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Phillip Vannini, Ferry Tales: Mobility, Place and Time on Canada's West Coast

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Phillip Vannini, *Ferry Tales: Mobility, Place and Time on Canada's West Coast*. New York: Routledge, 2012 (246 pp.), ISBN 978-0-203-13610-2, US\$29.95.

Reviewed by Maximiliano E. Korstanje

Just when cultural imagings of tourism are regaining strength in applied-research, the project of Phillip Vannini invites readers to imagine the world of ferry transportation and its impact on the small island communities of Canada's West Coast. While conducting the field work for this participant-observation study, Vannini made 250 trips on British Columbia ferries and interviewed nearly 400 passengers and local inhabitants. The result is an ethnography that reveals not only how ferries condition life and the impact of tourism on the islands, but it also describes the great dependency on local populations generated by the tourism and hospitality industries. To convey how ferry arrivals and departures evoke emotions and structure the experiences of travelers and island populations alike, the author makes use of Victor Turner's well-known concept of the "liminoid" phase in pilgrimage rites. This book aims to demonstrate the importance of ethnography for decoding the deep connections between culture and technology. For, as Vannini shows, the study of technology is more than a straightforward recounting of tools, techniques, and technicians. The ethnographer must delve deep into the meaning of technology and uncover how human experiences and performances are constructed through this cultural medium.

Unlike most other forms of transportation, ferries offer their passengers a nexus of time and space where play predominates over practical activities. The slow rhythms of displacement that characterize ferry travel facilitate an unusual sense of social cohesion among the travelers on board. In contrast, other forms of transport—such as cars, airplanes, and trains—create impersonality, alienation, and distrust. Because of this, security is of paramount importance to reduce the anxieties of the passengers in these other forms of transport. What the British Columbia ferry system means to the islanders is a complex matter. It has created connections with the wider urban-based society that have sometimes been beneficial to island communities in the short term but threatening to them in the long term.

The islanders and their customs stand in sharp contrast with urban-based culture. Islander values are opposed to the hierarchal order that characterizes populated cities. The islanders prioritize the social cohesion and trust that prevail

in their communities over and against the commercialized alienation of social relations in mega-cities. The clear physical isolation that marks the boundaries between urbanity and rurality leads to an ideological dichotomy between alienation and authenticity. Nevertheless, island residents have accepted the tourism industry into their communities and commercialize their spaces for outside visitors. The liberal State promotes tourism and the mobility that the ferries provide as the means by which greater prosperity and progress will be achieved. However, both initiatives push island residents further and further into a condition of extreme financial dependency. Later chapters in *Ferry Tales* reveal how the influx of capital investment has redefined the geography and culture of the West Coast islands. Tourism, commercial development, and the market for real estate are wreaking havoc by modifying the lifestyle of the residents. The worst of it has been that many islanders have left in recent years because of the economic asymmetries that have come about along with problems in local employment. As with other means of transportation, ferries not only facilitate the simple movements of people. They also affect the flows of economic resources, a process that raises the fortunes of some localities but sinks the fortunes of others. Tourist mobility undergirded by the ferry system has become a key factor in this trend.

In keeping with the program of writing an ethnography, Vannini gives readers a clear conceptual framework for understanding what happens in people's minds while they are traveling. *Ferry Tales* invites readers to re-imagine what traveling means and brilliantly reinterprets our current understanding of mobilities. This book, which should be suitable reading for upper-level undergraduates as well as graduate students, inaugurates a new series for Routledge entitled Innovative Ethnographies. The innovative thrust of this publication is that it provides links to multimedia web sites that help to convey more fully than the printed word alone the experiences of ferry travel.

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