



Banal Naming, Neoliberalism, and Landscapes of Dispossession

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Introduction

My objective in this brief intervention essay is to illustrate the way that the ostensibly symbolic politics of naming are imbricated in the very material politics of accumulation by dispossession. I make these links by illustrating the historical and ongoing connections between what Karl Marx (1976 edn.: 873-876) termed “primitive accumulation” and what David Harvey (2005) calls “accumulation by dispossession” and linking this, in turn, to the fetishization of these social relations in neoliberalized processes of naming places. My argument, in somewhat schematic terms, is thus that neoliberalization is caught up in specific forms of naming that symbolically and materially solidify current (and historical) processes of capitalist accumulation by dispossession. In this sense, neoliberalism is not merely an economic and social order but is also part of a racial order (Goldberg, 2009) in which original primitive accumulation involved the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples and their continued marginalization through “ongoing colonialism.” Naming places thus becomes caught up in the (re)production of wider processes of fetishization that efface the social relations of dispossession that underlay modern property relations. To date, much work on the politics of naming places has focused on the contested character of such naming practices (see Berg and Vuolteenaho, 2009). In this case study of Vernon, BC, Canada, I focus instead



on the way that more *banal* and *uncontested* forms of naming help to hide socio-spatial relations of dispossession.

The Context

The city of Vernon is located at the north end of the Okanagan Valley in Southern British Columbia, Canada. The Okanagan Valley is the most northerly extension of the Great Mojave Basin, and it thus has an arid semi-desert climate complete with desert fauna and flora including scorpions, rattlesnakes, sagebrush and cacti. It is also a fire ecology zone and when I wrote the first draft of this essay there were three active forest fires in the valley and more than 2,000 residents were under evacuation order (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. North Okanagan Valley, BC, Canada, looking South-West. Smoke from three forest fires can be seen in the mountains on the West side of the valley. The land on the East side of the lake (left of photo) is part of the 28,000 acre commonage reserve set aside in 1877 but never surveyed nor transferred to the Okanagan Indian Band (Photo: L. Berg)

The region was settled by the Syilx (also known as the “Okanagan”) peoples thousands of years ago, with white colonists “resettling” the area less than 150 years ago (Harris 1997, 2002). Given its proximity to large urban centres like Calgary, Edmonton, Seattle and Vancouver, its interesting terrain of mountains and large lakes, and its mild (by Canadian standards) climate, the region has been

“sold” as a major tourist and retirement destination for Canadians (Aguiar et al., 2005).

Vernon, BC: Neoliberalism in a Small City

Given the focus on major urban centres in the literature on neoliberal urbanism (e.g., Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Leitner et al., 2007; Peck et al., 2009; Peck and Tickell, 2002), and with a regional population of just 55,418 people at the 2006 Census, a city like Vernon does not come to mind as an exemplar of neoliberalizing urban space. However, I suggest that it is small urban centres exactly like Vernon that have had to shoulder the brunt of neoliberal social and economic re-regulation in Canada (also see Aguiar et al., 2005; Young and Matthews, 2007; Young, 2008). Accordingly, it is in these smaller cities that we should also focus our analytical lens when looking to better understand how “actually existing neoliberalisms” operate (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Indeed, like most urban centres experiencing the creative destruction of neoliberalization under late capitalism, Vernon is a space of contradictions and crises, and these are perhaps magnified in importance because this small city has neither the reserves nor the resilience to adequately contest downloading of programs and services (and the attendant costs) associated with neoliberalization. Accordingly, small cities like Vernon “are sites where the political and economic tensions of capitalism manifest in exceptionally vivid and observable forms” (Young and Matthews, 2007: 177).

