

Lost Movie Theatres, Niagara Falls, Ontario: Movie-going in a Cross-border City by Joan Nicks

Disappearing Motels, Niagara Falls, Ontario: Cultural Decline of a Post-war Travel Icon by Joan Nicks

Paul Moore

Volume 116, numéro 1, spring 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110106ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110106ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Moore, P. (2024). Compte rendu de [*Lost Movie Theatres, Niagara Falls, Ontario: Movie-going in a Cross-border City* by Joan Nicks / *Disappearing Motels, Niagara Falls, Ontario: Cultural Decline of a Post-war Travel Icon* by Joan Nicks]. *Ontario History*, 116(1), 121–125. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110106ar>

social and economic meaning behind the music—will also find much to appreciate. Laxer—an experienced musician himself—takes time to appreciate the content and structure of some of the musical pieces of the time.

Furthermore, the combination of the abundance of detailed examples and vivid writing will help to provide any reader with an understanding of daily life and important social and economic interactions in fur trade society. As well, there is a clear

and careful effort in this work to provide ample contextual information on fur trade history and on the culture and societies of Indigenous peoples at the time. As such, even the most novice of fur trade historians and Indigenous ethnographers can understand and appreciate the more specific detailed information.

Matthew Jollineau
Historical Interpreter Volunteer, Fort William Historical Park

***Lost Movie Theatres,
Niagara Falls, Ontario
Movie-going in a Cross-border City***

by Joan Nicks

Niagara Arts Centre, 2022, 256 pages.
\$30.00 Soft Cover ISBN 978-0-9784464-3-7.
artists@nac.org, ph: 905-641-0331.

***Disappearing Motels,
Niagara Falls, Ontario
Cultural Decline of a Post-war Travel Icon***

by Joan Nicks

Niagara Arts Centre, 2022, 319 pages.
\$35.00 Soft Cover ISBN 978-0-9784464-2-0.
artists@nac.org, ph: 905-641-0331.

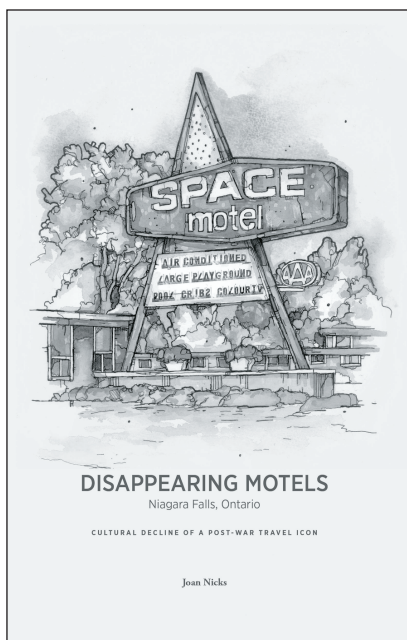
Deeply personal without being autobiographical, celebratory while maintaining a critical edge, Joan Nicks' pair of local histories offers an intensely local perspective on her lifelong hometown, Niagara Falls. *Lost Movie Theatres* and *Disappearing Motels* survey the history of two types of vernacular

buildings, "their social dimensions, thriving periods, decline, and closure" (p. 20, *Theatres*). The city's local cinemas were built between 1910 and 1940, with a trio of drive-ins opened in 1946-1947. All are now gone save for a façade and an emptied hull. Likewise, 1920s and 1930s tourist cabins gave way to motels in the 1950s and 1960s, which are themselves fading fast. (*Disappearing Motels* is accompanied by a set of postcards depicting the current state of many, part of a photography project by Oliver Pauk and Zach Sloodsky). The twinned projects were originally conceived as a single study, but it is easy to grasp why Nicks decided to sever them in two, since *Lost Movie Theatres* is about places of local leisure to view global popular culture, while *Disappearing Motels* is about places of local labour for outsiders to rest. Both types of places existed in every city, but tourism and movies each have a strong, unique tie to Niagara Falls.

Nicks documents the significance of places where people who lived in Niagara Falls worked or gathered, treating the famous natural wonder and its ring of tourist traps as mere backdrop to the institutions, built forms, and people of the city. Perhaps more familiar to us who are visitors,

the loud amusements of Clifton Hill and towers of Fallsview hotels and casinos do receive mention, but only briefly, as present-day reminders of lost mid-twentieth century places. Her primary method is interviews with owners and employees, surveys of historical local journalism and municipal-level decisions, with just a sprinkle of anecdotes and memories, including her own. Careful citations footnote academic and historical studies, but they are outnumbered by references to local, primary sources of all kinds. “Over nearly two decades,” the now-retired professor of film studies at Brock University notes, “the research unfolded like a detective case” (p. 20, *Theatres*). Both books also include many tangents into thematic Hollywood film analysis, sometimes in great depth. The books are written with the ease and familiarity of someone who cares deeply about the place they grew up, worked most of a lifetime, and studied in depth for decades. The result is nostalgic in tone, yes, but always realistic and aware of *this* place in relation to others. Alongside the expected local chronology of developments and historical change, Nicks continually stops to reflect upon dated, problematic relations to stereotypes of Black and Indigenous people, preventing her appreciation of this place and its past from becoming mere boosterism.

