clinic.

Discourses of public officials shape meanings, but they also have material effects. Douglas Holmes (2009) has observed that central bankers, once famously secretive and opaque, now hold press conferences in the name of transparency. Through ostensibly mere information-sharing exercises, central bankers, in fact, communicate their economic expectations and signal future monetary policies to financial actors in efforts to bring about desired economic behaviours.

Urban planning is a critical site to observe the ways in which governmental discourses are implicated in material transformations (Rutheiser 1996; Throgmorton 1996). In post-socialist Poland, for example, the government employs a rhetoric of “building” as it goes about deconstructing the physical traces of the socialist and pre-socialist industrial pasts (Stacul 2017). Matthew Cooper (1994) documented discursive practices of a Royal Commission that allowed the public, regulatory bodies and developers to reimagine the Greater Toronto Area shoreline of Lake Ontario as a watershed – an ecological zone – rather than as a waterfront, a place of economic activity. One commission recommendation was the creation of greenways that would bring the public to the lakeshore. In Toronto, the shift in both language and thinking contributed to an environment clean-up that permitted redevelopment of the lakeshore for post-industrial, multi-use public and private activities. In nearby Burlington, however, public officials subverted the call for public access to the waterfront via greenways by designating existing sidewalks on commercial streets away from the lake as “connectors.”

In this article, I examine the ways that heritage inflects the planning discourses integral to city building in general and for urban waterfronts in particular. New Westminster, a redeveloping post-industrial city with a largely deindustrialised waterfront, provides an apt case with which to think through the linkages between planning discourses, heritage narratives and the daily lives of residents. If the past and invocations of the past help “make the present” (Massey 1995, 187), they are also meant to make the future. New Westminster’s civic leaders employ the language of heritage as a representation of the future they desire. Invocations of heritage in New Westminster, as elsewhere, are, in part, efforts to brand the city for tourists and investors (Prytherch 2002; Stern and Hall 2010; Wherry 2011; Yeoh 2000). Local promoters mobilize heritage to support their claims about the future in applications for state development monies (Stern and Hall 2015), as well as to attract private investments. In these ways, the discursive work of heritage is often directed outward. Heritage work is also for internal publics, and heritage-marking efforts, whether for locals or for outsiders, permeate the consciousness of residents in ways that contribute to their affective attachments to place, “creat[ing] and recreat[ing] a sense of belonging, past, place, culture and ownership” (Franklin and Crang 2001, 9–10).

New Westminster is a rapidly gentrifying city within Metro Vancouver, and its waterfront is a focal point of both new urban imaginings and new local heritage

narratives and practices. In the course of redeveloping the waterfront, leaders in this previously heavily industrial place have quietly replaced the municipality's long-standing heritage narrative that branded the city as a site of British colonial heroics with a narrative marking it as a place to access timeless nature. A heritage narrative tied to nature may seem to be an unusual choice for a densely urban place like New Westminster, but it is not a unique one (Prytherch 2002). Of the multiple "possibilities for telling the past" (Reno 2016, 139), including several globalist narratives, what does it mean that current municipal leaders have chosen to tie the city's past, and thus its future, to nature? Following Nikolas Rose, Matthew Hull (2010, 258) notes that in democratic states, planners have learned to govern "not by denying but by working with people's desires, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs." Through repeated exposure – in the press, at city council meetings and at public fora to solicit citizen perspectives – to assertions that various planning decisions are meant to (re)connect the city's neighbourhoods to the river, residents come to desire time at the riverfront. They learn also to experience visits to the riverfront as opportunities to experience nature. As Rotenberg (1993, xiv) observes, by participating in discourse, residents "act on their understanding to disproportionately shape to their purpose the urban places they control." New Westminster's heritage marking has always reflected middle-class sensibilities and aesthetics, bracketing the existence of working classes and ethnic minorities. I hope to show that the contemporary nature-as-heritage narrative, like the older colonial heritage stories, is meant to indigenise residents and orient them to localist concerns.

The data for this article come from research conducted in New Westminster primarily between 2011 and 2015. New Westminster is a mid-sized city within Metro Vancouver and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The city is situated on the north bank of the Fraser River, approximately 25 kilometres from downtown Vancouver, and between the inner suburban city of Burnaby and the region's outer suburbs. From the early 1900s through the 1980s, the city's waterfront was lined with lumber mills, shipyards, commercial fishing boats and services, and port terminals that employed substantial numbers of male and female residents. Today, like many waterfront cities, the industrial waterfront is substantially reduced, and much of the formerly industrial waterfront land has been or is being redeveloped with housing, retail and linear parks. Recognition that knowledge of the working waterfront was disappearing along with the shipping wharves and sawmills was part of the impetus for the research that informs this analysis.

