# Pole Positions under Vancouver's Burrard Bridge: Exposure and Intersection on Indigenous Land in *Bell Tower of False Creek*

*Randolph Jordan*

I'm standing under Vancouver's Burrard Bridge on the hundredth anniversary of the 1913 reserve payouts, the government's first major push to clear the Kitsilano Indian Reserve that once stood here. Established as Indian Reserve No. 6 in 1877, the land was gradually carved up and sold off for use by the railway, the bridge, industrial works, private marinas, and a public park.[1] Today the air is thick with January fog on the shore of False Creek, blotting out the high-rise skyline for which Vancouver has come to be known (the City of Glass).[2] The view is eerily similar to what you might see in archival photos such as the one below taken by James Crookall in 1936. On days like this it's easy to imagine slipping into a past filled with the smoke of industry and the clearance of Indigenous dwellings, all the more poignant now as the area beneath the bridge was recently reinstated as reserve land following the decommissioning of the railway's right of passage through the area in 1982. To complicate matters, the reserve was awarded to the Squamish Nation at the expense of competing claims by the Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.[3] I think about Nicholas Blomley's call to "unsettle" the city through alternative modes of imagining its spaces and their construction as places by different communities with overlapping uses and histories.[4] The fog's ability to wipe out markers of contemporary place-making, generally geared toward effacing Indigenous history, offers an opportunity to rethink the land according to new realities.

My *Bell Tower of False Creek* project[5] is a set of related media works that use photographs, sound recordings, and films to explore the potential for creative unsettling

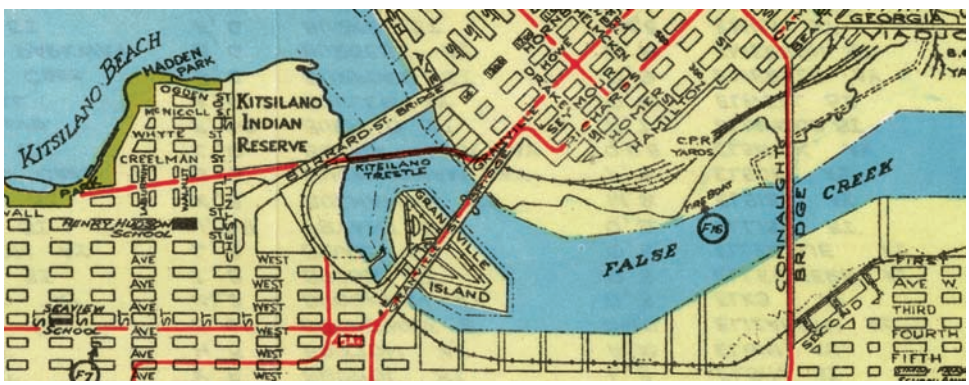



Plate 52
City Map and White Print Company, 1935, Kitsilano Indian Reserve, ca. 1935, lithograph.