For example, in an early section of *Lost Theatres* on the 1910 Princess Theatre, on Queen Street downtown, Nicks



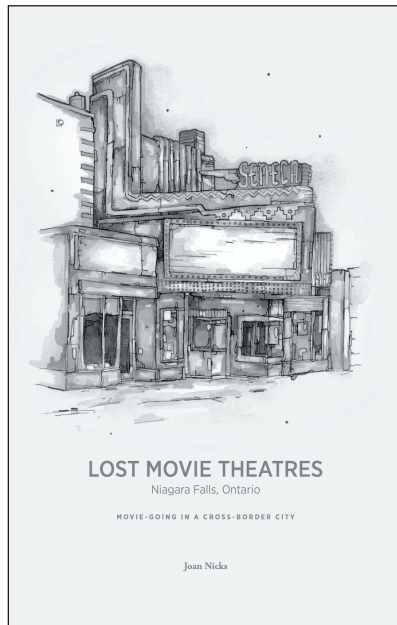
dwells upon a *Niagara Falls Record* report that a film crew from Pathé Frères was re-staging a supposedly traditional Indigenous ritual sacrifice, sending a “bark canoe containing a dummy figure of an Indian Maiden over the Horseshoe Falls” (p. 38, *Theatres*). Despite this proximity to the movie industry, the global production took ten months to be shown at the Princess in June 1911. “An extra special attraction... The Maid of Niagara. Don’t fail to see this picture, which

was taken a few months ago from the Canadian side of the river” (p. 38, *Theatres*). Nicks then uses this fleeting connection between local movie-going and settler-colonialism to provide renewed appreciation for John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) and Marilyn Monroe in *Niagara* (1953). A later section on the many failed attempts to preserve faux-Indigenous architectural elements of the 1940 Seneca Theatre also adds references to a string of movies as part of the fraught history of “Indian-ness” in popular culture. It’s the kind of insight a professor of cinema would bring, upon realizing these Hollywood films of her youth, which sustained a career of analysis, resonate with deeply local ties that go back to the beginnings of cinema.

Disappearing Motels is more squarely about outsiders’ experience of this locality. It begins with a first-person ethnographic account, with photographs, walking up Clifton Hill to Fallsview and back down to Table Rock—a typical tourist route—

and then provides an overview of the history of tourism and visual spectacle at the Falls. Nicks provides a brief overview of touchstones such as John Wm. Orr's 1842 *Pictorial Guide to Niagara Falls* and Frederic Church's 1857 painting of the precipice of *Horseshoe Falls* (p. 36, *Motels*). She reproduces the etching from Louis Hennepin's *Nouvelle découverte au très grand pays* (1697), first known European depiction of the Falls (p. 82-83, *Motels*). This is merely a brief platform, however, to launch an account of more recent debates over how to ensure this spectacular place to visit is also a good place to live and work. Indeed, *Disappearing Motels* aims to escape the gravity of familiar iconography, because "the preoccupation with growing the tourism industry has overshadowed the local community's sense of cultural identity apart from the falls" (p. 22, *Motels*). To achieve this ambitious goal, Nicks shifts continually back and forth between the local and tourist perspective, contextualizing the importance of motels along Lundy's Lane through a history of guidebooks, postcards, and brochures extolling their comforts and conveniences. The accompanying set of postcards of the present-day state of the motels is in keeping with the spirit of this methodological reliance on ephemera.

The first half of *Disappearing Motels* touches upon how the shift from railway to automobile in the 1920s impacted the spatial layout of the city. Stately hotels had existed nearby the Falls since the Pavilion



opened in 1822, more than a century before the grand General Brock Hotel was completed in 1929. Mass ownership of automobiles brought a new class of tourists' camps and travelers' cabins to the outskirts of town in the 1930s, and then motor lodges in the 1950s, with neon (no)vacancy signs promoting televisions and swimming pools. Again, Nicks adds a dash of critical insight by spotlighting the recurring figure of the "Red Indian" in 1930s and 1940s

road maps of the region, alongside surprisingly scant advice about Niagara Falls in the African-American *Green Book* in the 1950s. Black visitors were guided towards a pair of "tourist homes" on McRae Street (p. 118, *Motels*), in a residential area halfway between downtown and uptown. Just a few pages later, Nicks juxtaposes this detail with a reproduction of a 1930s colour postcard of "Uncle Tom's Cabins," on the side of a highway on the outskirts of town.