For the sake of complete disclosure, I have lived in New Westminster since 2007 and have observed many of the changes reported here from the perspective of both a local citizen and ethnographer. Nonetheless, research design and data collection were the result of collaborative efforts by faculty and students from Simon Fraser University, retired longshoremen who had worked on the city's docks, individual city residents and the New Westminster Museum and Archives.<sup>1</sup> Oral history, ethnographic and archival methods were employed to document waterfront work in the city from the end of the Second World War to the present. Although we did record changes in waterfront land use, data collection concentrated on documenting work and work lives rather than workplaces. Additional data came from formal and informal ethnographic interviews with city staff and from observations of city council and other public meetings, but the bulk of the data was obtained through oral history interviews with current and former waterfront workers and with a handful of current waterfront residents. The research team sought to document past and present waterfront work to uncover local working-class histories. We were also concerned with transcending broader linear narratives about urban waterfronts that posit the uniformity and homogeneity of the old industrial waterfront – a place of work – as well as its replacement by a similarly homogenous post-industrial waterfront – a place of non-work. The heritage narratives that are the subject of this paper emerged as a theme in the discourses about change on the waterfront.

### **Heritage Narratives in Multicultural Industrial New Westminster**

Doreen Massey (1995, 186) observed that "the identity of places is very much bound up with the *histories* which are told of them, *how* those histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant" (original emphasis). Until quite recently, the dominant local heritage narrative in New Westminster emphasised colonial and British origins. Tropes of colonial heritage in New Westminster included claims that Queen Victoria personally selected the name for the city, thus the city's nickname: the Royal City. Streets, parks and neighbourhoods carry names evoking colonial British heritage: Royal, Queens, Dufferin, Moody and Sapperton, for example. Taking a cue from officials, private real estate developers appended British-themed names to their projects, including Victoria Hill, the Dominion and Port Royal. Stories describing how the Royal Engineers, or "sappers," carved the city out of the wilderness, building roads with the trees they felled, are familiar to many residents.



The city's location at the head of the Fraser River delta made it a desirable site for many industrial activities tied to the processing and export of Canadian commodities. Until the beginning of the 1980s, the city's entire waterfront was industrial, and from its earliest days, local leaders were active in encouraging and promoting industrial development. For example, archived planning documents reveal that the city's Queensborough neighbourhood was designated for industrial uses in the late nineteenth century. The district, which is on an island and thus physically separated from the main portion of the city, did, in fact, become primarily industrial. Waterfront firms there included a large machine tool manufacturer, shipbuilders and numerous processors and manufacturers of wood products. Queensborough was also home to many first-generation immigrants, who found work in the industrial firms. Describing his childhood in Queensborough in the 1940s and 1950s, a retired shipbuilder noted that there "was nothing but immigrants down [there]. We actually had three sawmills going down [there], so we were cutting lumber, there was the towboat industry bring[ing] logs in, there [were] the sawmills, which paid a good wage, and you didn't really have to speak English as long as you worked hard . . . My school, I think we had 28 to 30 nationalities just in my class" (Les Gunderson, interview, 18 February 2014).

Immigration to New Westminster has mirrored that of Canada as a whole, so in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, most immigrants came from Europe. The city, however, also has a cosmopolitan history as an "arrival city" (Saunders 2011) and from its early decades counted substantial numbers of Chinese, First Nations and Punjabis among the Italian, Scandinavian, Irish and British residents. Despite the continuous multi-ethnic character of the city, colonial heritage narratives omit mention of Aboriginal residents who were part of the early city. The emphasis on British roots also bracketed other possible tellings of the city's history that could have included non-British and non-white settlers. For example, the retired shipbuilder Les Gunderson, whose parents came from Norway, and others who grew up in postwar New Westminster described a cosmopolitan "mobility of the imagination" (Radice 2015, 588) afforded by the city's diversity; working-class adults and children attended festivals and celebrations in the homes, churches and social halls of ethnically varied neighbours. These were neighbour-to-neighbour interactions among the city's working-class residents; such interactions do not appear to have been shared by those in the middle classes.

Within the mainland portion of the city, local leaders chose the downtown waterfront as the location of an

international shipping terminal; in 1913, they established the New Westminster Harbour Commission to oversee port operations. The following year, when the federal government proposed to erect a government grain elevator in the Lower Mainland to export Canadian grain through the soon-to-be-opened Panama Canal, the mayor of New Westminster headed the delegation to present the city's case as the most suitable site.

New Westminster did not win the grain elevator, but it did succeed as a port. In the decades following the Second World War, the local newspaper, the *Daily Columbian*, devoted considerable space to covering port operations, including a regular listing of the ships at dock. A lifelong resident and daughter of a waterfront worker, recalling her childhood in the 1960s and 1970s, observed that "there were always big ships down there [at the quay]. It is still kind of weird to drive down there and not see any big ships. Growing up, that was just commonplace, there were always ships" (Kathleen Langstroth, interview, 16 March 2014). The waterfront was normalised as an industrial space for many New Westminster residents, but one that was clearly understood as working class.

The city prospered in the immediate post-Second World War period. Success in the city's industries contributed to success in the city's retail sector so much that a section of the major downtown artery is remembered as being the "Golden Mile" before the establishment of suburban shopping malls. In addition to retail, the downtown was populated by professional and financial service firms directly tied to the local waterfront industries (Rashman 2016). City leaders nonetheless reinforced the physical and social separation between the industrial waterfront and the retail shops and offices in the downtown area, requiring commercial trucks to use the road hugging the waterfront rather than the downtown thoroughfare one block inland. While the industrial riverfront remained accessible to local residents, this period is now remembered as the city "turning its back to the river."

