

**ICE BLINK: NAVIGATING NORTHERN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY** Edited by Stephen Böcking and Brad Martin

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PART 3

*Environmental History and  
the Contemporary North*



# 9

## “That’s the Place Where I Was Born”: History, Narrative Ecology, and Politics in Canada’s North

*Hans M. Carlson*

### History, Meaning, and Place

I’m sitting in camp this evening, here on the southernmost lands of the James Bay Cree, watching the dragonflies diving and feeding on the mosquitoes that are getting thicker as the light fades. A Canada jay is calling out into the dusk—*wiishkachaanish* in his forest—and the light is fading behind the black spruce across this wide section of the Brock River, here in Eeyou Istchee, the People’s Land. There are few more evocative images of the Canadian north than this dark, boreal skyline of thin black spruce spires and witches-brooms. For so many, they signify isolation and wilderness, yet, even with the deep, settling quiet tonight, my thoughts are at variance with any perception of the “lonely land” here in the north.<sup>1</sup>

Our campsite is less than twenty kilometres west of the Quebec mining town of Chibougamau and northeast of the Cree village of

Ouje Bougoumou—“the place where the people gather.” The name Chibougamau is likely a mispronunciation of Ouje Bougoumou, whose people once inhabited the land around Lac Doré where the French town is now located. Their displacement happened in the 1940s and 1950s with the development of copper mines around the lake, and, though the mines are closed now, Chibougamau is still a good-sized town. Lumber mills became the economic base in the 1980s, though old mines may find new life, along with newer operations, thanks to the recent boom in mineral development here on the Canadian Shield—a subject that Arn Keeling and John Sandlos examine in their chapter in this volume. There’s a yard, at the south end of Chibougamau, full of thousands of rock core samples. Helicopters fly in two or three times a day to add to the collection, and I’ve been shown dozens of places where smaller prospectors have used the network of logging roads to bring in equipment and take their samples. This is the next big push up here.<sup>2</sup>

So, as peaceful and remote as this scene seems tonight, this place is anything but isolated, for the weight of events is heavy on this land. The early mines around Chibougamau had local impact, but Quebec has now been exploiting resources region-wide for nearly four decades. Since Hydro-Québec and then-premier Robert Bourassa began developing hydroelectric power here, there has been an uncomfortable dissonance between the solitude and peacefulness of places like this campsite and the momentum of political and economic forces working just beyond that line of trees. The Cree people that I am travelling with, and this forest, have been deeply affected by those forces, so this is an important part of narrating environmental history and issues of justice in this place. Yet the “history” happening beyond the trees is really only part of the story. This was brought home to me, earlier this afternoon, at the other end of this portage trail where we are camped.

There is another old campsite up there, and when we landed, Solomon, one of the three Cree men I’m travelling with, gestured toward a long-used tent site and rather casually announced, “that’s the place where I was born.” It was an almost offhand remark, but of course it struck me—how could it not? Solomon knows enough about my culture to know that this fact was likely to be evocative and unusual in my experience—thus the wry smile and twinkle in his eye, I think—so while it was done with humour, he did mean it to move me and make me think. These men all

have a clear sense of who ought to have rights on this land. They are not shy about saying what they think about the wealth that has been taken, but theirs is more than just a claim to resources or real estate—or even a claim to political sovereignty. I took Solomon’s statement as an intellectual challenge to think more holistically about this place, its history, and the current situation here, and to try to understand how it reaches out beyond this forest to engage that story of development and change. That is what I am focused on tonight, as the dark settles over this northern land.

The Cree’s is not a claim to land only, but to history and meaning in place. This is clearest when considering things on the ground, because history is so much closer than you think in the boreal north. History and “place” are not really separable at ground level, in fact. On the one hand, I mean that metaphorically, in that disruption here has its analogies in the Native histories of other places and other times, but I mean it more literally, too. I was trained to think chronologically—diachronically—to see the past as receding from the present, but as I’ve become more and more focused on the meaning of place in my thinking—Eeyou Istchee as a place, that tent site as a place—it has been getting harder not to see time cycling, as well as advancing. It’s all still right here, in some sense, cycling in the stories on this land.

We miss this present-ness of events because of a problematic cultural blind spot, for we would say that Solomon’s birth “took place” at that site sixty years ago. This is accurate in a way, yet we have to be careful of those easy turns of phrase. As Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday tells us, stories and events like this one quite literally “take place”; they take possession as they attain personal and historical meaning, and this does not pass with time.<sup>3</sup> When Solomon made a point of showing me his birthplace, it was a historical narration, because in those few words, delivered on that spot, there was a storyline. It began in a forest bush camp, in a region controlled almost exclusively by the traditional stewards of Cree lands—the Cree word is *Kaanoowapmaakin* (pronounced *Gah-new-whap-mah-gan*). It ended this afternoon, in the same place, but within a landscape massively altered by flooding and cutting. It was a personal history of a past event, but one connected intimately with present ones, and so I would say that it was a political statement as well as a history.

Solomon’s intellectual challenge to me was not purely academic, then, for his story is still “taking place” there, as he returns and tells it

within this changed landscape. In his words, I can't help but hear an echo of novelist Thomas King's comment concerning that kind of narration: "it's yours [now]. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently [or written history differently] if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now." Stories like Solomon's, in other words, come with responsibility. This is fundamental to the history of this land and its people, particularly if you try to understand the power of these places and the forces that have shaped them. It's a matter of doing justice—or some semblance of it—by acknowledging that, as powerful as outside forces may be, this land and its history are still defined from within.<sup>4</sup>

History is still "taking place." Solomon's connection is one small aspect of that, but while it may seem locally meaningful, when we start thinking about the Cree reaching out to the larger world, as they have often done in defense of this place, then his story is more than it seems at first glance. Cree men and women are still the primary connection between culture, land, and history, and all three of these are politically central in the north. In speaking of the Cree, Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come once wrote, "we have discovered that our way of life, our economy, our relationship to the land, our system of knowledge, and our manner of governance are an inter-linked whole. Remove us from the land, and you destroy it all." This is the lesson of Cree history, as well.<sup>5</sup>

In one sense, this is the kind of scaling issue that Tina Loo highlights in her history of justice and damming on the Peace River in British Columbia. There she assesses our understanding of history and environmental social justice by considering the different scales on which people understood what projects like that would do to the land. At the scale of provincial politics and economy—where dams brought growth and increased provincial power for British Columbia—damming the river looked very different as a justice issue than it did when scaled down to the local view, where land and lives were changed forever, mostly for the worse. She also makes the important point that, when considering local First Nations peoples, there needs to be temporal scaling in historical understanding. A dam seen as a modern environmental issue, in the 1960s, has one historical meaning; seen on a longer, temporal scale, one that highlights centuries of colonization for Indigenous people on this continent, a dam takes

on a much deeper and more sinister meaning. And one might add that, on a temporal scale that comprises human cultural occupation in North America, those dams look different yet again. This for me leads to the larger historical lesson of stories like Solomon's.<sup>6</sup>