The neoliberalization policies of the provincial government have involved “a radical political-economic experiment dismantling traditional Fordist and Keynesian approaches to economic development and replacing them with neoliberal strategies. This experiment targets both corporate resource economies and local or community-based economies” (Young, 2008: 1). In this sense, it involves two forms of neoliberalism, what Peck and Tickell (2002: 384) term “roll back neoliberalism” (the removal of Keynesian-welfarist institutions) and “roll out neoliberalism” (the embedding of neoliberal governance and regulation). Both forms of neoliberal restructuring involve to varying degrees “the deregulation of state control over industry, assaults on organized labor, the reduction of corporate taxes, the downsizing and/or privatization of public services and assets, the dismantling of welfare programs, the enhancement of international capital mobility, and the intensification of interlocality competition” (Peck et al., 2009: 50).

The city of Vernon was once a prosperous service centre for numerous agricultural and extractive resource industries, especially forestry, an industry that has experienced steady declines in both its levels of profitability and the size of its labour force since a crippling recession in 1982 (Hayter, 2000, 2003; Young, 2008). Between 2001 and 2006, for example, the forestry labour force in Vernon dropped by 4.8 percent, while that for forestry support jobs dropped by 21.5 percent (BC Statistics, 2008). This reduction of the labour force has had a significant impact on Vernon, a problem exacerbated by neoliberal “policy reforms

that broadly but selectively transfer economic authority and responsibilities from public to private domains” (Young, 2008: 2). Policy shifts that support the flexible accumulation strategies of capital also focus on encouraging more “entrepreneurialism” at the level of local government, which often play out in ever-increasing forms of *competitive urbanism* in British Columbia.

In this policy landscape, the city of Vernon has had to search out new means of attracting capital to the region in order to increase its tax base, provide employment, and reduce social service costs arising from downloading. One way it has done so has been to encourage the development of “recreational properties” and second homes for wealthy tourists from other regions of Canada, as well as from Australasia, Europe, and the USA (Aguiar et al., 2005) (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Recreational Property Web Advertisements. Left top to bottom: “Adventure Bay,” “Desert Cove Estates,” “The Outback Resort.” Right top to bottom: “Predator Ridge Golf Resort,” “The Rise Golf and Wine Resort,” “Seasons in the Okanagan,” and “Turtle Mountain.” (Source: Author-created montage from websites).

The resource economies upon which Vernon was once so dependant are part of a long history of capitalist accumulation by dispossession in British Columbia. I suggest that it is in the more recent naming and development of “recreational properties” that we can identify ongoing contemporary links between the symbolic aspects of naming and the very material aspects of marginalization

through capitalist accumulation by dispossession under neoliberalism. Perhaps more importantly, I suggest that this occurs *not* by extraordinary forms of naming (that then become hotly contested among citizens of the region), but rather through the adoption of much more banal and prosaic names that barely attract any attention whatsoever.

Primitive Accumulation and Accumulation by Dispossession

Marx (1976 edn.: 875) argues that to understand the origins of the capitalist mode of production, we need to understand how it arose from pre-capitalist production, or what he termed “primitive accumulation.” The key to this transformation was “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” whilst transforming “feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation” (Marx, 1976 edn: 875). Harvey (2005) notes that this latter process — one that in the 16th and 17th centuries saw peasants kicked off the land, the enclosure of common lands, and the transformation of church lands into private property — is a form of accumulation by dispossession. He goes on to argue that over the past two decades or so neoliberal capitalism has not been very effective at generating growth. Instead, neoliberalism has tended to be characterized by a reliance upon accumulation by dispossession. This has taken many forms, including armed conflict (e.g., Gulf Wars I and II), asset stripping through corporate mergers and concentration, credit and stock manipulation (e.g., sub-prime mortgages), management and manipulation of crises (e.g., “stimulus” funding), real estate speculation, structural adjustment programs, and privatization and commodification of public assets (Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007).

In examining contemporary accumulation by dispossession, it is important to question who gets dispossessed, but it is even more important to historicize this dispossession. This is because there exist long histories of dispossession in white settler states like the USA and Canada. Accordingly, in Vernon, we must be sensitive to two forms of accumulation by dispossession (and their ongoing character): neoliberal accumulation (by speculative dispossession) and ostensibly primitive accumulation (by colonial dispossession). I will deal with each in turn below, where I argue that *banal namescapes* — names that raise little or no political response — play a key role in the processes of fetishization that efface the social relations that underpin landscapes of dispossession.