By the mid-1960s, industry began to shift from New Westminster's waterfront to suburban, inland and, eventually, international locations. Docks were allowed to fall into disrepair, and in the late 1970s, Pacific Coast Terminals, which operated the shipping terminal, announced its intention to relocate its cargo operations to a suburban site away from the Fraser River. Global restructuring in other waterfront industries, especially lumber milling, caused firms to shutter their New Westminster plants through the 1980s and 1990s. New Westminster and Vancouver – the most densely urban and industrial places in the Lower Mainland – were the

only municipalities in the region to decline in population in the 1970s. Both cities have since rebounded, though New Westminster lagged until very recently. Many of the waterfront industrial sites sat abandoned; piers, sawmills and shipyards were allowed to fall into disrepair. A tiny handful of waterfront industrial firms remain at the edges of the city.

In the 1970s, as industry left New Westminster, regional planners advocated for the riverfront to become a focus of new urban development; they wanted to make “the waterfront edge accessible for public use” and “connect the city to the river” (Joint Review Committee 1977, 7). Planning professionals (and many of the city’s leaders) who worked and made their lives away from the riverfront looked at New Westminster and saw a city severed from the river. But this was not the experience of all residents. Data from the mid-1950s indicate that “roughly 60 percent of the [city’s] employment was located in the industrial sector” (New Westminster 1990, 21), which, at that time, was almost entirely waterfront work. While an industrial waterfront was part the habitus of New Westminster residents, those residents went to the waterfront for a variety of purposes other than work. More than a few of the former waterfront workers who shared their stories described childhoods in New Westminster spent in and on the river fishing, swimming and playing. Working-class adults, too, had lives intimately bound up with the river. Retired longshoreman Dean Johnson, who collected many of the oral narratives of waterfront work, said the following: “I went with my [work] friends through girlfriends ... [through] their marriages, their children, their divorces, another marriage or whatever. I was [on the docks] 48 years, and the whole time with them, you have been through your whole life, their lives. [They’re] the only ones that stuck” (interview, 1 May 2014). As with an earlier urban renewal study (New Westminster 1965; see also Airas 2016), the Joint Review planners disregarded the ways that the city’s working-class residents made lives on the river through both work and leisure. Instead, they appear to have understood “connection” and “public use” as leisure activities for which the river would provide a scenic backdrop. Redevelopment since the 1980s has, until very recently, been slow and incremental. Thus, as it declined economically and demographically, New Westminster, especially its downtown waterfront, became seen as a site of crime and dereliction. This reputation has receded only recently.

In her ethnography of Kenosha, Wisconsin, Kathryn Dudley (1994) reported that many middle-class residents welcomed the decline of that city’s auto industry because it offered them an opportunity to recreate the city, both physically and socially. As Kenosha was transformed

from a working-class automobile manufacturing city to an outer suburb of Chicago, middle-class residents’ aesthetic and consumptive preferences were validated. Redevelopment of New Westminster’s waterfront has likewise advanced middle-class aesthetics, but the city’s deindustrialisation coincided with a demographic shift toward suburbs and a period, in North America, of generally negative public attitudes about the livability of central cities like New Westminster. In the 1970s and 1980s, the city’s middle class was the local business class, which depended on local industries and industrial workers. While they did not celebrate the demise of the local port, they quickly reimaged the port lands as post-industrial. With support from the BC provincial government and the Greater Vancouver Regional District, New Westminster pursued plans to redevelop formerly industrial waterfront lands with condominium housing, retail spaces and parks; even the small local commercial fishing fleet was ousted to create a waterfront park. If the city is “a discursive field in which knowledge and power produce and manage meaning among contesting groups” (Rotenberg 1996, 6), whose knowledge is privileged? In contrast to the vision of the redevelopers of a city (re)connected to the waterfront, a retired longshoreman described redevelopment as an absence: “I think the Fraser supports New Westminster, or it did [for] all those years. I’m kinda sad to see there [are] no more berths in New Westminster ... What does New Westminster do now? What have they got? Not much” (Eugene Dutour, interview, 12 June 2013).

### **The River as Natural Heritage**

Redevelopment of New Westminster’s waterfront began in the 1980s but progressed extremely slowly for several reasons, including the city’s gritty working-class image, an economic recession and the continued draw of the suburbs. Though some condominiums were built soon after the port closed, the original plan to erect condominium towers along the full length of the former port lands was not realised. One developer went bankrupt without breaking ground; another held its waterfront land for three decades, selling it in 2016. In the last decade, as central city addresses have become desirable (Birch 2009), and as land prices in the City of Vancouver have soared, New Westminster has again become an attractive place to live. However, new residents, many of whom are immigrants, are unlikely to work within the city boundaries or to think of themselves as working class.

While a few waterfront industrial operators remain in New Westminster, as of this writing, just two abandoned industrial sites remain to be rebuilt. Where millwrights and longshoremen worked, New Westminster’s

downtown and Queensborough waterfronts now host attractive, moderately priced (for Metro Vancouver) condominium housing, retail services that serve local residents, and several well-used linear parks. The delayed implementation of the original redevelopment plan has worked to current residents' advantage. Rather than a solid wall of condominium towers along the central riverfront, the city built a waterfront park called Westminster Pier Park on the four-hectare parcel that had belonged to the bankrupt developer. Redevelopment of the waterfront also provided city leaders with the opportunity to reimagine the history of the city and to present that history to the public through monuments, plaques, park designs and street names, as well as through design guidelines for private developments. City officials recently completed a city branding exercise that locates "The Riverfront" at the centre of the city's growth strategy and social imaginary.