Part of the intellectual challenge here in this forest is to think about land, people, and history in a way that does not neglect those other scales, but also acknowledges that Solomon returned to that tent site, not only within the context of recent resource development and environmental change, or the history of colonization, but also within the much larger context of Cree cultural understanding of place and story. Travelling this land with the Cree is to traverse both the landscapes of personal memory and the geography of cultural connection. It's not just the fact that people continue to travel the lands of their birth, but again that they are connected to a culture that has been placing itself in this forest for the better part of four millennia. As Matthew Coon Come also once said, "our land is our memory, that is why it is so important to us." Memory, the stories of births or the struggles for rights, is held in the land. I am here researching the environmental history of the last few decades, and, while much of what I will write about resides in various libraries and archives—that story of massive change—the sources are more diverse.<sup>7</sup>

Whether we are talking about storied places like that tent site, or the place that Dave, Solomon's brother-in-law, showed me this morning—the scene of an old legend he has told me several times in winter camp—the stories attached to them are important to the way people act in relation to the land. They are important to the ways they talk, listen, and think about the land, as well. As storyteller Jeannette Armstrong says of her own lands and stories far to the west of here, in them "I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns." These stories, and this perspective on stories, shape the land everywhere on this continent.<sup>8</sup>

Living and narratives are connected, so this is not simply a statement about stories or language, but a powerful ontological statement about the nature of the world we live in—another echo of Momaday and King—that the truth about these stories, "is that that's all we are."<sup>9</sup> Here is a kind of philosophic scaling, in that these stories represent another intellectual

tradition in this forest and give a very different view of what “environmental history” or environmental justice might look like. It’s not a matter of telling history from within those traditions—something outsiders are incapable of doing—but of giving them the kind of weight or agency that they deserve. We ought to keep our eye out for the way they have shaped, and continue to shape, the history that unfolds in the places we study. And this is not only for the sake of doing justice to Native people living on their lands, but because we might learn something about our own connection to these places.

## Narrative Ecologies and the Polyphony of Meanings

Ethnographers, translators, and folklorists have done a great deal of work with Native people interpreting these kinds of meanings on the land. There are lessons here for historians. What the best of this work shows, in the words of translator and poet Robert Bringhurst, is that “a coherent system of storytelling is like a system of science or mathematics. And like a forest, it is more than the sum of its parts. So long as it remains alive, [it is] not just a collection of stories or myths. It is a system that can be used to regulate and to record transactions with reality,”<sup>10</sup> and thus shape history. These systems of stories shape human action over time, most importantly our relationships with the land, and here in Eeyou Istchee—all across the north—Indigenous systems of stories are still very much alive.<sup>11</sup>

Again, while we may never fully explore these stories in our histories of people and land, we should not forget their presence. They have helped people live here successfully for thousands of years, after all, and are at the heart of all their histories of place. Nor should we forget the relationships between our whole system of stories and those already placed here on the ground; histories, too, are transactions with reality, after all. They can claim no transcendent understanding, for they are part of something more complex. As an environmental historian, I believe all these narratives have shaped land and human culture here, just as they themselves have been shaped in that dialog. All of this makes up the history of this land.

Like Bringhurst, I have come to believe that this is best thought of as an ecology of story in this forest—a fabric of personal, cultural, and political narratives of place and time—related to, and every bit as complex as, the

ecology of plants and animals that make up the boreal north. Ecology, as a science, is the study of the interactions between abiotic and biotic parts of the Earth's systems (and the distribution of those parts across the globe), and human stories are no part of its business. And ecology is also a term that is currently very trendy and probably thrown around in a lot of ways that it should not be. My point is not to be trendy, but to complicate our understanding, both of the term "ecology" and of the ways that Western paradigms of thought, like science, shape our thinking about the narrative interactions between people and land.

Human stories may not be part of the science of ecology, but that science is founded on a narrative understanding of the world that sees a clear distinction between what it studies (nature) and the stories I've been thinking about (culture), and this has shaped the way we tell our stories of this land. There is a heated and unresolved debate in environmental circles over the relationship between culture and nature, and over history's relationship with the science of ecology. What's important for me, however, is that the culture/nature dualism—no matter how you position yourself in that ongoing debate—is not indigenous to or normative in this place. It is really an unhelpful abstraction for people who occupy this land at the scale that many Cree people still do. Their understanding of networks and interactions, both local and global, are focused on another set of meanings, and all this makes up environmental history here in this forest.<sup>12</sup>

This narrative ecology is a metaphor, of course, but so too is the science of ecology, at some level. And given that the stories here began as soon as there was a forest to be storied, which ecology are we going to call natural and which one cultural? It's not that the distinction between culture and nature is unhelpful at some level—it is fundamental to the intellectual transactions that are reshaping this forest today—but it is a distinction newly brought. So, while physical ecology may be abstracted temporarily for the sake of study, it is a tricky business for the historian. Part of that cultural blind spot that I was thinking about earlier is that we too easily fall into what Alfred North Whitehead called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," forgetting that our abstractions are only creations of convenience and not real in any universal sense. For my purposes, abstracting local historical meaning out of this forest—calling it simply "tradition," or some such thing—allows us to ignore the ecological inseparability of people and land held in Cree thinking. We thus lose sight

of much of the real meaning of Solomon's or any other story that people use. Here is where injustice lies.<sup>13</sup>

Without sliding down the rabbit hole of postmodern linguistic relativism, we have to acknowledge that stories are part of this forest's makeup. They nest inside one another, like the various ecosystems, presenting a conceptual diversity as vital as any biodiversity in these woods. Bringhurst would tell us that these stories are musical, that their diversity is polyphonic, "a subtle, flexible, trim, and self-policing form with room for many voices." In "polyphonic music, several voices sing or play at once. They sometimes say very similar things in several different ways; they sometimes contradict each other. Each voice has its own melodic line, its own simultaneous path through musical space. Dissonance can occur; it may even be sought, though it is rarely expected to last. Some voices may say more than others, but no one voice is allowed to dominate the whole."<sup>14</sup>

The ecology of this forest is not harmonious; that is the romanticized and abstracted ideal, born of that nature/culture dualism. This forest is polyphonous, and to understand how history plays out here demands, like Jeannette Armstrong's claims about language and story, a different understanding of who is doing the singing or the storytelling. Seeing the forest like this points to the full meaning of that tent site back there, and to the way that the Cree still think about place. Historically the Cree have not thought of this land as an abstract set of ecological components on which they lived. Nor have they thought of their stories as discreet bunches of disconnected words with no putative meaning outside of their narrative context.

