

A Man-Made Natural Wonder

by Jeremy Cohen

“What’s in the bag m’am?” She shuffled in her purse. “Oh, you know...stuff.” My mom answered the customs officer at the Canadian border with a “who, me?” response, since we were completely innocent travelers. We were crossing over to see Niagara Falls. The Canadian side offered better views of the massive series of naturally formed waterfalls. That was probably the cause of the problems I had in “seeing” the falls. I’ll elaborate on this further, but even though I was looking right at them, it felt like something was missing from the total experience. Walker Percy, an esteemed novelist, summed up this feeling in his essay “The Loss of the Creature.” In the piece, he talks of a loss of sovereignty over experience—our original sense of a place independent of stigma and preconception. He offers a solution: a “recovery” process of gaining back that which humanity has destroyed with its influence. However, according to Percy, full recovery isn’t a typical outcome.

Glaciers formed Niagara Falls naturally many years ago. However, nowadays, one cannot imagine what the setting originally looked like before the town surrounding it boomed. Looking out over the falls, the golden arches of a miniature fast-food utopia blazed into the night sky with a phosphorescent glow rivaled only by the multi-story Best Western next door. Ignoring these artificial distractions, we sought out a clerk for a guide on how to tackle the falls, but were redirected to an informational kiosk. The three-dimensional display exclaimed, “Welcome to Niagara” and gave a listing of tours available that day. To say that there weren’t many options available to the tourist who wanted to “see it all” would be akin to blasphemy in the church of the falls. Our first viewing option was a towering mass of steel, rising hundreds of feet into the sky and eclipsing the sun. The giant spire, à la the Seattle Space Needle, offered express elevators and a spectacular 360-degree view from the top. Among other possibilities were helicopter rides, tunnels that bore through the rocky interior behind the falls, a shoddy walkway that actually allowed passage through the falls (raincoats were provided *gratis*), and a harbor boat that cruised around the base of the falls offering tours. Epitomizing the falls hysteria was a structure we thought was a bridge to the other side. But it was only a bridge that led us halfway over the falls, with a glass floor allowing us to gaze right into the heart of the falls. My mom, brother, and I went on almost all of these tours mainly because we booked a hotel for two days, and there wasn’t anything else to do there. After the whirlwind of “falls” mania, I felt jaded.

I got back to my hometown exhausted. My grandparents, who lived in Canada growing up, had talked about the wonders of the great falls my whole life. I know I didn’t feel the same sort of awe at the sight of the falls that they did. I felt like what Percy calls a “consumer of experience.” I was sold the Niagara Falls experience just as the surrounding businesses chose to sell it.

With all the roaring rapids and clouds of mist in the square mile of Niagara, the one thing that stood out the most for me was found inside a Burger King, of all places. The trash bins opened automatically upon sensing hand movement. I had seen waterfalls before, especially Niagara, in magazines and on the Discovery Channel, but never before had I seen something like this. In fact, everyone in the restaurant seemed delighted to be there, inside, eating hamburgers, while everyone outside complained about rain, sunburn, and getting their photograph taken. I figured the falls should have had a greater effect on people than a Burger King that can be found in thousands of locations across the world—a man-made

pre-fab abomination of neon and cinderblock. So I can only assume that what was missing for me flew right over others' heads as well.

What was missing was authenticity, my own sovereign experience, "it." How could I recover it with so many preconceptions and enforced rituals of enjoyment for a natural wonder such as the falls? Percy offers several suggestions, but the most applicable one to my experience occurs as "a consequence of a breakdown of the symbolic machinery by which the experts present the experience to the consumer" (470). Perhaps if it were Sunday, and all the tours were shut down, and the crowds had gone home for the day, the vendors and their ilk would lose their hold on the reins and let us experience the falls. The "experts" are those whom we look for to tell us to jump. They define the experience by telling us what the experience is or should be—in this case, that one should ride the "Maid of the Mist" boat tour across the harbor in order to fully experience the falls. Or that, by being hundreds of feet in the air above it, somehow one will feel enlightened and "get it."

Knowing that the only way to "recover" an experience like mine is by wrestling back the hold of the "experts," it seemed impossible to experience Niagara Falls any other way than how I did. The sheer intensity of the other tourists, who like us were just trying to "see" the falls, brought forth the typical mob scene that led to consumer-crazed chaos. Everyone was selling a piece of the falls—in t-shirts, snow globes, and hats. Everyone else was selling an experience, pushing slogans all saying the same thing: "Come with us, and have the experience of a lifetime!" I found that instead of focusing on the falls themselves, I ended up being endlessly fascinated with the humanity of the place. Strange-looking people, beautiful people, and nondescript people were crawling out of every crevice while I fished for the snippets of their conversations like salmon swimming upstream. Percy explains the phrases "This is it" and "Now we are really living" as meaning that "now at last we are having the acceptable experience" (473). This is the mantra of the nü-falls, Niagara Incorporated.

My trip to Niagara was not unique. It was or has been felt by countless other "patrons." The falls are a business. I couldn't recover anything from a site so decayed by incorporation it practically begged to be sponsored by Coca-Cola. Percy talks about breaking down the "machinery" of the experience, but the machine itself cannot be broken down because it has already lobotomized the original essence of the falls and parasitically attached itself to them. Sovereignty cannot exist independent of outside influence because the mere notion of sovereignty requires an individual to declare it. Therefore, recovery was in my hands, but I failed to see it, and all I got was a lousy shirt.

Work Cited

Percy, Walker. "The Loss of the Creature." *Ways of Reading*. Eds. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. 7th Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005. 467-484.