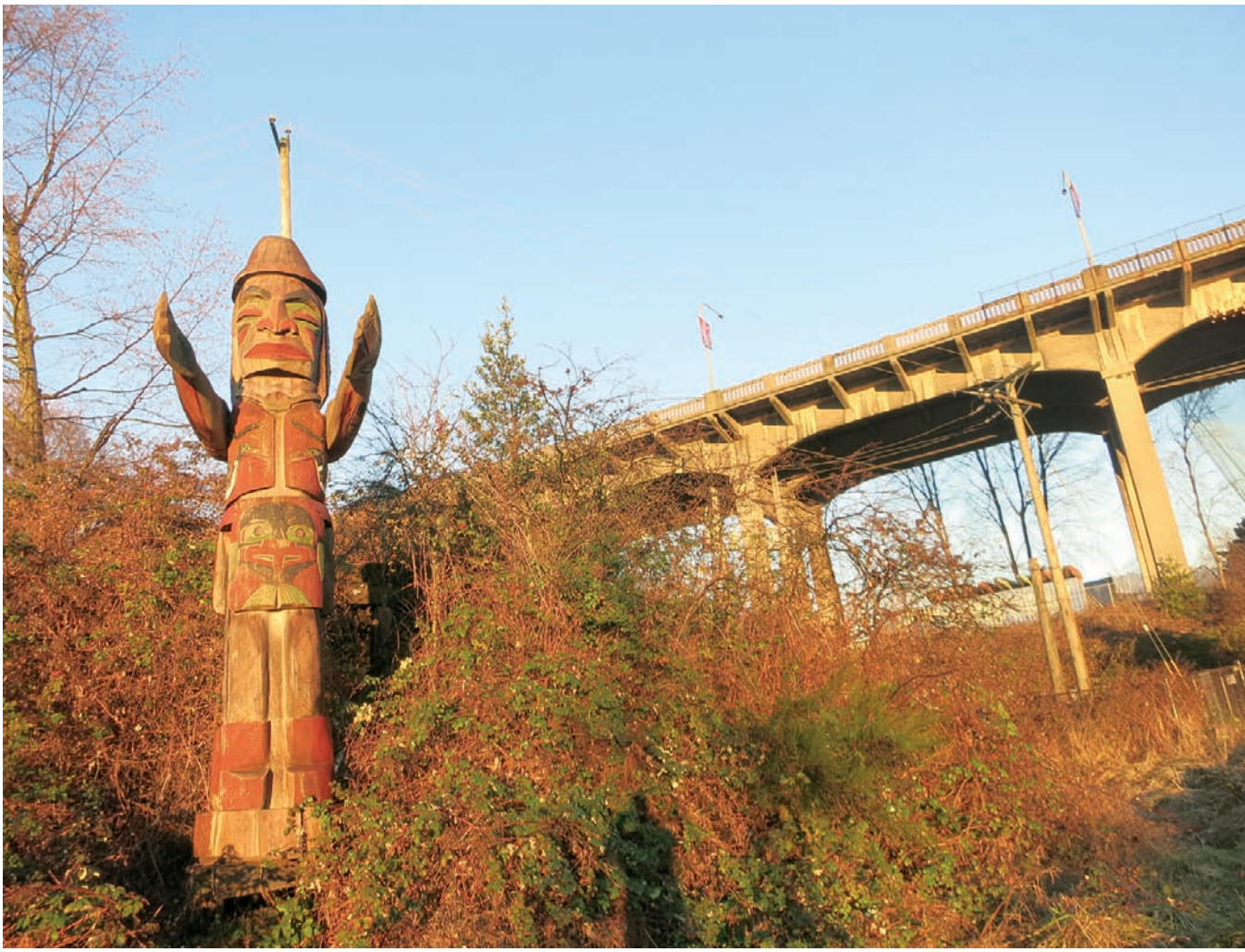


Plate 53 Opposite
James Crookall, A road beside the Burrard Bridge, 1936, photograph.

Plate 54 Above
K'aya'chtn Totem Pole carved by Darren Yelton in 2006, photograph.


Plate 55
Electronic billboard on Kitsilano Reserve #6.

of the space beneath Vancouver's Burrard Bridge, oriented around the positions of two poles that serve as distinct markers of Indigenous presence on the land beneath Burrard Bridge. One is a traditional K'aya'chtn totem pole, arms outstretched across the water to welcome visitors, carved by Darren Yelton and erected in 2006 to mark the return of the land to Squamish title.[6] The other is an electronic billboard, visible from the bridge surface, erected in 2009 to generate revenue for the Squamish band. The photographic component of *Bell Tower of False Creek* focuses on the process of double exposure to play with the notion of "pole positions," bringing visual elements into dialogue with one another in ways that challenge appearances on the ground. In the first double exposure presented below, the two poles are presented


Plate 56
K'aya'chtn Totem Pole and electronic billboard on Kitsilano Reserve #6, photograph with in-camera superimposition.

together from an impossible vantage point. As it happens, the best conditions for overlapping exposures are heavy grey skies, or fog, with a lot of texture that can serve as a solid background against which objects in the second exposure appear relatively opaque. It is fitting that weather conditions that help erase some of the markers of modernity allow for a starker contrast between these two poles on film, suggesting a host of issues in this area around legal land claims, intersecting practical uses of the land, notions of Indigeneity, and attitudes toward the built environment. In this photographic series I aim to frame these issues around three elements fundamental to the image capture process: exposure, position, and intersection.

