

Roots of Past and Present

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Abstract:

Places are not simply the sites where our lives happen. Rather, they are made, produced and contested processes that happen, take place. They are both highly personal and collectively shared. Places are also inherently political as cultural values and power relations are built into, and reconstituted, through place. The very possibilities of place are constrained by structures of power and the dominant cultural imagination. This personal natural history essay is a starting point to explore the link between people, landscape, and the complexities of place-making. Specifically through interrogating my personal connection to place in the South Interior of British Columbia, this essay is an engaged personal reflection and examination of my relationship with what I have seen as a particular kind of place—"the natural world." By way of this reflection, the essay questions our relationships with place, specifically in those places seen as 'natural,' and opens up space for thinking about the complexities of place-making, personally and collectively.

"There is? There *will* be. It's not here yet!" My mother playfully, but with a tone of chastising, corrects my father. He is describing the house they plan to build. Lost in his own vision, he is gesturing to the freshly excavated soil, dust, and rocks around him, verbalizing what already exists in his mind. "Here's the sauna off the back side by the bathtub. Here's the kitchen, it has large south-west facing windows to look towards Fountain Peak when we're cooking breakfast. On this side is the kids' room and up top is ours, which will open up for fresh air in the summer." That was the summer of 1991 and the home eventually built in that space was a shadow of my father's original vision.

Three weeks ago, my brother Phillip and I bought that same piece of land, which my parents had sold 15 years ago. Applespring. Part of returning to the past is renewal. With friends and community lending hands, we put match to wood and burnt the house that was once our home. The relentless turning of time affects all things. The once brightly painted French doors that my mother so loved stood one-hinged and flaking into the soil below. Countertops where my father rolled out biscuit dough in the morning sat forgotten under layers of rat shit. Old Milwaukee cans lay spilling out of a black plastic garbage bag near the window where I once lay on a couch sneaking precious battery time on Phillip's Gameboy.

When we spend enough time in a place it is difficult to entirely erase the marks we leave behind. On one corner, near a doorway, scrawled marks remain, documenting the changing heights of growing children. "Leif—June 23, 1994. Phillip—April 2, 1996. Anna-Raye—July 28, 1995." Even now many years later, I feel some satisfaction in seeing the moment I became taller than my older sister Anna-Raye. On another wall I can see the tattered remains of a picture I painted and glued to the wall because, for some reason, magnets weren't working on the wood framed interior. Beside the house, the apricot pits I spit down the bank one summer have become small trees. Above, a trail we frequently walked is still evident in its winding open space among the Blue Bunch Wheat Grass. The searing heat of fire and the collective work of many hands takes most of this away though. Only memories and roots remain.

Applespring consists of two steep mountainside acres punctuated with five small horizontal flats edged out of the vertical landscape. The Little Apple—a river in the spring and a stream in late August—gushes down the north side of the property boundary. "Above our heads a 22-foot beam supports the roof. Below our feet is a concrete pad to support this post for the loft where our bedrooms are." After burning away the old house, I find myself talking about my own plans to build in the same space my father did 25 years earlier. "Here's the kitchen and living space, with windows to look out over the valley and a claw-footed bathtub in this corner. The woodstove is near the front door to easily bring in wood in the winter."

The present reverberates with echoes of the past. Place will do that. Water slips seamlessly from creek bed into culvert under the road in familiar ways, but a quarter

century of successive spring runoff has altered the current flow through annual scouring and depositing of gravel. Even in this dry, hot semi-desert landscape on the outskirts of Lillooet, the trees have managed to change. The same Douglas Firs and Ponderosa Pines grow roots into the landscape, but they're wider and taller. Conifers race to grow deeper roots towards the water table below as moisture becomes rare in the heat of July. They continue vying for sunlight above, both with each other and the high mountain ridgelines of the South Interior. At the base of their broad trunks, Canadian Goldenrod, Wild Onion, and Rattlesnake Plantain play out a similar narrative, searching both below and above ground.

As a young child the world is simpler. Trees are grouped into categories of having short needles, long needles, or leaves. But mostly they exist to climb—or at least to imagine climbing—as I watch Phillip grab the low pitchy Douglas Fir branches I can't yet reach. Summer stretches on for ages, each season an entire lifetime. Orbs of Salsify seeds stand delicate and inviting, waiting for my young hands to carry them onto new places. Alfalfa blooms in every colour imaginable on the side of the driveway—a favourite snack, tasting faintly of honey. Horsetails growing next to the Little Apple are endless jigsaw puzzles as they are pulled apart and reordered. The mountains above and the Bridge River far below at the valley bottom are taken for granted. These larger pieces of the world are akin to the sky and the earth, they seem a part of what always has been and always will be.

Walking on this landscape today with Phillip I am in the same physical space, but it has new and more complex meaning. "If we cut down this tree it will open up the view down the Bridge River valley towards Lillooet." I recognize trees as important for the larger ecosystem, but this is somehow disconnected from my day-to-day lived experience. The small wonders of seeding Dandelion and broad leafed Plantain are forgotten under my feet, in favour of the sweeping lines of Fountain Peak to the southwest and up into the Camoo to the east. This is the first time I have been here since the property title has been transferred to our names. As we walk together my eyes are drawn more towards the condition of the ruts in the driveway than the exotic mustard growing along the edges. The space around me isn't so different, but my focus has shifted.

Along with the Paper Birch and Engelmann Spruce, my own roots have continued to grow into this landscape. They reach further down and keep me grounded to this place, collecting and carrying the water and nutrients I need from deep forgotten places up into the light to support growth. But they are also less orderly, intertwining into themselves and others. At times my roots extend towards imagined water or nutrients that are too-late-discovered mirages, finding only bedrock. They reach out to explore in new directions, but finding nothing of value slowly turn back or wither away. But false starts and misguided paths are part of the process of life. Without this continual process of exploration and discovery both myself and the Douglas Firs around me would remain unchanged from 20 years ago.

Roots are also important beyond their direct individual function though. They hold the landscape together. They hold our communities together. Without them, the heavy summer rains would have long ago sent the mountainsides of Applespring into the Bridge River below. Roots counteract the erosion of soil and also counteract the erosion of community. Roots hold together the landscapes upon which we all thrive, ultimately allowing the birth of new life in both plants and people. Roots have given meaning to a place called Applespring.