The Cree have thought of the land as a collection of communities of other beings *in* which they live. In many ways, they still see these communities of plants and animals as being made up of individual other-than-human beings, all of whom communicate with one another and with humans, just as people do within human communities. These communities of other beings feed the Cree in the gift exchange of the hunt, giving of themselves materially as the hunter gives back in respectful acknowledgment of the gift. Stories and food together, then, create networks of exchange on which the Cree depend for their survival, and abstracting one away from the other is a dangerous thing. The successful hunter not only skillfully uses the material resources at hand, but more importantly navigates these

communities of very talkative and animated other-than-human beings who also live in the bush.<sup>15</sup>

So here is another metaphor, a Cree understanding of narrative ecology or Bringham's polyphony. In a sense, it is Geertzian cultural understanding writ large, one that takes the "thick description" of human cultures—the Weberian web—and spreads it out into the forest, encompassing all of what we would call the "environment" here, but what the Cree simply call "the bush." In translation it is easy to forget that "the bush" is not some quaint, colloquial term, but a precise ecological description that is imminently practical. Living in the bush for the Cree is not living in culture or in nature separately, but operating within an ecological relationship with the food and materials one needs, while communicating with the other residents of this forest. Within this way of thinking, I would say that "the bush" is also a historical description, because this polyphonic, animistic understanding shaped Cree reaction to the arrival of Europeans in this forest, and shaped the experience of this forest for those Europeans, as well. It is still one of the narrative voices here.<sup>16</sup>

Much of what I have written about Cree history previously underscores how Europeans carried out their fur trading and other activities within this Cree understanding of the bush—that both Cree narratives and Cree practices defined history in this forest into the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Contact was not the sudden advent of large numbers of non-Natives streaming into these lands, but hundreds of years of Europeans negotiating a narrative world that they struggled to understand. The Cree did not completely avoid the imported diseases and ecological change brought by Europeans, but Francis Jennings' description of a "widowed" rather than a virgin land—while true in many places—is not accurate in James Bay.<sup>18</sup>

For centuries here, there was a mixing of cultural economies, a tenuous, often contentious balance of negotiated power by people who perceived that they needed one another. In actuality, the same thing played out down the St. Lawrence Valley and the Atlantic coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There, however, the sway of Native thinking lost much of its agency with the imperial and revolutionary conflicts of the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> It all lasted a great deal longer in Eeyou Istchee, and finding the agency of these ideas continues to be my goal in this place, though it has become more difficult as my focus has moved toward the more recent past. All of the politics and sudden change, all of the new

people living here in the north, have reshaped the land, but also reshaped the ways we can speak and think about the land and its history.

## Northern Forests and Western Frontiers

When writing about events before the 1970s, ethnohistorical accounts of those earlier encounters between Natives and newcomers were important to my thinking. Most ethnohistory is primarily concerned with early religious, trade, and military engagement between Natives and Europeans, yet the records of fur traders, missionaries, and bureaucrats are full of environmental history, too.<sup>20</sup> Ethnohistory's boundary-jumping methodology was highly useful in finding this out, and crossing the lines "of time and space, of discipline and department, of perspective, whether ethnic, cultural, social, or gender-based," helped me look at and think about the environmental history of that prolonged story of the bush.<sup>21</sup> This was not something historiographically novel; Calvin Martin had done something similar back in the 1970s, but while he and his detractors raised important environmental questions concerning Native involvement with the fur trade, the larger and long-term meaning of the bush strangely did not penetrate into environmental historical thinking. Environmental history still largely misses the importance of Native ideas in its interpretations.<sup>22</sup>

Environmental historians over the decades have too often portrayed Native people as being swept along into tragic decline, from "natural" freedom and "traditional" subsistence into poverty and political irrelevancy, without considering how Natives acted according to their own understandings and affected the larger story by doing so. Historians have used First Nations as the canary in their narrative coalmines—judging environmental decline by Native decline and vice versa—without acknowledging the deep sense of interrelationship that made Natives stay in place, suffering along with the land; they have not often acknowledged the political fact that they are still in place, living their histories there, either. This was particularly true when environmental histories were driven by the idealization of past pristine wildernesses, where historians once sought this ideal. And, while recent works have radically qualified our notions of wilderness, Native peoples still too often seem to get essentialized when they are living "traditionally," or ignored when they are not.<sup>23</sup> This goes

back to that debate over culture and nature. In leaning on the science of ecology, or getting too enthralled with the narrative aspects of culture, environmental historians have missed a lively and living intellectual perspective. They have missed the intellectual articulation of living in the bush, which takes their arguments concerning narratives and nature and turns them on their head.

Missing the importance of the community of the bush has also been a matter of getting swept up in that outside history, which I was thinking about earlier. Environmental writing, in the US particularly, has been dominated by the post-revolutionary rush west, so it has been easy for generations of environmental historians to read back into the colonial period, or onto places like Eeyou Istchee, the same nationalist/capitalist juggernaut that rolled out on the western frontier. Arguably, this has kept environmental history from exploring the nuances of places like the north, where people like the Cree did not face the expansion that the Cherokee, or Lakota, or Yurok faced in the United States. Places like this forest, until recently, were not the focus of the transformative economic and political activity that marks the speed of US expansion.

Here in Canada's north, a lingering colonial heritage, slower economic expansion over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to staples dependency, and technological limitations in moving into this territory, made for a much different history for both land and people. The fact that Canadian growth, historically anyway, lacked most of the ideological imperative that marks so much of US history also made a great deal of difference.<sup>24</sup> For much of what I have wanted to say about Cree history before the 1970s, environmental history's focus on rapid transformation and dispossession has been a poor fit, and I have found myself reaching out not only to ethnohistorians, but to historical geographers and colonial historians as well. These disciplines in Canada have had a much better eye for subtle changes in the land.

The question that arises now is whether recent events here have changed the way we should look at history. In the last four decades, roads and outsiders have proliferated, hunting lands have been flooded and forests clear-cut, and non-Native hunting cabins have been built by the hundreds—all in a way that looks a lot like that older frontier onslaught. The Cree now are certainly also facing an intensity of change that threatens communities, families, and individuals in a new way, and that historical

view of long, slow, negotiated change within a Cree understanding of the bush seems to lose much of its interpretive power.

Across the whole of the North, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, advances in technology, as well as changes in the market value of resources, have made resource exploitation possible and profitable in new ways. Northern development has shaped, and is still shaping, federal and provincial economies in ways that look very similar to what happened in the American west. This has once again made “Staples Thesis” history<sup>25</sup> relevant economically in Canada. It has also added some of the ideological motivation so strong in US expansion, so maybe we need to start thinking in ideological terms about the lands and people here, in addition to the economic imperative.