Banal Namescapes and the Fetishization of Landscapes of Dispossession

Since 1995 there have been at least seven major “resort community” developments in the city or on the outskirts of Vernon: “Adventure Bay Resort,” “Desert Cove Estates,” “The Outback Resort,” “Predator Ridge Golf Resort,” “The Rise Golf and Wine Resort,” “Seasons in the Okanagan,” and “Turtle Mountain” (see Figs. 2 and 3). The developers have, apparently, not relied on high priced marketers from the major cities to think up exciting names for their developments.

Instead, they have drawn upon local geographical iconographies and created what should be seen as fairly banal names for their developments. In this regard they use either generic geographical features (cove, desert, mountain, outback, ridge, rise) or locally recognizable places (Adventure Bay, Okanagan) in their names. It would give too much credit to suggest that this is an explicit strategy on the part of developers. Even though real estate development is a multi-million dollar industry in Vernon — the total value of residential building permits in Vernon in 2006 and 2007 was CAD \$226,207,000 (BC Statistics, 2008, table 7) — developers tend to rely on do-it-yourself naming strategies, rather than hiring expensive naming consultants. Moreover, naming is certainly not considered as a strategy for *reducing* visibility of developments. Yet, for some unforeseen reason, one or two developers changed their naming practices in the North Okanagan Valley and this change took hold among the rest. Instead of drawing upon exotic names that evoke faraway and exotic place imaginaries, developers have begun to use much more banal names that both invoke and evoke local place imaginaries. I suggest that the outcome of drawing upon local iconographies for names of developments is that these names pass relatively unremarked, and thus cause little in the way of controversy that might prevent capital accumulation.

Speculative Dispossession

Clearly, these developments are both caught up in and reproduce neoliberalizing tendencies in British Columbia. The rise of a super-wealthy class in the province is, for the most part, a recent feature of neoliberal taxation and socio-economic policies. As the growth of a super-wealthy class in Canada comes at a cost to others, it's not surprising to find that some people are being dispossessed by the speculative activities of the wealthy. Indeed, almost all of these developments are priced completely out of range for Vernon's residents, whose median incomes in 2005 were just CAD \$22,144 per annum (BC Statistics 2008, table 3), more than 31 times less than the average selling price (CAD \$700,000) for a home in developments such as *Predator Ridge* or *The Rise*. Perhaps more insidiously, these developments were part of the engine that drove a speculative bubble that saw average house prices rise from CAD \$154,636 in 2004 to CAD \$390,685 in 2008 (BC Statistics 2008, table 6). There is a significantly gendered component to this speculative dispossession, as median incomes for women (CAD \$18,278) are much lower than those for men (CAD \$29,541) in Vernon (BC Statistics, 2008, table 3). Whilst the current crisis of capitalism saw residential house prices drop 6.65 percent between 2008 and 2009, they rose by 3.26 percent between 2009 and 2010. Moreover, they remain at unaffordable levels for the majority of the population of the city.²

² According to the Okanagan Mainline Real Estate Board, average residential house prices in the North Okanagan region (which includes Vernon) were CAD \$394,719 in 2008, CAD \$368,503 on

These developments are thus a key part of the process of speculative accumulation that leads to dispossession. The banal names of these developments, which are designed to evoke images of the local landscape, operate partly to efface these neoliberal social relations behind images of rural idylls and “outdoor lifestyles.” In doing so, they become fetishes that hide the neoliberal social relations that underpin the dispossession of many long-time residents of Vernon.