Contemporary city officials have repeatedly and publically expressed a desire to pursue development strategies that would "(re)connect" citizens to the river, suggesting that the connections that were once there existed before the industrial period and that they were severed by industry. For the most part, though, officials have been vague as to what precisely they mean by (re)connection. The current *Downtown Community Plan* (New Westminster 2012) speaks of the need to protect view corridors, create spaces where people can interact with the river and experience tidal activity, foster stewardship, and restore the natural habitat for wildlife. Similar language about fostering environmental stewardship through proximity to the river appears in the newest *Queensborough Community Plan*, with the added claim that stewardship desires will "help knit community members and groups together" and contribute to "a sense of place" (New Westminster 2014, 75). This last claim ignores the connections recounted by shipbuilder Les Gunderson and others. Local officials reinforce assertions of nature as the heritage to be recovered or preserved. According to the city's tourism office, "remnants of the Quay's industrial heritage are still visible along the waterfront, in form of an old paddle-wheeler and a paper mill, *but the most valuable historical fixture of the neighbourhood is the Fraser River itself*" (Tourism New Westminster, n.d., 32; emphasis added). Finally, the Waterfront Vision statement recently adopted by city council reads, in part, as follows:

The Waterfront is the City's most significant cultural, economic and natural asset. It is home to vibrant and diverse public spaces, high-quality recreation, business and housing, and significant natural features. It

is an integral component of the local economy, providing employment, services and tourism opportunities while *providing a living link to the city's past*. (New Westminster 2016c; emphasis added)

Through statements such as these, city leaders assert that the river is or presents a potential connection to heritage; however, it is a heritage that is at once non-specific and to be found primarily in nature. The current city council, elected in 2014, has spent considerable time discussing and debating how best to identify the city with the Fraser River. Many of their statements draw on the assumed natural qualities of the river. For example, while discussing the proposed branding strategy, Councillor Patrick Johnstone spoke about the silt colour of the water while at the same time asserting that "it's not just the waterfront, it's the water. I think I am a little afraid of us continuing to envision our waterfront as a linear that separates us from the river as opposed to something we interact with as the river" (New Westminster 2016b). Others connect the natural features of the river to past Aboriginal ways of life. At a council sitting to discuss the city's waterfront strategy, Councillor Jamie McEvoy made a plea for restoration of the foreshore habitat, then made an explicit assertion of ties to an Aboriginal past through the Fraser River: "If people came back from the past and looked around New Westminster, one of the most shocking things [would be] how empty the river is. The river was a centrepiece of Aboriginal life" (New Westminster 2016a). A timeless Aboriginal past in nature is also invoked in the city's description of its Sapperton Landing Park:

This remarkable place was once a sublimely beautiful wilderness, home to the aboriginal Stó:lô (river) people who made this valley their home for thousands of years. The site of New Westminster is known to the Stó:lô as "Sxwaymelth," after a legendary warrior turned to stone. (Wolf 2007, 97)

The focus on the river's aesthetic qualities rather than on the social interactions that occurred there, to paraphrase Millington (2013, 280), reduces complicated ecologies and histories to a vague story about a simpler, long-past era. As well, city officials' invocations of the natural qualities of the Fraser River should not "be mistaken for a conventional informational or public relations function [of government], rather these communications are the instruments of policy themselves" (Holmes 2009, 386).

How do inchoate statements of connection to the past through the river and the waterfront translate into action? Initial redevelopment plans from the late 1970s



included boat and fishing docks that would have permitted public access to the water; these were never built over concerns about liability and about public nuisance for the occupants of the new waterfront condos. Underscoring Councillor Johnstone's plea, at present there is just one, somewhat remote, spot on the redeveloped waterfront where it is possible to walk down to the water's edge and physically touch the river. Although linear parks – only a few metres wide in most places – extend along nearly the entire deindustrialised waterfront, these are bounded on the waterside by fences or other barriers. Post-industrial residents and visitors experience the river as a visual amenity, and the barriers work to naturalise the distinction between the land-based lives of people and the nature that inhabits the river. History placards erected along a one-kilometre downtown esplanade further emphasise the natural history and ecology of the river, reinforcing the nature–culture distinction.

Bruce Hemstock, a New Westminster resident and the landscape architect who led the design work for the new waterfront Westminster Pier Park, responded to my question about how he understood the mandate to reconnect the city to the waterfront by referencing the colonial and pre-colonial eras:

If you go back to before New West[minster] was a city and before anything was settled, the water edge was an important part of the culture, and the trading, and the meeting for even First Nations, and even the people that first landed in New Westminster. So when the sappers – the British engineers – landed, that was where they lived: on the waterfront. They used the waterfront as their transportation network. They used the waterfront to meet, and exchange stories, and eat, and sleep. The water was an integral part of that. And as development continued to happen, the city began to take shape, and the waterfront shifted. So instead of that social, economic, and cultural, and environmental, and ecological edge, the waterfront became mostly a [place for] commerce and industry. And the social and cultural part of it moved up onto the banks of the river and into the city. And so street networks were developed, and town centres were developed, and that's where the cultural and everyday life happened for everyday people who worked on the waterfront, who lived and played in the city. And so we lost that kind of connection to the river from that standpoint. And as industry continued – as time went by – industry continued to get more sophisticated and more complicated, and that sort of separation from the waterfront became even bigger ... So now we're in the twenty-first century, and New Westminster is like a lot of cities in North America. They're recognising that the

waterfront is this really interesting place for cultural, historical, ecological reasons. And that industry still has a place there, but to invigorate the downtown and reconnect to what was originally that place of gathering and that place where everybody enjoyed each other's company, and we traded and we enjoyed the river, is really important. (Interview, 29 April 2015)