Certainly the James Bay Projects were an outgrowth of the Quiet Revolution, and so this land has been part of the history of cultural emancipation and sovereign expansion of the Québécois technocratic state, as well as its economic growth. Here is some of that ideology lacking in earlier Canadian expansion. When Bourassa announced “the project of the century,” in 1970, he was riding the tiger of a growing separatist movement in Quebec and was fighting for his political life. He celebrated the expansion of French ethnic and political identity in this northern environment and began a story that has been carried forward by boosters from all sides since that time.<sup>26</sup> One has only to look at former premier Jean Charest’s April 2011 announcement of “Plan Nord”—a twenty-five-year, \$80 billion international investment scheme to develop any and all of the resources in Quebec’s north—to see the continuing power of northern expansion in shaping the economic and political landscape here in the province.

Robert Bourassa only made the argument that the James Bay Projects would create a stronger and more self-reliant Quebec within a changed Canadian confederation; but he might well have been speaking about all of the provinces, their resources, and their power relationships with both Ottawa and the north since the 1960s. Across the north now, one can define a nationalist, as well as a resource frontier, and this is reshaping the Canadian political landscape. Now, those environmental histories critiquing expansionism and its costs are, in fact, more applicable to this place and its story than they ever were before – and for much the same reason when looked at from the other side of development.

In the US, those kinds of environmental histories were greatly needed as a counter-argument to celebratory nationalist stories of manifest destiny, “improvement,” and “progress” on the frontier. And histories of sweeping and destructive environmental and cultural changes during nineteenth-century expansion and development in the trans-Appalachian and trans-Mississippian west certainly speak directly to many things happening in Eeyou Istchee today. One has only to look at the scale of change, here, to make the connections obvious. Frontier environmental histories also inverted Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis—that open spaces create national character—and the triumphalism of conquering wilderness and the Natives that inhabited it. Since the 1970s, Québécois rhetoric concerning the north has often been the same blithe Turnerian vision of progress, and is arguably in need of the same kind of inversion—the same is true all across Canada since the early 2000s. Turner’s stages of frontier growth and his individualistic settler, imbued with nature’s democracy, are not a perfect fit in Quebec or Canada, but environmental history’s meta-narrative of exploiting untouched landscapes, thus foreshadowing the bad end of modern experiments in massively altered landscapes and national ideologies, is a very tantalizing paradigm in which to think these days.<sup>27</sup>

Looking to James Bay, in the nineteenth century Curé Antoine Labelle called on the “founders of this future North American empire” to travel north and “conquer this land of America against the English philistines,” and thus give new life to a French nation.<sup>28</sup> A hundred years later, Robert Bourassa styled himself the “conqueror of the north” for much the same purpose, and, though Charest was more staid with his rhetoric—focusing more on economics—“Go North Young Man” was clearly the sentiment and political message at the heart of Plan Nord. So frontier conquest is useful to think with in Eeyou Istchee, because in a great many respects Quebec’s north is a frontier. This forest, like the American west in previous centuries, can be seen as a place of massive environmental disruption and conscious cultural destruction by both government and business—a colonial possession in the worst sense of the word, with all the ugliness that this implies. As a friend of mine over in Waswanipi told me in reference to clear-cutting, “my impression is that the Quebec government is out to occupy Cree territory as quickly as it can.”<sup>29</sup>

The initial temptation, then, is to take up uncritically those same interpretive tools of frontier, both in writing history and thinking about

justice. Yet, as useful as these ideas are, focusing too heavily on historical frontiers at some point ceases to educate and begins to obfuscate. Quebec's north is not the American west—neither is any of the Canadian north, even with Stephen Harper's legislative agenda—and none of what has happened in the last few decades happened in the context of the militaristic expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It has all happened in the legalistic and technocratic twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and so, while the process of negotiated meaning changed in the 1970s, the north has not been conquered.<sup>30</sup>

Here in Quebec, for decades now—and this is not to say that the province has not tried to take as much as it could without negotiating—everyone has been engaged in bargaining over this territory. The Cree, who have been anything but passive in this, have exploited both the tensions in Confederation, over Quebec sovereignty, and also the tension between provincial control of resources and federal responsibility for First Nations. They have also exploited ideas of justice and multiculturalism within modern Canadian and world politics. Within this process and amidst all the dramatic changes brought by development, the Cree have been kept busy trying to define a form of Native sovereignty, and this is central to understanding the continued negotiation over the meaning of the land.

In this struggle they have hard-won victories to their credit, which have mitigated some of the bad results of development, and, importantly, put them in a somewhat better position than other First Nations in Canada's north. The Cree have not always been obstructionist—this has been part of their success—but when they have been, it's been dramatic and history-making. When they have conceded, it has been history-making too, and so in this sense Eeyou Istchee has become a very political place over the last four decades. I mean this in the sense that provincial and national politics have a place here that they never did before, but also that the politics of development have become a part of Cree culture now. The older ideas of the bush have not been abandoned, but they have been nuanced and challenged by the need to negotiate politically and to codify Cree rights and legal standing. The meaning of Eeyou sovereignty now sits side-by-side with stories like Solomon's and the two together illustrate something more than just a replaying of frontier history.