Colonial Dispossession

Of course, this is not the only way that these developments are caught up in accumulation by dispossession, for Vernon is located almost in the centre of territory of the Okanagan Nation, an alliance of Syilx-speaking interior Salish peoples. After first contact and with very few exceptions, first the colonial government and then the provincial government of the province of British Columbia acted as if there were no original inhabitants to the region. With the exception of 14 small “Douglas Treaties” on Vancouver Island and Treaty Number 8 in Northeast British Columbia, no treaties were negotiated, and no laws were passed to explicitly extinguish Aboriginal title. In 1982, the *Constitution Act* (1982) enshrined Aboriginal rights, including Aboriginal title, virtually preventing provincial or federal governments from extinguishing such rights.³ Subsequently, Aboriginal title and rights were confirmed in the landmark Supreme Court of Canada case: *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1997 3 S.C.R. 1010).

The seven development properties occupy land that is the traditional territory of the Syilx (Okanagan) peoples, land that has never been ceded and which is now subject to both specific (relating to reserves) and general (relating to wider Aboriginal title) land claims. The developments are thus caught up in earlier rounds of dispossession by what Marx termed “primitive accumulation” and rounds of colonial practices that reinforce, often through everyday banal practices such as real estate sales transactions, ongoing colonialism in Canada. Whilst these properties occupy lands that are part of a general claim of Aboriginal Title by Syilx peoples, the Province of British Columbia has promised that it will not alienate existing “private property” as part of any land claim negotiations. Thus real estate developments like the seven in question here, which involve the partial creation of “private property,” literally cement dispossession in place.

The process of colonial dispossession is ongoing in another way, as three of these developments are located on a Commonage Reserve (see Fig. 3) that was set

2009, and CAD \$380,501 as of November, 2010 (Source: Okanagan Mainline Real Estate Board sales statistics, accessed online December 10, 2010: <http://www.omreb.com/page.php?sectionID=2>).

³ Once Aboriginal rights became constitutional rights, the only ways to extinguish them would be either by amending *The Constitution Act, 1982*, or by invoking the “Notwithstanding Clause” of that Act. The former is almost impossible given the nature of regional differences and the formula for constitutional amendments; the latter would likely create a constitutional crisis.

aside in 1877, but never surveyed nor transferred from the Province to the government of Canada (to hold in trust for Aboriginal peoples, the common way to transfer reserves). The Commonage Reserve is the subject of a specific claim against the government of Canada and has been an ongoing concern for decades to the Okanagan Indian Band, which is a member of the Okanagan Nation Alliance. Continued real estate development (and thus alienation of Crown land) on the Commonage is seen as a direct affront by Okanagan Band members, but receives almost no comment from non-Aboriginal people in Vernon.



Figure 3. The northern portion of the Commonage Reserve, set aside in 1877 by the Joint Reserve Commission. *The Outback*, *Predator Ridge* and *Seasons in the Okanagan* all occupy land inside the reserve. The latter development can be seen in the lower right of the photograph. (Source: L. Berg).

Conclusion

Banal naming, which gives these resort communities a particular legitimacy-without-controversy, is thus caught up in the dialectic of remembering and forgetting that characterizes so many white settler societies built on the dispossession of Aboriginal lands. In the case of the Okanagan region with its relatively recent colonial history (Harris, 2002), such a dialectic is expressed through settler stories of the “long history” of white settlers and their place in the region, along with two concomitant silences: one silence elides the brutality of colonial settlement, especially the confiscation of land and subsequent placement of the first inhabitants of British Columbia on reserves (Harris, 2002); another silence hides the relative recentness of colonial settlement. In this way, white Vernonites construct a story of “European settlers as bearers of civilization, while simultaneously trapping Aboriginal people in the pre-modern” (Razack, 2002: 2), thus excluding them from participating in modern life (Berg et al., 2006: 400-401). In this way, whites are able to safely ignore Aboriginal people, and banal names lend a sense of the everyday to processes that reinforce the effacement of this dispossession and marginalization of Aboriginal people. But this process also

involves the marginalization of the economically impoverished, as speculative processes drive up the price of housing in an already economically marginalized community. In this way, both primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession come together in these banal naming practices to elide the true character of these landscapes of dispossession. In the end, banality conquers all, as these processes of dispossession are never remarked upon — often even by the very people being dispossessed.

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