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## THE CITY AT THE END OF THINGS

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### ABSTRACT

What does it mean to photograph a *remainder*? Sudbury Ontario, a Northern city responsible for a vast chunk of the world's nickel production, has produced a landscape full of distances, absences, and looming architectures. In this photo essay, I take my hometown of Sudbury as an example of what Phil A. Neel (2018) dubs *Hinterland*, that growing desert between urban centers characterized by active (and abandoned) sites of extraction. Sudbury's nickel mine remains active, but recent economic decline, catastrophic cuts to educational funding, and a crippling wave of fentanyl addiction have multiplied the *presence of absence*. In this photo essay, I have attempted to photograph the feeling of aesthetic *remainder* – whatever is left of a city's presence when something fundamental has been *subtracted*. Empty streets. Closed businesses. The slow creak of a rusty sign. Factories subtracted of workers, looming watertowers subtracted of water. Occasionally, a freight train wanders south, subtracting a few thousand tons of ore. It is the remainder of these subtractions that I have hoped to capture.

### KEYWORDS

hinterland, anthropocene, ontario, partial object, anthropology, visual ethnography

### BIO

Damián Arteca is a master's student in psychiatry at McGill University (Montréal, Canada) and senior research fellow at McGill's Building 21. He holds a Bachelor's in Philosophy and Anthropology. He currently studies the dynamics of cultural ontologies from the perspective of neuroscience and cognitive anthropology. Outside of his more scientifically-oriented work, however, Damián remains interested in the methodologies of visual and textual ethnography. Returning to his hometown of Sudbury, Ontario, for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, he composed this photo essay over the months of February and March of 2021.

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*“The Hinterland is the sunken continent that stretches between the constellation of spectacular cities, the growing desert beyond the palace walls” (Neel 2018)*

*“Lurid and lofty and vast it seems; It hath no rounded name that rings, But I have heard it called in dreams; The City of the End of Things” (Archibald Lampman, 1899, writing about Sudbury, Ontario)*

### **Two Cataclysms Make a Hinterland**

The city of Sudbury Ontario finds its origins in the mid 1800’s, at the conjunction of two cataclysms of production. The first of these cataclysms was colonial. In the 1850’s, the Robinson Huron Treaty was formed between the British Empire and the Ojibwe First Nations of the Algonquin group. On this front, the cataclysm continues: the Ontario government, over 150 years later, is appealing a recent decision won by First Nations groups regarding honoring the treaty’s terms. The second of these cataclysms was prehistoric. Nearly 2 billion years ago, a meteoric impact shattered the earth’s crust, creating a basin vast enough to cup the entire municipality. This apocalypse left a soil rich with metallic ore -in particular nickel, which was discovered accidentally during the construction of the Canadian railway. The intersection of these two catastrophes – the colonial expansion and the Paleoproterozoic meteoric impact- set the stage for one of the globe’s most intensive projects of raw material extraction. Decades of pollution have stained Sudbury’s granite hills an ebony black (photo 7) in an irreversible chemical reaction. A folk tale (I’m told is at least half-true) tells that the Sudbury’s landscape was once so desolate that the moon landing was practiced on its surface. Everywhere, evidence of extraction and relocation – the symptoms of a *Hinterland*.

What is a Hinterland? In his 2018 essay “Hinterland”, Phil A. Neel defines his eponymous concept as “[a] often heavily industrial space - a space for factory farms, for massive logistics complexes, for power generation, and for the extraction of resources from forests, deserts, and seas” (Neel 2018: 17). The Hinterland is the space of negative extraction which sustains the political-administrative urban cores concerned with productive generation: manufacturing, cultural commodities (‘creatives’), finance, real estate, and so on. The material substrate which sustains this economic superstructure is provided by those communities which exist as sites of extraction.

Hinterlands paradoxically sustain global flows of power while remaining isolated from them: Sudbury’s nickel built the bulk of the United States’ accumulation of missiles during the cold war, but received little of the spoils of the military-industrial complex. During my childhood, the nickel mine was bought out by Brazilian multinational *Vale*: but again, this link to global flows left the community *more* severed from them, as work conditions in the mine have steadily deteriorated since the buyout. The inhabitants of these extractive sites, active or abandoned, are the ‘hinterlanders’. And what of the lives that are lived there – the lives that perform this extraction? And when this extraction is abandoned – what of *those* lives, that exist as a sort of intergenerational remainder?

To be clear, it is not that Sudbury can be fully characterized by lack. Sudbury is not purely a *negative space* – it insists upon its own positive existence. There are many beautiful presences in Sudbury – many avenues of joy, creativity, friendship, and community. However, it remains true that when a community owes its inception and continued existence to a site of productive extraction, negativity remains in some sense at its core. Sudbury exists as an extractive site (a perpetual act of negative removal) that must constantly justify its connection to the outside world by expelling flows of raw material substrate. Without this constant export, there is always a fear that nothing *but* the negativity will remain, rendering the city a sort of partial object – a doorknob without a door, or an organ without a body (Zizek, 2004).

Attempts to circumvent this partiality are a constant site of struggling desires. The city is dotted with abandoned projects dictated by external investors promising economic growth. An abandoned beer factory (Photo 5) is promised to become high-end condos, and despite heavy subsidies from the municipal government, it sits unchanged. Attempts to diversify the city’s economy so as to become independent have had mixed success. It is this constant grappling with the status of *hinterland as partial-object* which leaves its landscape littered with what I suggest be called ‘aesthetic remainders’.