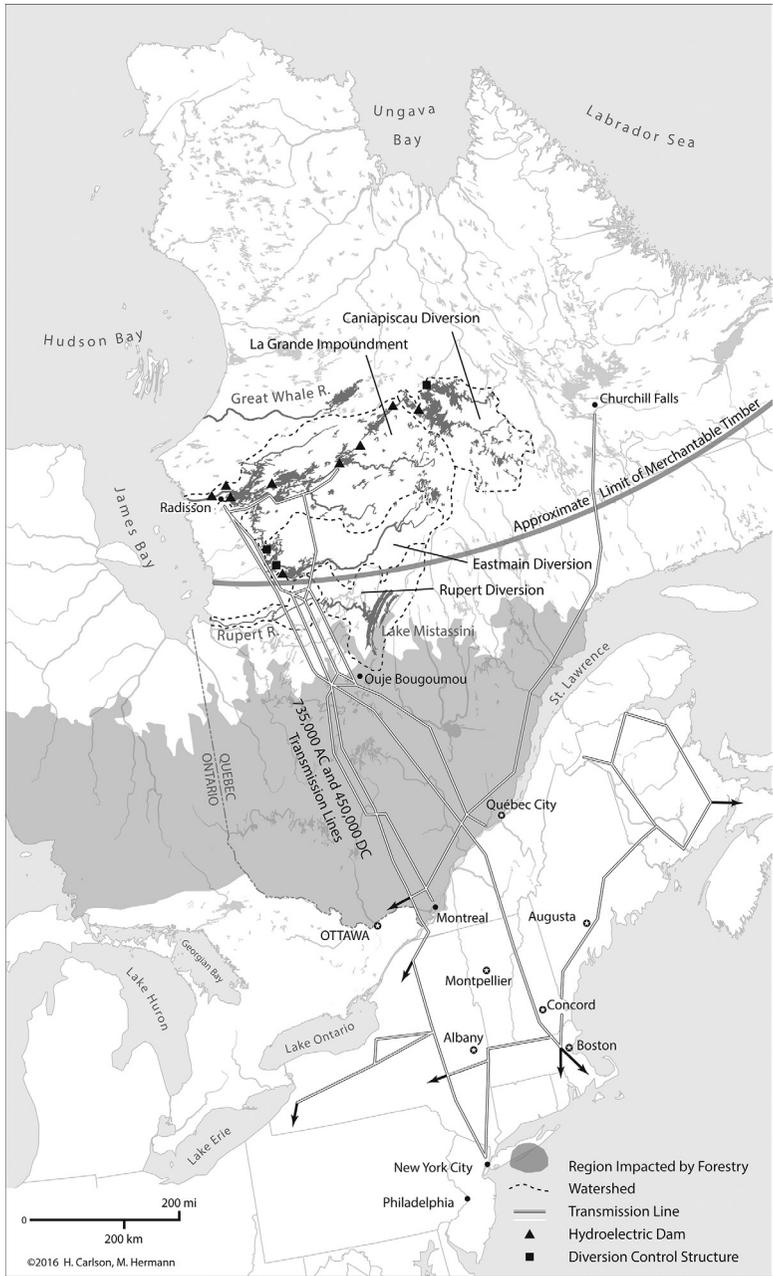


FIG. 9.1: Map of James Bay region by Hans M. Carlson showing extent of hydroelectric development and logging on Cree lands.

## The Politics of Development and the Development of Politics

The Cree began this new political history under the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), and this is still the foundational legal framework for them as a people and the land on which they live. The JBNQA compensated them, in some measure, for the damming of the La Grande River by creating a good deal of self-determination and control for each Cree village—now usually identified as individual nations. Most importantly, it created the Cree Regional Authority, which is the corporate vehicle through which the Grand Council exercises its authority and negotiates with other governments. All of the communities of James Bay were incorporated under it, and all share equal representation. Much of the document does not deal with the land, but lays out the structure of local and regional government, giving the Regional Authority direct control of some services that, until 1975, were controlled by the federal government: health services in the region, under the Cree Board of Health; education, under a unified school board; and police forces, both in the individual communities and special Cree units of the *Sûreté du Québec*.<sup>31</sup>

The key provisions concerning the land were those that subdivided the territory into three categories, for purposes of development and legal control, and those that protected Cree hunting. Category I lands, which surround the nine Cree communities, were designated to be held most exclusively within Cree control. Here Cree authority is strongest, and, while these lands can be taken for development, there are strict guidelines and compensation regimes for doing it. Category II lands, shared by all the communities, are less controlled by the Cree. Here they have exclusive rights to hunting and fishing, but it is easier for Quebec to develop resources without compensation. On these lands, hunting is controlled by the traditional Cree stewards of the land—the *Kaanoowapmaakin*—and the Cree have fought over the years to keep these carriers of traditional knowledge within the legal framework of negotiation with outsiders. Category III lands are open to use by all parties and are controlled by the province. The Cree are not excluded from using these lands—here, too, the *Kaanoowapmaakin* maintain their stewardship within Cree culture—but non-Natives have access.

In addition to this categorization, the Income Security Program (ISP) administered by the region-wide Cree Trapper's Association was set up, by which hunters who continue to live a significant portion of their lives on the land are guaranteed an income from the province. This more than anything has helped maintain not only a Cree presence on the land, but also has enabled the continuation of a Cree understanding of their lands. Without the ISP, the continued stewardship of the Kaanoowapmaakin would have been much more difficult to maintain. Something akin to the "territoriality" described by Paul Nadasdy in the following chapter might have developed had the communities or the Cree regional government had to take control of hunting, but this kind of regulation has not happened. The Kaanoowapmaakin still look to social and cultural sanction, rather than government regulation, to exercise their stewardship.

All that said, there is no doubt that the JBNQA established a new language of environment through which the Cree have had to speak of their land to non-Natives. This has changed the way the Cree can conceptualize their lands in certain contexts. Legally, land, water, air, and people—and how they should be interrelated ecologically and economically—are categorized in a system of understanding that thinks in terms of resources. This now has as much meaning as traditional thinking, so that hunters, under the agreement, have the "right to harvest game resources" under Western conservation principles. Hunting is now defined as "the pursuit of the optimum natural productivity of all living resources and the protection of the ecological systems of the territory." It is here that Western divisions between culture and nature come face-to-face with the Cree understanding of the bush—the difference between resources and relations.<sup>32</sup>

Hunters on the ground are thus challenged by resource exploitation, but also by new ways of thinking, and Cree politicians stand between two worlds. This makes for a complicated situation. The money in the ISP helps insulate hunters by keeping them on the land where they still have some measure of autonomy. They are not as independent as their grandfathers, but they still have room to maneuver intellectually, as well as spatially, and this shapes events in the region. Their presence has given Cree leaders a foundation to stand on, as they have asserted a Cree presence in Canada and Quebec, and traditional use creates moral and political high ground from which politicians can negotiate with governments. This can be seen as a way of mitigating change from outside, but it should be seen as a way

of controlling change from inside, as well. The culture of traditional hunting has been used to bring pressure to bear on Cree leaders, as they navigate the political landscape that has been evolving since the JBNQA was signed, and this is still happening.

Provincial and federal politics fully entered Cree territory with the initial treaty, and continued with the ratification of the JBNQA, which was not passed by the Quebec legislature until 1978. Provincial politics—the fight between Bourassa’s Liberals and the increasingly powerful Parti Québécois—became a Cree problem when Bourassa was defeated in 1976. They had to lobby with the new government to get the JBNQA ratified, and to get Ottawa and Quebec to live up to their ends of the agreement. Neither government made it a priority, in the strained atmosphere of the time, though the Cree were helped by an official inquiry, the Tait Report, which severely criticized the government’s inaction in seeing the JBNQA through, and by the UN Conference on Indigenous Peoples in Geneva.<sup>33</sup> In the end, the Cree managed to make the whole issue simply too uncomfortable, and, with ratification and implementation, they began to inhabit a new and powerful political structure. The Cree speak of their rights under the JBNQA as other Canadians speak of their Charter rights. It makes sense for them to do this in relation to the Canadian constitution, but the implications of this are still developing, in large measure because of Quebec’s continued demand for the resources on Cree land.