Interestingly, Hemstock, like many other professionals in the city, found it necessary to invoke both First Nations and British colonists to locate the commercial and social life of the city at the water's edge while ignoring the ways that more recent waterfront work was an important site of social interaction. This contrasts markedly with statements such as those by retired longshoreman Dean Johnson, whose most significant social relationships were forged on the waterfront. Indeed, Hemstock depicted waterfront industry and commerce and the everyday lives of everyday people as separate and distinct entities.

Little physical evidence of the industrial waterfront remains, though there are some symbolic references in the form of bollards and other bits of maritime kitsch (Atkinson 2007). Several factors likely worked against preservation and promotion of the city's industrial heritage. The recentness of the industrial era is one reason. Heritage advocates in the city have privileged older events and have not tended to regard those that occurred within their lifetimes as genuine history. But industrial structures and working-class histories were also devalued (Airas 2016), all the more so as the deindustrialising waterfront was allowed to fall derelict. The civic leaders involved in selecting heritage motifs have little knowledge of or direct experience with the industrial waterfront. Some local leaders, including members of the city council, have expressed the view that urban grittiness discourages middle-class families from choosing New Westminster as their home; at the same time, they argue that the city remains insufficiently urban to attract young artisans and hipsters who might desire grittiness.

For the most part, condominium developers have chosen generic maritime-sounding names for their waterfront projects – Laguna Landing, Regatta, Paddlers Landing – names that are not connected to the specific history of the sites or to the history of the city more broadly. Discussing the redevelopment of a portion of the shipping wharves, one retired longshoreman correctly stated the following: “We were talking about Pacific Coast Terminals earlier; it's all condos there now, high-rise condos. They would never know there were docks there, the amount of work and the type of work we've done, down right where they are living. They would



Figure 1: Seating in Westminster Pier Park is meant to reference hand trucks used by longshoremen in the pre-Second World War era (photo by Annika Airas, used with permission)

never know” (Lorne Briggs to retired longshoreman Dean Johnson, interview, 20 January 2014). Indeed, another interviewee, a relatively new resident and a retired teacher who volunteers at a local museum as a waterfront tour guide, reported being unaware that his condominium was built on former shipping docks.

Partly as a result of our work to document the stories of waterfront workers, the city has begun to incorporate some industrial iconography in its waterfront branding. For example, the riverfront logo recently selected by the city council includes silhouettes of historical and industrial structures, including an Edwardian-era office building, a bridge, a tugboat and a piece of conceptual art constructed of shipping containers. In direct contrast to the position that “grittiness” works against economic growth, the logo designers noted that they drew upon the industrial aesthetic often assumed to have led to urban regeneration in Brooklyn and Portland:

There is a blue-collar grit to the city that rather than ignore we should celebrate ... The city is arguably gentrifying quite significantly by merit of the cost of housing in Vancouver and elsewhere. And what that is doing is introducing a lot of young people and young families. They themselves come with their own tastes and their own ideals. When we speak of young people we are also talking about a group that is actually very much obsessed with the aesthetic. (New Westminster 2016b)

For the most part, the few physical and symbolic commemorations of industry on the redeveloped waterfront are highly abstract and inaccessible to the uninitiated.

In Westminster Pier Park, for example, the designers installed the following features: seats that pivot on a hinge, which allude to the hand trucks used by longshoremen in midcentury (see Figure 1); rolling turf, intended to conjure an image of the wakes of tugboats; and windsocks, meant as a “kind of nod to the sailing ships” of the distant past (Bruce Hemstock, interview, 29 April 2015). These motifs of the “working waterfront” are presented without interpretation and without any reference to workers, who, if they are imagined at all, can be imagined as long gone (compare with Clarke 2011). Instead, visitors to the waterfront are encouraged to experience the river as part of their natural heritage.

Despite the language of community-building through (re)connection, in practice, redevelopment undertaken and encouraged by the city has helped to redefine the waterfront as a place where individuals can find peaceful solitude or engage in private consumption, rather than public communion or work. That this has occurred became clear during the protracted discussion over razing half of a 1950s concrete parking structure located between the historic downtown commercial district and the river. In 2015, city council moved forward with a plan to remove the western (and oldest) half of the parkade to advance their vision of a “pedestrian friendly retail street with historic storefronts [and] seamless connectivity to the Waterfront” (New Westminster 2011, 9). Many residents supported the decision to take the wrecking ball to a structure widely viewed as ugly. A small but vocal opposition mounted an unsuccessful campaign to “Save the Parkade” – not for cars to park, but for the unbroken views of the river it afforded:

In the morning especially, it’s quite quiet. Even in Pier Park, it’s quite quiet ‘cause the trucks are far enough away, but definitely on top of the parkade, it’s really quiet. And it’s a tremendous view. And there’s something, there’s something really nice about being out there when the sun’s starting to come up, and I just enjoy it. And it’s fresh air, and it’s healthy for me. (Doug Whicker, interview, 17 March 2015)

At the time of this writing, the rubble has been cleared and final restoration work on the remaining portion of the parkade is nearing completion. Following a recommendation from the Public Art Committee and city staff, the council voted to install a mural depicting songbirds sitting on tree branches, rather than any historical scene, along the waterfront side of the remaining half of the parkade.