### Aesthetic Remainder

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sudbury underwent a concerted effort to reduce the environmental impact of its mining practices. Part of this effort involved the construction of the *superstack* (photo 17), a towering chimney that was once the tallest in the world. Its height would allow the gaseous waste produced by nickel mining (namely, airborne sulfuric acid) to catch the winds above the city and avoid creating acid rain. For much of my childhood, the sunset was cut by a thick dark plume heading eastwards. Recently, the chimney was shut down, if only because new technology allowed the acid to be captured and sold as a commodity. It stands now, out of operation, a surreal monolith peering over the city like a vast sundial.

Without its industrial function, the colossal concrete-and-brick tube seems uncanny. When emitting its plume, it remains connected to its industrial core, and thus retains comprehensibility. Once disembodied, its continued existence becomes obscene and melancholic. Thus, severed from its perceived existential source, it becomes uncanny, seemingly having an autonomous quality external to any human intervention (Zizek, 2004). This is the core of the uncanny hinterland: retaining comprehensibility only when affixed to the urban cores, once detached from their extractive function they must confront their own autonomous quality: the aesthetic result being the proliferation of *remainders*.

What I mean by an aesthetic *remainder* is simply an aesthetic quality of *emptiness* that seems to demand, in of itself, a return to fullness. The remainder of a water-tower lacking water. The remainder of a factory lacking workers. The remainder of a chimney lacking smoke. The remainder of a University lacking professors – just this past month, facing bankruptcy, over 30% of Laurentian University’s (Sudbury’s post-secondary institution) tenured staff were fired, permanently crippling the intellectual community of the city. The remainder of an empty corner store. The remainder of a church without a congregation. Whatever is left of nickel ore after yet one more, just one more train heads south. It is hard not to perceive the effect of all this *remaining* in the souls of the community’s citizens. A friend of mine once told me that Sudbury’s high rates of drug use, pregnancy and smoking amongst youth could be explained by one unifying pathology in *boredom*- quite literally, in the absence of any autonomous reality, what remains is the diversion of slow self destruction.

In my neighborhood -the city’s downtown core- one of the most salient traces of economic decay is the stark influx of fentanyl addiction. In much the same way material flows of nickel ore and sulfuric acid leak south from the city by rail, material flows of heroin and fentanyl leak north into the veins of its citizens. Both flows are productive of economic and subjective realities. Despite the sharp spike in homelessness and addiction, the city has recently lost one of its few homeless shelters. Safe injection sites are delayed. Overdoses are constant. Passing through a concrete tunnel which cuts underneath a train line, I encountered a piece of graffiti labelled the “RIP (Rest in Peace)” wall (photo 2). Underneath, four names were listed. Among them, the *Tanner*. Tanner had been a friend of mine in my teenage years. I had not spoken to him in half a decade. A few weeks ago, he had died of an overdose. Now that small, starkly beautiful shrine is part of what remains of him in the city. In the event of each of these overdoses, the city remains uncannily animated in their absence, like a key without a piano. In this sense we are all remainders – we are what remains of one another.

Ultimately, what is at stake in the Hinterland -in the land of remainders- is nothing politically new to anthropological discourse: ultimately the stakes are a matter of *autonomy*. As Phil A. Neel indicates in his 2018 essay, the existence of Hinterland is always the product of an asymmetry in the power of governance.



**PHOTO 1:** *The All Nations Church's unique architecture was modelled after the so-called "apocalypse proof" hurricane-resistant domes used in Florida. February 2021.*



**PHOTO 2:** *The "RIP" wall. Scrawled by anonymous artists in the tunnel that connects Sudbury's downtown, the wall lists the names of recent fentanyl victims (as well as a tribute to 2pac). March 2021.*



**PHOTO 3:** *The old watertower, now used for advertising, looms through morning fog. February 2021.*



**PHOTO 4:** *Freight trains and a hill of oxidized stone and slag block the view of the lake. February 2021.*



**PHOTO 5:** *A house and its garden add a bit of colour to the palette of an abandoned beer factory. February 2021.*



**PHOTO 6:** *Kilometers of the trainyard bisect the city. Behind the yards, the watertower looms. March 2021.*



**PHOTO 7:** *Years of pollution have left the granite hills around Sudbury jet-black. Lichen dots its surface. March 2021.*





**PHOTO 8:** *A train line curves its way through a residential neighborhood. February 2021.*



**PHOTO 9:** *On a clear day, a friend lies on his back on the frozen Ramsey Lake to get a look at the winter sky. February 2021.*



**PHOTO 10:** *An accidental crucifix. March 2021.*



**PHOTO 11:** *The land rusts. March 2021.*



**PHOTO 12:** *ABC Taxi, now abandoned, lingers at the edge of the neighborhood. March 2021.*



**PHOTO 13:** *The old corner store holds its Kit-Kat sign proudly. March 2021.*



**PHOTO 14:** *The hilly landscape requires bridges for rail. March 2021.*



**PHOTO 15:** *Another view of a rail line. Just off frame, a couple EverGreen containers zip past, a reminder of the economy's global scope. March 2021.*



**PHOTO 16:** *The sky opens over frozen Ramsey Lake. February 2021.*



**PHOTO 17:** *Once the tallest chimney in the world, the smokestack dominates all other Sudburian landmarks. February 2021.*

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