## Exposure

The process of exposing a frame of film calls to mind the idea of land as a blank slate to be developed according to specific intention, one distinct facet of colonial attitudes toward Indigenous lands. Double exposure challenges single claims to a bounded area, allowing for overlap between different uses of the frame that might complement one another, stand in contradiction, or any number of alternatives. As a photographic technique, double exposure is well suited to visual exploration of land claims issues in contested areas. On-site, the billboard provides a figurative double exposure in its superimposition of public advertising over scenic views, an affront to prevailing civic attitudes toward Vancouver in general and the area around Burrard Bridge in particular.[7] Billboards in such prominent positions are very rare in Vancouver since the 1974 signage bylaw severely curtailed public advertising in an effort to reduce visual pollution and rebrand the city as "Spectacular by Nature."[8] But the laws don't apply to reserve lands, and this particular billboard stands as a brilliant move by the Squamish Nation to generate considerable revenue from an awkwardly shaped parcel of land under the bridge. As such, the billboard upends stereotypes about Indigenous use of land and the long-time association between Native cultures and "unspoiled" wilderness. The billboard also confronts the appropriation of totem poles by settler cultures as a safe marker of Indigeneity long past and with no current claim to the land.[9] This pole isn't safe, because it marks a contest to the use of this land in the present. Exposing the frame twice to reveal the poles together, a vantage point impossible on the ground, invites the viewer to contemplate the ways in which their contemporaneity challenges received wisdom about urban Indigeneity.

## Position

Position is essential to the functioning of the two poles. The billboard requires visibility from the bridge surface to attract the eyes for which advertisers will pay. Simple enough. The welcome pole, on the other hand, is placed at the exact spot where the Kitsilano Trestle Bridge once crossed the shoreline, the first transgression of the original reserve area in 1899, demolished just as Vancouver was on the push for Expo '86 to capture the world's attention as one of its most beautiful and "livable" cities. The False Creek area, previously industrial for many decades, was newly redeveloped around the principles of gentrification and primed to boom. The welcome pole thus stands, in part, as a sign of competing claim to "best" use of this valuable land and is oriented in the same general direction that the trestle bridge once ran, contrary to the traditional use of such poles to orient the arms toward the mouth of a bay in order to welcome arrivals by sea. In the second of my double-exposure images, I graphically reorient the pole to face the bridge, and the bay on the other side, posing

a visual question about the pole's relationship to the bridge and my own position in relation to both. On the one hand, the bridge was an early example of how urban development robbed Indigenous peoples of their land. On the other hand, the bridge is now instrumental in the new use to which the Squamish Nation is putting the land. Understanding the billboard as positive marker of urban Indigeneity requires an alternative perspective, an ideological shift that I am attempting to emulate through the camera's ability to offer perspectival reorientation within the frame.

## Intersection

The process of double exposure always reveals points of intersection between the exposed planes, an effect I am interested in for its potential to reveal the uneasy co-presence of elements brought together within a single frame. Across this photo series I explore a range of possibilities in rendering evidence of double exposure visible within the frame through variable points of intersection between the two layers. This variability is perhaps most obvious in compositions that highlight the remarkable graphic similarity between the two poles when viewed from directly beneath. Although purely coincidental, identifying the aesthetic similarity is one path to acknowledging the billboard as a legitimate sign of twenty-first-century urban Indigeneity, challenging the stereotypes of an ancient, dead culture that position totem poles as historical artifact rather than current practice.[10] In the film component of this project, I animate the process of understanding the work of one pole in relation to the other through a dissolve that allows the two poles to share the same space in the frame with continually shifting levels of intersection. Here opacity and transparency both have their functions, the dominance of one pole yielding to the next, while the process of transition provides a sense of ephemerality that can evoke the transient nature of the land, spirits of the past lingering in the present moment, and the need to account for history while acknowledging the present.