### Which Publics? Which Heritage Narratives?

One important place that the idea of (re)connection to nature plays out is in real estate development. Property



developers in New Westminster, who previously appended colonial-sounding names to their projects, quickly adopted new heritage tropes. What is interesting is that developers have deployed the nature narrative in ways that simultaneously signal the reconnection promoted by city leaders and private access to nature presumably desired by middle- and upper-middle-class buyers. Discourses of nature, for New Westminster, seem to work in much the same way that sustainability narratives operate elsewhere (Kear 2007) – they obscure class-based forms of accumulation and exclusion. While discussing the character of the redeveloped waterfront, the bar manager of a waterfront sports bar exaggerated the physical and social separation between the redeveloped waterfront and the rest of the city:

We're your typical neighbourhood pub. One thing about New Westminster – these railroad tracks out here, [they separate] the quay, where we are right now, the New Westminster Quay, from New Westminster. You ask any of these residents that live down here, "So you live in New West?" "I do not. I live in the quay." It's kind of ... a little bit of pride in that. But these railroad tracks separate the good from the bad. Because there's lot more bad stuff going on that side of the tracks than this side of the tracks ... All these homeowners down here, they own condos and that ... We don't need to sell beer for two dollars a glass to get people in here, because all these people are here day after day after day; this is their deck; this is where they feel safe; this is where they know everybody; this is where they meet their friends. (Bradley McLaren, interview, 5 July 2016)

Local waterfront real estate developers are also selling the fantasy of an elite and nearly private waterfront. Even the names of the newest projects – RiverSky and the Peninsula – broadcast seclusion. The developer of the Peninsula emphasises its private setting: "At the point where the Fraser River parts, the tower is bordered by water on three sides" (Aragon 2014). The developer of RiverSky has said that the structure will include a "public 'living room' to the waterfront" (quoted in Bartel 2014).<sup>2</sup> The reference to a living room – a privatised space – follows much earlier claims to private luxury made by the provincial agency responsible for initial redevelopment of the downtown wharves in the 1980s. The first page of a promotional booklet produced by the public agency reads as follows:

A waterfront setting is your own private window onto the world. It's a special place that lets you ponder the panorama below. People strolling on the promenade. The tugs at work on the river. The seals playing in

the spring freshette. An ever-changing vista of activity. A restful interlude for the eyes. And a welcome rejuvenation for the mind. (First Capital City Development Corporation 1987)

Evocations of nature are often thought to be part of anti-urban narratives (Holleran 2015; Millington 2013). In Bulgaria, as reported by Holleran (2015, 238), the visual spectacle of water from the shore of the Black Sea worked as a "symbolic foil to rapid urbanization and modernization" during the Communist era. Today, it triggers feelings of nostalgia for the socialist way of life, as well as ongoing critiques of industrialisation as pursued by the socialist state. In New Westminster, I argue, evocations of reconnection to the natural waterfront can appear to be progressive and eco-friendly while quietly signalling withdrawal from the public realm and its global connections.

New Westminster is not alone in claiming nature as an urban asset. Prytherch (2002), for example, shows how civic boosters in Tucson, Arizona, employ images and discourses of wild nature to sell their city to potential tourists, investors and residents. It is probably significant that nature is the feature most commonly associated with British Columbia. The provincial government urges residents and visitors to become enveloped in nature with its decades-old and well-established tourism campaign, which touts "Super, Natural British Columbia." While the Super, Natural British Columbia campaign primarily highlights the unbuilt and rural regions of the province, it asserts the juxtaposition of the urban – referred to as "fine civilization" – to the "raw wilderness," exhorting residents and visitors to "find the wild within" (Destination British Columbia 2014). The City of Vancouver, as well, trades on its program to become the world's "greenest city" and on its cityscape that affords views of nature in the forms of both water and frequently snow-capped mountains. Lower Mainland regional planners and politicians regularly congratulate themselves for pursuing development strategies that have become known globally as *Vancouverism*, which includes a "multiple use, high-density core area; a transit-focused and auto-restrained transportation system; exquisite urban design to echo a spectacular natural setting; and a peaceful, tolerant multicultural population. In short, a place that gets it right, most of the time" (Harcourt and Cameron 2007, 1–2). To "get it right, most of the time," municipalities in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia are, I believe, especially susceptible to the lure of programs and rhetoric that equate greenness with sustainability, progressive politics and economic vibrancy (Hall and Stern 2014).

