

Painting the Trestle: Adolescent Negotiation of Space and Place

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Abstract

In the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, the only city on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada, an otherwise unassuming piece of industrial infrastructure has taken on new meanings by its incorporation into adolescent ritual. Built in the 1950s at the height of the area's industrial boom, when post-war Canada was investing in the Trans-Canada Highway project and automobile ownership was the rule rather than the exception, a railway trestle bridge, locally referred to simply as "The Trestle," spans the road connecting the commercial and industrial centers at the eastern extremity of the Island to the transportation corridor to the north. The grade of the road, the steep embankments for the rail line, and the "portcullis"-like design have all contributed to a sense of it comprising the border between urban and rural/suburban, or industrial and pastoral, rather than the river-bridge 100 metres beyond. This idea of boundary was further emphasised by the placement of Riverview Rural High School, a secondary school whose students coming from across the region had, for fifty years, no option but to travel under the Trestle. Starting with a celebratory genteel vandalism in 1981, for the past thirty-five years the Trestle has been painted by students of Riverview and of rival schools, creating a site for boundary contestation occasioned by painting conceived of as rite of passage. Painting has moved through various levels of license, from illicit practice to a fully sanctioned school-supported extra-curricular activity to an outright ban under threat of suspension or expulsion. As a folklorist, I have been following the painting traditions for the last seven years, since an incidence of underage drinking at a paint lead to calls for decisive action. I place the practice within the context of Cape Breton's post-industrial decline, the consequences of outmigration, and the material culture of public display.