## Variations in Motion

The spatial reorientation of pole positions across my photo and film works documenting Burrard Bridge reveal my fluctuating positionality, enacted through the very process of capturing the images themselves. Exposing two shots on a single frame requires that I move between shooting locations between each exposure, grafting the element of time onto each photograph as a function of memory. Since these images are captured on analog cameras with no monitor on which to review shots on-site, framing double exposures requires that I keep the first frame in mind as I compose the second. Thus, the positioning of the landmarks within the frame is a function of

Plate 57
K'aya'chtn Totem Pole and Burrard Bridge, photograph with in-camera superimposition.

Plate 58
K'aya'chtn Totem Pole and electronic billboard next to Burrard Bridge, Photograph.

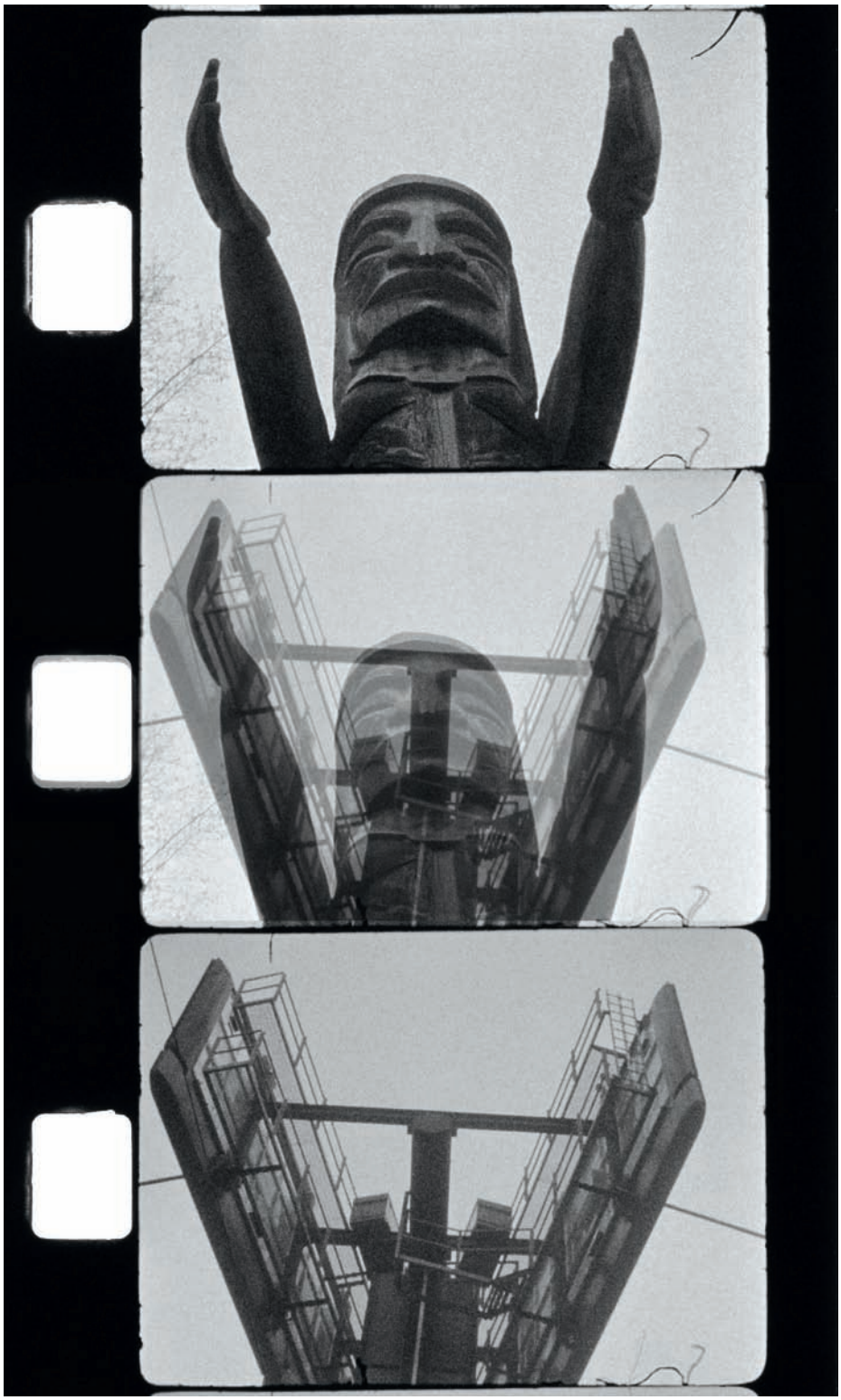


Plate 59
K'aya'chtn Totem Pole and electronic billboard, 2017, Super 8mm film footage from short film *Bell Tower of False Creek*.

how my continually shifting position on the land affects my memory of each composition as I prepare the next. This is a fitting exercise for my desire to document the legacy of appropriation, remembered and forgotten, on lands that continually shift status as uses intersect. Yet my process – similar to the sound compositions that I have made alongside these images – functions along the lines of what Dylan Robinson describes as "hungry listening," a term that identifies the assimilation model enacted on lands and cultures by original settlers as a form of hunger that persists through their descendants to inform contemporary encounters with Indigenous art.[11] The assimilative instinct is apparent in my own attempts to make of the land what I will through my acts of media capture. In my desire to interpret the "meaning" of these poles in their positions on this land, a function of Indigenous knowledge to which I am not privy, I am hungry. And there is a danger, here, in my "sampling" of Indigenous work, like the welcome pole, into images, films, and sound compositions that rely on claims to the infinite and inevitable cross-referencing across global peoples that provides licence to cultural appropriation.[12] At least the fate of the land itself will not be decided by me, and my documentation in the *Bell Tower* project might stand best as a marker of the instability underlying the final years of this unsettled space, now primed for another major shift as the Squamish Nation begins a major residential development project flanking the bridge in 2021.[13] Those who bemoan the "blight" of the billboard's affront to Vancouver's "view imperative"[14] now face a substantial perspectival reorientation around twenty-first-century Indigeneity.

## Notes

1 Susan Roy, "Mapping Tool: Kitsilano Reserve," Indigenous Foundations, accessed May 2022, http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/mapping_tool_kitsilano_reserve/.