In Metro Vancouver, the claim of doing urbanism “right” is also a claim about being part of nature. It is not a huge step from identifying beauty in the landscape to congratulating ourselves for designing cities that offer views of that beautiful landscape – to seeing the landscape that we have helped create as our personal and spiritual endowment. This, I believe, is what is claimed when New Westminster’s leaders make planning decisions intended to (re)connect citizens to the waterfront, or when city workers describe the river as the city’s “most valuable historical fixture” (Tourism New Westminster, n.d., 32).

Doreen Massey (2006) suggests that identifications of places with nature can come from desires for stability in periods of uncertainty or rapid change. My sense is that the claim to the Fraser River as local heritage does satisfy a need for something stable and enduring in a period when both the city and the region are experiencing rapid population growth. It is a call to continuity with the past that enables change (Hobsbawm 1983, 2). As Massey (2006) also points out, assertions of the past need not be exclusionary.

For long-time and especially working-class residents, the industrial waterfront connected New Westminster to other parts of world through the wood products manufactured locally and shipped abroad, as well as through the flour, zinc, fertiliser, fruit and other Canadian exports that longshoremen unloaded from the city’s docks. Residents also interacted with foreign sailors. One woman interviewed, a former waterfront worker, reported that she had been uncomfortable with their presence in the city; others, however, expressed nostalgia for the connections forged by maritime shipping:

When I sit at my desk and look at the river, not infrequently this massive marine lift barge comes up and down the river, and its home base is right up there, right up next to the Pattullo Bridge. And it goes all the way to the Arctic. It goes across the Pacific, that barge. And it is huge. It can lift anything. And I think, “Where have you been?” And when it’s leaving I think, “Where is this thing going?” ... I need that barge and crane in my life, you know. I need that kind of oomph, that kind of curiosity, and that connectedness with big stuff. (Heritage architect and New Westminster resident Eric Pattison, interview, March 2014)

A heritage focus on the riverfront could have been deployed to make cosmopolitan claims – to locate New Westminster in global networks. Indeed, that is how some would like to regard the heritage represented by the river. But aside from a minority of residents and some former industrial workers, no one is asserting a

different approach. As well, unlike the cosmopolitan and globalist positioning that the City of Vancouver asserts with its *Greenest City Action Plan*, New Westminster is primarily competing on a regional stage; thus, its claims are localist.

## Heritage Narratives as Indigenisation

Current official heritage discourses emphasise the Fraser River, a place to experience timeless nature, as the locus of the city of New Westminster’s heritage. On the face of it, discourses of the river as heritage appear to contrast with earlier narratives that highlighted the British colonial builders of the city. It is my view, however, despite very different content, both heritage discourses work to indigenise settlers, giving them claims to deep local roots. According to New Zealand sociologist David Pearson (2002), citizens of British-origin settler states need to legitimate their claims to territory that belonged to others and simultaneously separate themselves from Britain. Indigenising discourses in Canada have primarily emphasised the wild nature of the Canadian landscape, especially underscoring a process in which Canadian farmers, miners, woodsmen and (now) recreational adventurers tame the wilderness while absorbing some of its wild qualities (Baldwin 2009). While indigenising discourses often imagine unbuilt and rural places in Canada, there are urban versions such as New Westminster’s narrative of colonial settlement. In Pearson’s (2002) analysis, former settlers of British origin performed indigenisation by marking their own difference from obvious “others,” including racialised minorities and actual Indigenous people. This was certainly the case when New Westminster’s heritage was narrated through the exploits of British colonial settlers.

New Westminster was then and remains today an ethnically and economically diverse city with the largest groups of recent immigrants arriving from the Philippines, China, India and Romania (Statistics Canada 2013). Many of the city’s residents, like Canadians in general, regard multiculturalism as being progressive and liberal (Padolsky 2000). Although there are dissenters, the prevailing view is that multiculturalism is a positive indicator of a cosmopolitan mindset, one that distinguishes Canada from other nations, a sentiment shared by many of our oral history narrators. Nonetheless, multiculturalism in contemporary New Westminster is not marked by the official forms of recognition of cultural difference – festivals, parades and ethnic displays, for example – found in many places in Canada. Aside from a Multiculturalism Advisory Committee of citizens, the city rarely acknowledges, let alone promotes, the ethnic diversity that is otherwise apparent in its restaurants,





Figure 2: Beach volleyball game in Westminster Pier Park, 16 March 2016 (photo by author)

corner groceries and hair salons (see Figure 2). Curiously, as well, there is no mention of ethnic diversity in the city museum's new permanent galleries, installed in 2014.<sup>3</sup>

Although there may be many reasons current city leaders are promoting nature and the Fraser River as local heritage, I suspect that recognition of the city's ethnic diversity is somehow implicated. What makes nature compelling as a heritage narrative? I propose that nature as heritage, like earlier declarations of British colonial heritage, serves to indigenise residents – to root them in the soil of the riverbanks. But nature works as a better testament to current residents' long-standing ties to place than do heroic tales about British colonial ancestors. To be sure, the city's colonial heritage continues to be used to mark claims to place. The owners of two recently constructed office/retail/condominium complexes mounted large signs on their buildings to make a connection to the Royal Engineers, or sappers (Figures 3a and 3b). For forward-looking city leaders, though, finding heritage in natural features is "better" than British colonial heroics because it does not risk excluding ethnically and racially diverse newcomers. Natural heritage thus suits the Canadian ethos of multiculturalism but without the need to explicitly recognise or celebrate any distinct cultures. Almost everyone can be welcomed into and invited to establish their roots in the local heritage of nature, while ethnic difference remains a private matter.

