Book Review | Ferry Tales: Mobility, Place and Time on Canada’s West Coast

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Ferry Tales: Mobility, Place and Time on Canada’s West Coast; Phillip Vannini; New York, Routledge, 2012; 264 pages; $29.95 paperback; 978-0-415-88307-8.

Just in a moment where cultural imaginaries in tourism recovers strength in applied-research, the project of Phillip Vannini invites readers to imagine the ferry’s world reconsidering the nature of arrivals and departures. In his book Ferry Tales our anthropologist focuses on the importance of “mobile ethnography” to understand the role played by emotions in figuring landscapes and human geographies. This research is centred in examining the life of coastal communities situated alongside Canada’s West Coast. The introductory chapter starts with descriptions about the North of the Queen sinking. This tragic news not only shocked the entire community, but also raised a lot of questions respecting to the security on ferries. Our sense of security is constructed based on daily habits, our rules. Accidents, in this vein, break our definitions of what is safe and not. Reasons behind this made-man disaster remain certainly unknown and to be honest they are not important for the argument. Some alternative explanations pointed to human errors (this is the first assumption in this type of accidents), but these were not officially confirmed. The supremacy of technology leads us to consider failures in the function of machines as improbable. Accidents, no matter their nature, appeal to our sense of security and the way of thinking spaces. Our biographies - where places and times converge - are determined by death.

Ferries in Canada not only condition the life of coastal communities but also generated a great dependency from tourism and hospitality industries. Travel creates cultural landscapes by means of imposition of experiences, times, representations, and sensations. Mobilities should be ritualized following the V. Turner’s concept of pilgrimages where two
geographical spaces open the doors for “liminoid moment of suspensions.” The main thesis of this valuable project seems to be that we need to understand “mobility as performance has the advantage showing us how people, places, material things, and times are actors marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence and how they are constantly evolving organically” (p. 39).

At some extent, Vannini acknowledges that mobility is certainly established and controlled by capital and its rapidity of expansion. While politics is aimed at encouraging the rights to access mobilities in some privileged actors, it immobilizes others who lack voice and representation. To solve these short-circuits researchers should conduct innovative ethnologies collating silenced stances. In doing so, our ethnographer recurs to the “more-than-representational theory,” which focuses on the significance in practices and senses in sharp opposition to symbols and cultural codes. This new methodology re-questions the existent definition of technology (mainly referred to machines and instrumentality). Technology is something else than a mere mean; it can be defined as a form of interaction between structures and agents. Technologies should be considered in connection with technicians (experts or users), technics (tools) and techniques (ways). Methodologically, it is preferable an ethnographic creation; this means the evocation of experiences and performances than a simple representation, technique used to cite some interviews. The scaffolding of society remains covert to ethnographers, an only can be found if one delves into the emotions of self-experiences.

It is important not to lose the insight that tourism industry fabricates nation cultures and sensations to be commercialized by the imposition of tourist-gaze, but sooner or latter passengers come across with the principle of reality. It is not surprising that travel agencies do not promote in their brochures experiences related to suffering. Uncertainty and accidents should be controlled by means of visual hegemony. Tourism rather emulates dream-worlds imposing a one-sided way of travelling. There are many forms of travelling and many others to imagine places.

For some years, the existent specialized literature in mobilities developed a dichotomy between tourists and travellers. The relational investigation conduced by Vannini evidenced how there are many mobilities that depend upon the convergences between culture and technology, or “techno-culture.” Mobility seems to be based on an ambiguous nature, for on one hand its speediness accelerates the time of connections making the life more prosperous and suitable. On another hand, its effects blur the boundaries between past and present. The sense of efficiency that identifies the industrial societies imposes a discourse that evokes how a person should travel. Whether a tourist has the enough time to enjoy from landscapes and feel new sensations, a migrant is circumscribed to the eclectic nature of work-life.
Therefore, one might speculate that mobilities provide us with a new frame to understand emotions and politics. The techniques and their ways of use appeals to the notion of spatiality that denotes how a space is sensed, experienced and engaged. Unlike other forms of transports, ferries give to passengers a space of dreams where the play predominates over practices. Slow rhythms of displacement that characterized ferries facilitate a much slower travel and social cohesion on board. The anonymity of mass-transport system as cars, airplanes or trains focuses on the impersonality as a form of social relations increasing the alienation and distrust. For that, the sense of security is of paramount importance to reduce anxieties. What can be done or prohibited in travel is widely conditioned to the concept of danger. Children play a pivotal role in drawing or deterring the concern of adults as well as the necessary technologies (as maps, or GPS) not to be lost.

Aside from a particular style of life, islanders and their customs represent a sharp defiance for urban-based culture. Most certainly, islanders’ values defy the hierarchal order in populated cities from many perspectives. Islanders prioritize the social cohesion and trust of their communities before the alienation of mega-cities. There is a clear physical isolation that marks the boundaries between urbanity and rurality. From another view, nonetheless, this ideological dichotomy between authenticity and alienation leads residents to commercialize their spaces to outsiders. Although the tourism industry is adopted in these communities as a form of activity, many of locals have historically migrated from urban populated cities. The rural identities given by insulation becomes in a challenge for the encounter tourism generates. The liberal State promotes tourism and mobility as sources of prosperity and progress, but without regulation both push residents to a state of financial emergency. The nineteenth and twentieth chapters are the most illustrative respecting to the role of capital in drawing the geography of islands. Tourism, commercial development and real estate are wreaking havoc in modifying the style of life of residents. But worse comes to worst, many islanders moved in last years because of economic asymmetries and problems in local employment. Basically, as other means of transport, ferries not only affect movements but also distribute the necessary resources from one to another direction in order for landlords enhance their profits. This result in a real estate that increases launches some soils sinking others. The costs of tourist mobilities are a key factor to expand the current understanding of physical discrimination (gentrification).

As the previous background is given, this book is organized in basis of seven sections. The first contains relevant information for introductory purposes. The second and third parts refer not only to the experience of travelling in ferry boats, but also in how the sense of place is changing to be adapted to community’s gazes. Sections Four and Five debate to what extent this activity generates relations of subordination in ferry-dependent
communities. The two last sections reveal the ritualized expectances and experiences of travellers before departure. Structured in an all-encompassed viewpoint, Vannini provides readers with a clear conceptual framework to determine what happens in people minds at time of travelling. More than a simple book, ferry tales invites readers to imagine travels and re-interpret brilliantly our current understanding of mobilities.