Each book has a central, film-focused chapter that acts as a feature attraction, if you will, telling a story in a way only Nicks could. *Lost Movie Theatres* has several passages that recollect local talent shows and community events held on cinema stages. These are noted as part of the subtle distinctions of the "midtown" movie-going habits of working-class immigrants, compared to first-run "downtown" norms. The section culminates with an unflinching spotlight of "local groups and service clubs producing amateur blackface shows," (p. 162, *Theatres*). Held primarily at the Web

Theatre, uptown near Lundy's Lane, Nicks uses several photographs and written descriptions to expose the casual use of minstrelsy on stage as well as public gatherings and parades on Main Street. She notes how prominent citizens performing in blackface justified the shows for white audiences of family, friends, neighbours, and civic leaders. If justification was even deemed to be wanting, the *Review* only endorsed the pleasures of local minstrel shows... Publisher F.H. Leslie editorialized on many subjects and railed against the immorality of Hollywood's 'movie people,' but was silent on the racial caricatures. (p. 167, *Theatres*).

Here, especially, Nicks adds an important element of realism and critique, achieved without diminishing her commitment and interest in local heritage.

In *Disappearing Motels*, Nicks centres upon the idealized Niagara of Hollywood cinema and literature, which often produced an uncanny, dual glimpse of the Falls for locals. An expansive chapter begins with movie motels generally (think: *Psycho*, to start, but Nicks reviews several others). The focus shifts to the time Hollywood visited the Falls and left its mark. In 1952, Marilyn Monroe joined the cast and crew of Twentieth-Century Fox's location shooting for *Niagara* (Hathaway, 1953). The two-week film shoot lingers still, seven decades later, as a "souvenir event, triggering a nostalgic after-effect... A mythic value has long since grown around the film shoot, especially a fascination with Marilyn Monroe... her curves equated with the arc of the cataract—a sensuous maid of the mist inviting the male gaze" (p. 174, *Motels*). Nicks dug into Hollywood's own archives to find memos from Fox studio head Darryl Zanuck commenting lasciviously on the prospect of changing the film's title to *Maid of the Mist*. "About the

word 'maid' there is a horrid suggestion of virginity, which certainly does not evoke Marilyn Monroe." (p. 183, *Motels*). It's amusing to imagine an anachronistic Oscar Wilde responding to the movie mogul with his quip about the newlywed bride's sight of the Falls, which Nicks cites in an earlier passage in reference to Karen Dubinsky's *Second Greatest Disappointment* (1999). Niagara motels, of course, are the hometown of the honeymoon suite with a heart-shaped tub—an item that, despite its cultural largesse, was deemed too big and expensive to fit into the local history museum, according to the foreword penned by Clark Bernat, the city's manager of recreation and culture (p. xiv, *Motels*).

Nicks writes with passion, but from such an intensely local perspective that, ironically, some of the obvious particularity of the place gets sidelined. It's admittedly beyond the scope of *Disappearing Motels* to ask if people from Niagara road-tripped and honeymooned differently, given their daily proximity to tourism. But what about *Lost Theatres*'s subtitle positioning Niagara Falls as a "cross-border city"? There is little attention to times local people left town to seek amusement elsewhere. Where are the stories about trips to Buffalo for major league games, concerts and museums, and for special movies such as Cinerama or road-show premieres? Or again, the story I was most anticipating in *Lost Theatres* arrived only near the very end. I knew that Niagara Falls' drive-in mogul, Michael Zahorchak, created a coast-to-coast chain of national importance. Investing in shopping-plaza multiplexes, Canadian Theatres Group became profitable enough to purchase Odeon in 1977; important enough to become an essential part, in turn, of Garth Drabinsky's Cineplex-Odeon.

Nicks upends the local success story I was anticipating, instead lamenting how

“heads of chains promoted new theatres as civic investments in the future of the city, later selling them off as failing assets” (p. 228, *Theatres*). Zahorchak’s son, Robert, continues the wistful recollection but adds a key insight speculating about the drive behind his father’s national expansion. “Niagara Falls, being a tourist town, had a lot more options than people [had] in other cities... and people were working supporting that tourist industry when they should be at the movies. We were kind of competing for the same people” (p. 188, *Theatres*). He is hinting at a couple of things unique to the local experience of movie-going in Niagara Falls. Service workers’ hours con-

flicted with movie-going schedules, and perhaps labouring to deliver idealistic promises of once-in-a-lifetime leisure left too little hankering for ordinary distractions. Reading them side-by-side, Nicks’ books left me with a new appreciation for the tension between spaces and times for leisure and labour. Overall, she offers a remarkable achievement at the admirable quest to commemorate and celebrate the links between her cinephilia and the cultural scene of heritage preservation, just steps away from the Falls.

Paul Moore
Toronto Metropolitan University