2 Douglas Coupland, *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009).

3 Jean Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver," *BC Studies* 155 (Autumn 2007): 29.

4 Nicholas Blomley, (2004) *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

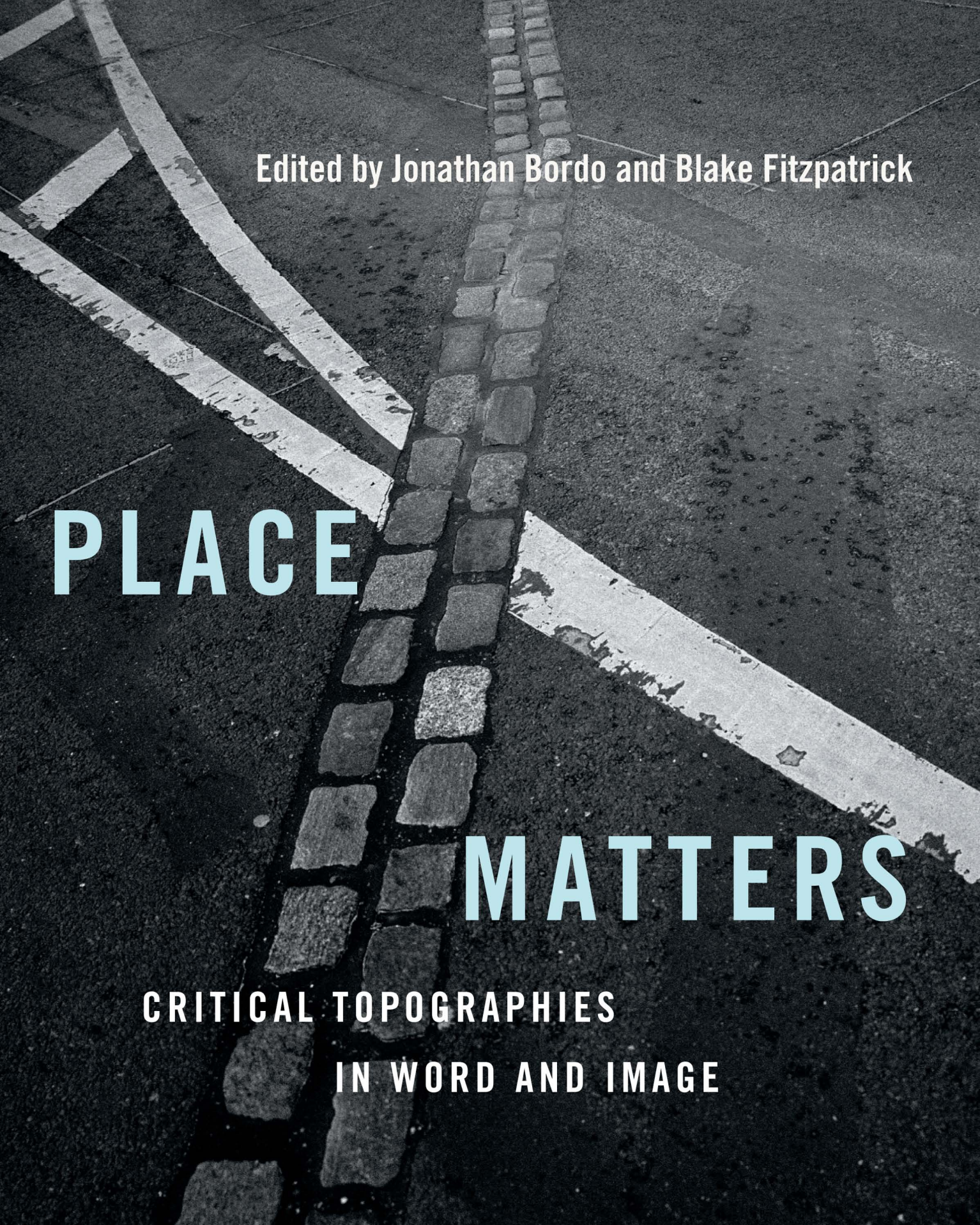
5 Randolph Jordan, "Unsettling the World Soundscape Project: The Bell Tower of False Creek, Vancouver," *Sounding Out!*, 3 September 2015, https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/09/03/unsettling-the-world-soundscape-project-the-bell-tower-of-false-creek-vancouver/.

6 Elizabeth Newton, "Kitsilano K'aya'chtn," *Creators Vancouver*, 19 August 2016, https://creatorsvancouver.com/welcoming-figure/.

7 Megan Stewart, "Bringing the Squamish Nation into the Global Market," *Vancouver Magazine*, 2 March 2010, www.vanmag.com/the-rise-of-the-squamish-nation.

8 Nancy Noble and Mari Fujita, *Neon Vancouver, Ugly Vancouver* (Vancouver: Museum of Vancouver, 2011), 6.

9 Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity," 29–30.
10 Ibid.
11 Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Sound Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 2.
12 Ibid., 130.
13 Jon Azpiri and Simon Little, "Squamish Nation Approves 11-Tower Development Near Burrard Bridge," *Global News*, 11 December 2019, https://globalnews.ca/news/6284011/squamish-nation-development-near-burrard-bridge/.
14 Lance Berelowitz, *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 25.


Edited by Jonathan Bordo and Blake Fitzpatrick
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