Robert Bourassa and his federalist Liberals came back to power in 1985, and with them came a plan for further expansion in James Bay. The next phase of hydroelectric development was to be the Great Whale River, to the north of La Grande, and when the announcement came that construction was slated to begin in 1991, the Cree organized to stop it. Here is where their story reaches out beyond Canada, as a large part of the justification for the new project was to sell power to the United States. The Cree actively engaged people in New York and New England, trying to bring understanding to people whose desire for power was going to change their lives yet again. The launch of the campaign was the arrival of *Odeyak*—a Cree/Inuit hybrid boat—at Earth Day celebrations in Manhattan in April 1990, where the Cree spoke about what they faced. After that they travelled extensively and repeatedly put the case in no uncertain terms to Americans: “a project of this kind involves the destruction and rearrangement of a vast landscape, literally reshaping the geography of

the land. This is what [we] want you to understand: it is not a dam. It is a terrible and vast reduction of our entire world. It is the assignment of vast territories to a permanent and final flood. The burial of trees, valleys, animals, and even the graves beneath tons of contaminated soil.”<sup>34</sup> Many in both Canada and the United States worked with the Cree, and this was really the moment when Native issues in James Bay entered most clearly into outsiders’ consciousness. The expansion was stopped, in part because US states cancelled power contracts, but it’s important to see what a double-edged victory this was in many ways.

First, the Parti Québécois really called a halt to Great Whale because, after defeating Bourassa again in 1992, they wanted to spend their political capital on another referendum on separation. This was a threat to the Cree, too, as an independent Quebec would not be bound by the legal relationships negotiated in treaties like the JBNQA. This began another fight for rights, but the cancellation of Great Whale also opened up a rift between most people’s understanding of James Bay and the ongoing process of change that was happening on the ground. While there was a great deal of well researched and well considered reporting done about the land, people, and issues in Eeyou Istchee during the Great Whale fight, the dominant theme of this work was the destruction of untouched “wilderness” and “traditional Cree culture.”<sup>35</sup> This wasn’t entirely wrong, but it missed the many ways that land and people had worked to adapt to the situation in the 1990s. Here are those issues of scaling in clear terms, because in the minds of most people who fought the dams, and who lived far away, we had won a great environmental battle, and they presumed that the Cree could go back to the way they had “always been.” In Eeyou Istchee, this was not the case.

The Great Whale was only one river, and halting its diversion did not slow the province’s use of other resources. They added hydroelectric capacity along the Eastmain River, dams to which the Cree government agreed, despite a good deal of opposition in certain Cree communities. That river was already dammed, and the additional environmental impacts were balanced against the money that the Cree needed to deal with other pressing issues. One of those issues was Quebec increasing its logging on Cree lands in dramatic and devastating ways. This was something that most of us here in the south missed, just as we missed the fact that

the building boom in the United States—the bubble that has only recently burst—was fed largely on Canadian lumber.

During the 1990s, the forestry operations that had been slowly expanding, here in the southern sections of Cree land, grew exponentially in the matter of a few years. Massive clear-cutting became the mirror image of the vast landscape changes that the river diversions brought to the north, and roads advanced on a yearly basis, devastating much of the bush. The Cree had Quebec in court over this issue for much of the late 1990s, and it was pressure from cutting that moved them toward negotiating yet another treaty. The 2002 Agreement Respecting a New Relationship Between the Cree Nation and the Government of Quebec, or “La Paix des Braves,” introduced a new system of cutting meant to alleviate problems, though the Cree only got Quebec to the negotiating table by offering the damming of the Rupert River as a precondition.<sup>36</sup> The Paix des Braves has largely been misunderstood outside of Eeyou Istchee, both in terms of the outside forces at play on the land and the fact that it was an initiative of the Cree government.<sup>37</sup>

When the negotiations came to light, people in the south asked about fighting the Rupert diversion, as they had the Great Whale, but the Cree government wanted to negotiate, even if environmentalists and outdoor enthusiasts were bothered by the loss of the Rupert. Many were deeply disappointed in the Cree, not understanding that life in Eeyou Istchee was no less changed by the decade of the 1990s than life in the United States and southern Canada had been. In fact, going back to that theme of imagined wilderness, most did not understand that change was even a part of the James Bay story. The problem for the Cree was, and is, that most people were unaware—unaware of the history here, of the current threats to this land, and especially of their own connections in creating the threats and driving them forward.

Many thought the Cree sold out. In 2010, Vermont signed new long-term contracts for Hydro-Québec power, and this was done with almost no public consultation. This was largely because people did not understand why the Cree government did what it did. I am from Vermont, and this conspicuous lack of public interest was troubling for me personally because, whether we know it or not, we are connected to this land in terms of energy and other natural resources. You will find few Cree who will celebrate the damming of the Rupert, and many of them who are critical

of their government's actions—but many of them also voted to ratify the treaty because of the reality of life in the north today.

Vermonters did not understand recent historical events on the lands of Eeyou Istchee, or the processes by which change happens in many places, so we missed the real meaning of actions like those new contracts. Today, metaphorically anyway, every fourth time I flip the light switch in my house, I am drawing power off the Cree lands. Hydro-Québec and other Quebec companies are buying up substantial sectors of the electric grid south of the border in order to make the connections stronger still. The Rupert diversion is a *fait accompli*, but long-term contracts will be used to capitalize further damming all over Quebec's north—and the same is true of other resources. When I go to the lumberyard back home and buy a two-by-four, there is a good chance that it came out of this forest, and an increasing amount of minerals used in electronics are coming from here, too. Quebec would like all these connections to be stronger and more permanent, and so, in its relationship to the northeastern economy particularly, northern Quebec is the closest illustration we have for all the disruptive effects of our resource demands all around the world.

When I said there were analogies to other frontier histories to be made, I could have said other geographies and ecologies, too. As I travel the roads of James Bay and visit the communities, I can easily make analogies with more far-flung places, like the Niger River Delta, the boreal forests of Russia, or the Australian Outback; in all these places, the ever-increasing demand for energy resources and raw materials—oil, lumber, uranium, and other minerals—is reshaping the land and the lives of the people who live there. Many of these people, like the Cree, are the Indigenous occupants of traditional territory, and are trying to save their culture as well as land in the face of this expansion. They, too, deal with the tremendous lack of knowledge that most of us have of their places and their histories. There, too, the forces of distant power and the lack of public understanding are forcing a singular history upon them. This is the ongoing legacy of colonization.