Nature is widely understood as timeless, and, thus, claims to nature have the effect of obscuring the social relations that produce place (Reno 2016, 218). The imaginary of the waterfront as a place to access wild nature helps erase the memory of the industrial work that was



Figures 3a and 3b: Two contemporary New Westminster buildings in which the owner/developer marked the exterior with proclamations about the nineteenth-century Royal Engineers, or "sappers." The line about the tented canopy is from a poem written by the building's architect and is a reference to the tents occupied by the sappers. The text facades on both buildings face the Fraser River (photos by author)

executed there in the recent past while also rendering the small number of current waterfront workers invisible. It obscures the shaping effects of previous land use decisions (Hall 2012; Urry 2007). Significantly, it locates the city's Aboriginal residents to some place out of time, allowing non-Aboriginal residents to assume responsibility for telling Aboriginal stories.

But the indigenising claims of settlers depend on the invisibility of actual Indigenous peoples (Simpson 2014). This is tricky in British Columbia and New Westminster, where Aboriginal people constitute 5.4 percent and 4 percent of the population, respectively, and where few Aboriginal land claims have been settled. The city of New Westminster has an ambivalent relationship with the



local Qayqayt First Nation, alternating between ignoring assertions of land rights and inviting the chief to open public events.

In recent years, non-Native Canadians have acknowledged the harms colonialism visited upon Aboriginal communities. At the same time, non-Native Canadians have struggled to find appropriate ways to repair those wrongs. We have been reluctant to see ourselves as directly responsible for the wrongs done in our names or to accept that the harms of colonialism are ongoing (Irlbacher-Fox 2009). In New Westminster, the response has been to largely ignore the presence of Aboriginal residents.

Contemporary assertions of the Fraser River as local heritage include subtle, and sometimes explicit, references to the Aboriginal users of the river. For the most part, however, Aboriginal peoples continue to be presented as part of an almost forgotten past, a past that existed sometime before the arrival of British colonists. Stories of the colonists' or later arrivals' relations with First Nations peoples are not told as part of the city's history – nor can they be if settlers are to lay claim to belonging.

## Conclusion

In the last few decades, as urban waterfronts around the world have been revalued as places for residence, retail and recreation, local leaders have sometimes found it necessary to update the heritage narratives for those previously industrialised places. In New Westminster, British Columbia, local leaders have quietly abandoned long-standing heritage narratives based in the city's British colonial history, replacing them with narratives that locate the city's heritage in timeless nature as represented by the Fraser River. As changing economic and urban conditions of post-industrial landscapes are narrated by politicians, planners and place marketers, the stories these people tell may stand in contrast to the memories and stories of former workers and older residents. Leaders in New Westminster speak of (re)connecting the city's neighbourhoods to their heritage on the previously industrial waterfront. The language of (re)connection appeals to many current residents, who experience the redeveloped waterfront as desirable and welcoming. Many of New Westminster's former mill-workers and longshoremen, however, experience the waterfront redevelopment as a disconnection from valued forms of sociality.

The older colonial heritage stories of New Westminster were highly circumscribed, omitting both Aboriginal and non-white residents of the city. Contemporary narratives of the river as local heritage include Aboriginal peoples, but only imaginary peoples from a

timeless past, rather than actual Aboriginal residents, past or present. Non-white settlers, past or present, are not explicitly included, but neither are they explicitly excluded.

The previous emphases on colonial heritage were claims to deep local roots, which worked to indigenise settlers in the place of Aboriginal Canadians. The new stories are also indigenising stories that reach back in time to take the Fraser River as the local and localising heritage. In doing so, nature is implicated in waterfront developments that reference environmental stewardship and physical connections to the river. Local leaders draw on a language of (re)connection to heritage through the river, while they ignore the ways in which the river and riverfront were hubs of social life in the past.

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## Acknowledgements

Research for this article was supported by a Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (#890–2011–0154, 2012–2015). I thank Peter V. Hall and two anonymous reviewers from *Anthropologica* for thoughtful comments on earlier drafts. Remaining errors are my own.

## Notes

- 1 The academic participants included faculty with specialties in education, history, economic geography and anthropology. Many of the research “products” were public rather than academic. In particular, we produced a four-month exhibit, *Our Working Waterfront, 1945–2015*, at the New Westminster Museum. Most of the 103 oral narratives of work by current and former waterfront workers may be streamed from the Simon Fraser University library (<http://summit.sfu.ca/collection/224>).
- 2 All large (and many small) real estate developments require explicit planning permission in the form of a bylaw enacted by the city council. Proponents, after extensive consultations with the city's planning department, make presentations to a planning advisory committee of citizens and to the city council and may revise plans after each. These events are open, and members of the public can and do speak for or against aspects of proposed developments. Commitments to provide features like a “living room” to the waterfront” are for the benefit of these public bodies more than for potential purchasers.
- 3 The New Westminster Museum recently issued a call to the city's ethnic communities to donate family memorabilia so that the museum collections would better reflect the city's demographic profile (McManus 2016). Current museum staff are making conscious and explicit efforts to engage Aboriginal and other non-white communities in exhibit planning and programming.

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