Michael Turner / A Postcard from Victoria

The postcard is a nineteenth century invention attributed to Theodore Hook, a London-born man of letters who, in 1840, addressed to himself a piece of card that carried with it a hand-painted caricature of British postal workers on one side and the requisite Penny Black stamp on the other. The postcard was delivered, and from there the sending of postcards evolved into an equally requisite activity undertaken by a burgeoning class of travellers, a succinct way of reporting on one's adventures while conveying a picture that would have been taken had the traveller a camera, access to a photo lab, and the time to wait for that picture to be developed. Today, the speed and relative affordability of travel is matched by technologies that allow us to take a picture with our phone, add a text message, and send it in an instant, making the postcard less a redundancy than something twee and endearing, like the city of Victoria is said to be by those who visit it.

A Postcard from Victoria is an immersive exhibition that began during a 2010 Western Front Media Residency in Vancouver, where I came upon an archived 16-minute video entitled *A Post Card from Victoria* (1983) by the Montreal-based duo Robert Morin and Lorraine Dufour, who themselves participated in an earlier Western Front Media Residency that resulted in the video. In this picaresque docudrama we meet a middle-aged working class woman and recent émigré from Northern England. The video opens with her in Elizabethan dress outside a re-creation Anne Hathaway Cottage, after which we step back in time to her job interview with the cottage's more-English-than-thou owner. Following that, she leads a cottage tour, then takes high tea alone at the Edwardian-era Empress Hotel. From there, a tracking shot as she walks past increasingly impoverished houses to her bedsit, where she munches on leftovers while watching a newscast of growing tensions between the Social Credit provincial government and public sector employees. On three occasions—at the cottage, at the Empress, and at her home—we see her sift through postcards, perhaps deliberating on which ones to send, and to whom (if at all).

Accompanying the video is a table, chair, and place-setting from what is now the Fairmont Empress Hotel tea room positioned against the gallery's east wall, while on the wall above the table, behind a pane of glass, hangs an array of historic postcards (1900–1960) of the Empress from the Philip Francis Collection—what is, at least from the array's central column, a view to where one takes tea as rendered by an artist from where the tea-taker might be looking. The final element in the exhibition, near the west wall, is a carousel that includes postcards that were for sale when Morin and Dufour made their video, interspersed with recently-commissioned postcards by artists asked to "interview" the video (just as the Northern English woman was interviewed by the owner of the cottage). The resultant postcards reflect the eerie quality of Morin and Dufour's work (Did you notice that when the maid pours the cottage-owner her tea, nothing comes out?). Raymond Boisjoly provides a lurid image of the video scanned from his smart phone; Julia Feyrer a staged still-life that implicates an infamous Victoria-set book from 1980 on satanic cults and repressed memory (*Michelle Remembers*); and Geoffrey Farmer a drawing of a ghost-like figure seated "within" an appropriated drawing of Anne Hathaway's Cottage at Warwickshire, England.

A further impetus for this exhibition is personal history. Prior to my move to Victoria in 1981, to attend university, I lived in the decreasingly British city of Vancouver, where I grew up with bittersweet tales of a Victoria told to me by my Shanghai-born Eurasian father, a boarder at what was then University School (now St. Michael's University School), where he was sent in 1946 as a ten-year-old after his family's wartime internment in Japanese-occupied China. These tales, coupled with my own experiences in a Victoria that anthropologist Eric Wolf once dismissed as a "sea of white faces" (at the opening of his 1982 University of Victoria lecture), have remained with me, and have informed my thinking on a range of topics, such as colonialism, hegemony, historical memory, entitlement, repression, racism, the occult, social class, and identity. This is not to say that I hold a dim view of Victoria, for in many ways it was the absence of what I experienced in this city (a lack of diversity and self-reflexivity) that allowed for a figure-ground view that, through difference, informs how I experience the world today.

While I continue to see traces of the "old" British Empire Victoria (as a tourist once again), I also see a city that, like most cities now, operates less on its own terms (in "splendid isolation," to use a phrase once associated with late-19th century British foreign policy) than one that bears the mark of a de-centralized "Empire" driven by global market forces and its ghostly flow of capital, to which we are all subject, whether we refuse that world or not. Interestingly enough, this shift towards a global market economy, aided by government deregulation (like that initiated by the Social Credit provincial government of the early 1980s), was in full swing when Morin and Dufour made their video. Although the effects of this transition are not always visible, they can be "seen," most notably in the recent history of the Fairmont Empress Hotel, where, in 1999, Canadian Pacific added "Fairmont" to all their hotels (after their acquisition of San Francisco's Fairmont), and in 2006 when CP sold those hotels to Saudi Arabia's Kingdom Hotels International. Of course to know this is not to see it but to seek it, to ghost-hunt it, as it were; and it is this ghostliness that artists Raymond Boisjoly, Geoffrey Farmer, and Julia Feyrer have both captured and reflected in their postcards.