Since the Rupert diversion, the Cree have negotiated several additional agreements-in-principle with the province and the federal government. In an attempt to clear up lingering issues concerning how the JBNQA has been implemented, Ottawa has agreed to give the Cree money and a great deal more control over their internal political lives—infrastructure,

justice, and more. This makes Eeyou Istchee look increasingly sovereign in many ways. The Grand Council has also become much more open to the idea of development, even tentatively signing off on Charest's Plan Nord in exchange for Cree economic participation. Charest was eager for the opportunity to advertise his cooperation with First Nations, and the administration of Matthew Coon Come was a willing partner. The 2012 change in government put Plan Nord in question, and it is unclear at the moment if the 2014 return of the Quebec Liberal party will give it new life. In any case, Cree demands for participation in development have remained constant.

One can feel a number of different ways about this, and Cree people are not universally happy with the actions of their government or with Cree involvement in many of these projects. There is a near-unanimous consensus against uranium mining in Eeyou Istchee—there is a huge deposit about one hundred kilometres north of here—but some Cree are fully in favour of more development. Others see development as problematic and troubling, though inevitable; they favor the Cree getting what they can, but they worry about the consequences. Still others see participation as an abandonment of Cree values and the relationship with the land that has always supported them. This has become a tremendously complicated political situation—a far cry from forty years ago, when opposing the first dams was a simple matter, if a nearly impossible task.

We cannot ignore these changes. We should not romanticize or essentialize the Cree as we did during the Great Whale fight, for they are not the same people they were when the development began. At the same time, we have to be wary of any simple-minded denial of that traditional culture, that history, which people like Solomon, David, and Lawrence still very much embody. There are those, often thinking of themselves as political “realists,” who dismiss what they see as “idealized” notions of Indigenous culture and relations to the land. They point to increasing Aboriginal engagement with resource development in areas around the north as support for this position, but there is essentialism here, as well. At best, these they-are-just-like-us-now arguments miss a good deal of what is happening on the lands of the north. They miss the many reasons individuals might have for participating in the whirl of activity brought by development, yet also working to stay connected with older ways of thinking and living. They miss the historical and current agency of people living on the land, the

ways that they are conceptualizing events. At worst, one might see these arguments as a continuation of the colonial process. So, how do we think and write about this increasingly complex situation in a way that does not essentialize people on the ground, yet does do some justice to all the current situation's nuances?

## History and Political Ecology

In her chapter in this volume, Tina Loo frames the history of development in the post-war Keewatin District in terms of hopeful bureaucratic action on behalf of First Nations people. One can point to similar processes in Eeyou Istchee during that same period, and this is an important part of the history of this place. But the bureaucrats here were not alone in their hopefulness, for traditional Cree culture is founded upon a belief in the efficacy of hope. Hunting success relies on the hopeful attitude of the hunter, in his or her relationship with the hunted animals, and hope, as a cultural force, is something that I feel defined how the Cree have encountered Western culture over the last three hundred years. It is still a powerful presence in Eeyou Istchee, and should probably influence the way that we see Cree involvement in current events, as well.<sup>38</sup>

I had dinner not too long ago with an older couple whose land was the focus of the early mining activity here in this southern region of Cree territory. Matthew, who was Kaanoowapmaakin until he turned the responsibility over to his son, had helped with the prospecting and other development. He had done so for a number of reasons, he told me. First, he believed the land had been given him to share, and at the time he did not make a distinction between uses. Like all mining, the extraction of copper in the Chibougamau area has left a legacy of polluted water and land, but this was not something that Matthew could have foreseen.

Matthew now feels a great deal of responsibility for not understanding, but at the time he believed that mining would offer him and others the opportunity to feed their families, make good lives for themselves, and continue to hunt. There is little doubt that he entered into the process with a great deal of hope for what the land could provide. It was not economic hope that the land would make him rich, but the active and effective hope that is the basis of Cree hunting. This is the point, as we try

to conceptualize the many ways that Cree people take part in what is going on around them presently. The hope with which Cree hunters engage an animate world of other beings is still important for understanding recent events.

Matthew's is another story to set alongside Solomon's, and neither can be understood in isolation from all of the larger changes brought by development, or the treaties and politics that now define parts of Cree life. Because all this has happened. Eeyou Istchee now defines political boundaries and some facets of sovereignty for the Cree; the decades that the Grand Council has spent working to wrest more Cree control from this situation have not been wasted, despite the high price that has been paid and the compromises made. This Eeyou Istchee is now where all Cree live, and their stories must be viewed within this nested set of political contexts, which begin at places like that tent site up the trail, but in the end reach out far beyond the Canadian north. Not to connect these things together is to risk intellectual irrelevancy.

The changes I'm trying to capture—those since 1970—are aspects of the global economy and the part that Eeyou Istchee now plays in that economy. They are also part of the history of Canada, because all northern First Nations have and still do face everything that the Cree have faced: challenges to traditional life, a loss of control over land base, and all the social and cultural stress that this brings. Like the Cree, they are trying to negotiate ways forward within the context of the Canadian state, as well as the global economy. Like the Cree, too, they know that the history of this land is theirs in large measure, as much as the land itself, and in both these ways environmental history encroaches on current politics and needs to be attuned to this fact. The whole north is politically charged; one cannot avoid this, but one must also work to show the continued historical importance of the Cree understanding of the bush in an era of industrial development. Narrating this complexity requires some methodological adaptation.

I mentioned earlier that the mix of ethnography and history was valuable in understanding many aspects of history here, but that this approach fails to get at everything that has happened in recent decades. Frontier history offers something, too, but understanding the full meaning of historical change means focusing instead on the interplay between larger forces and the power of local stories like Solomon's, on the context of politics

and economic development, as well as the meaning of traditional culture and local events. It means focusing on ecological change, but also on the ecology of stories on the land, and so I find the current situation moving my environmental history toward the discipline of political ecology, in search of new ways to frame historical questions.

Developed originally to challenge apolitical ecological explanations of environmental change—behaviorist and functional understandings of human-environmental relations, which limited their explanations to the local and the cultural—political ecology looks for the global context of local environmental impacts. In this, it offers insight into issues of development here at James Bay, looking at those connections between environment and the larger forces of political economy. It does this with an eye to the meaning of local action, and in ways that are useful for understanding the current complexity in Eeyou Istchee. As “a field of critical research predicated on the assumption that any tug on the strands of the global web of human-environment linkages reverberate throughout the system as a whole,” affecting distant and seemingly isolated places, it applies well to what I’ve been thinking about here in Canada’s north.<sup>39</sup>

Sitting here in this campsite, this seems a natural fit for this region—but interestingly, political ecology as a discipline has focused largely on the developing world outside of North America and Europe. It has looked at what happens to the traditional systems of South American peasants and their forests when the bottom drops out of the coffee market, for example. Or at what happens when the World Bank funds massive afforestation projects that enclose land and restrict traditional use.<sup>40</sup> The geography of the north has not been its focus, because Canada is a “developed” country. Yet this approach lends itself readily to asking what happens to land and people when the United States wants to buy power or lumber from Quebec’s northern forests—or what happens when governments and industry try to provide them.

Interestingly, too, political ecology is a cousin to the kind of environmental history I have written about this region, delving into current uses and adaptations of local ecology and traditional environmental knowledge of places like this forest. It has done this, however, with little historical analysis as part of its method. The past, for most political ecologists, has been secondary to present events and their causes. Oddly, much political ecology positions itself theoretically in ways that dichotomize present subaltern

practice and past globalizations from its interpretation of current events.<sup>41</sup> Ethnohistory and environmental history, which might illuminate current cultural responses to global pressure, seem only lightly understood. This dichotomy, as political geographer Karl Offen writes, “assumes that local, peasant/indigenous perspectives, ambitions, memories, ideas, consciousnesses, and resource uses are somehow separated from global-local continuums in the past.” To use Eeyou Istchee as an example, many aspects of Cree cultural traditions grew from three hundred years of fur trading and other past “globalizations.” Many will fail, however, to connect this with the fact that Cree traditions continue to grow within the current context I have described.<sup>42</sup>

To achieve a more historical political ecology, Offen suggests a “field-informed” perspective on the past, by which he means “lengthy field immersion that includes ethnography, surveys, participant observation, mappings, and often biophysical research.” This means getting to know the land and people involved, the various stories of place, as well as digging in archives. In addition, he wants to see “an explicit linkage between social justice and the management of natural resources, a broadly conceived ‘nature conservation’ that takes into account the health and viability of the non-human world.” This call for justice touches back upon that dichotomy between traditional culture and political aspirations, and highlights the need to really understand the relationship between people like Solomon, here on the ground, and larger issues outside, in their historical context. Both at ground level and in the larger political arena, Offen emphasizes that, “any notion of ‘social justice’ is historically contingent and culturally specific, it should include a respect for cultural difference, customary rights and ways of knowing the world, as well as an equitable mode of resource distribution, economic opportunity, and political representation.” He means that both the cultural traditions of local people and their political hopes are important.<sup>43</sup>

By incorporating historical perspectives and methodology, political ecology’s perspectives can help contextualize the last forty years on the ground in Eeyou Istchee. Together they can focus attention on local ecological facts and stories—that narrative ecology with which I began—and the political/economic context of development. Together they can also help show how all of this has developed over time in relation to the varied ways this land has been and is now being used. Industrial use, including

current Cree participation, is obvious wherever one looks up here, but there are other equally important uses still happening. In the same way that the marriage of history and ethnology into ethnohistory illuminated the meaning of Native actions in the more distant past, so, too, can this union help us understand more recent change. All this together gives us a way of contextualizing the various stories here on the land.

## Getting History back to the Land

The men I'm travelling with are all Kaanoowapmaakin. They are stewards over hundreds of square miles of territory, and the knowledge that they have about their lands is detailed: they know where the good wood is, where fish can be caught in abundance, where medicine grows, and, most important, where the animals can be found. They also know where the stories are placed, and all of this knowledge must be tended. Because of this, the Cree often speak of the bush as being "like their garden."<sup>44</sup> Here is another metaphor, which the Cree use to communicate that the land is more than a set of material resources for daily living; that Cree tradition is of the land, just as the plants and animals upon which the Cree traditionally rely. The garden is a conscious simile, which they use to describe the bush to outsiders, knowing full well that the word skates the line between the biblical and the horticultural.<sup>45</sup> They use it because it's a relationship with their food and a story about their land that resonates with non-Cree, and gives them some entrée into the communicative reciprocity of stewardship I described above. "Place," in all its many aspects, is tended "like a garden" by people who are in turn cared for by the land.<sup>46</sup>

Dave, Solomon, and Lawrence have a responsibility within this understanding. They have to make sure that these lands are as productive, as useful, and as whole when they pass them on as they were when they took charge of them. Others may hunt, fish, and trap these lands, but under their guidance—if the rules are being followed—and the land is thus kept in order. This cultural system of stewardship, not dissimilar to the old rural rights of the shared commons, is known as "Weeshou Wehwun," and it has shaped the lands of Eeyou Istchee for many generations. This is what we would label Cree tradition, and this is what is threatened by everything industrial development brings. Yet here is where historical research is so

important—in addition to the tools of political ecology—because if we focus too much on the traditional ecological knowledge of this system in the present, then we risk missing the fact that the *indoh-hoh istchee* system is also a historical creation.

There is a lively anthropological discussion as to whether Native hunting grounds like these predate European contact, for the Cree are not the only Algonquian people to have this kind of land-use system. All their provenances are an open question.<sup>47</sup> This debate is interesting in its way, but in Eeyou Istchee defined hunting lands have been around for at least a couple of centuries, as fur-trade records show that there were certain hunters in “possession” of certain lands from the beginning. Whites did not understand this system of possession (as was the case with most Indigenous divisions of land), so they wrote little about it. A system of some kind existed, however, from an early time, and the *indoh-hoh istchee* are certainly part of Cree culture and tradition today in all the ways I have described; nobody here would say that they or the Kaanoowapmaakin are not fundamentally part of Cree traditional use. All of this is an important foundation of understanding, but it is not the most interesting historical aspect of these territories, nor does it connect Cree tradition historically to issues of development as it should. To make that connection one has to understand that, from the 1930s to the 1950s, the *indoh-hoh* system was reinvented by both Cree hunters and non-Native outsiders.<sup>48</sup>

In the early twentieth century, regional beaver populations were decimated. This was caused first by white trappers overhunting fur resources, but then by the abandonment of traditional boundaries as individual Cree tried to get what they could before it was gone. The resulting hunting free-for-all affected other animals, and this became a cultural as well as an ecological crisis, as people began to starve in the region. The hunger and deprivation in James Bay did not receive the national attention that drove governmental response in the Keewatin District, but it did inspire action in the creation of beaver reserves on Cree lands. In writing previously about the longer history of the region, I described this response as a manifestation of the hope within Cree hunting culture, but I think now that it also speaks to the historical and political issues I’ve been discussing here.<sup>49</sup>

In the decades surrounding the Second World War, the Kaanoowapmaakin responded to environmental crisis by adapting the conservation ideas of fur traders and government officials to their traditional ideas of

stewardship through political action. They did this with the aid of a few cooperative non-Cree actors, through petition and negotiated agreement, and thus got their traditional system sanctioned under federal and provincial laws.<sup>50</sup> In essence, they allowed their stewardship to be bureaucratized, reporting to the Ministry of Natural Resources on populations and receiving quotas for beaver. For this they regained exclusive Cree use of the land, and—importantly—a great deal of control over its regulation. The Kaanoowapmaakin knew the government formula used to come up with quotas for the next year, and they were the only ones in control of the data, so in essence they negotiated a system where they set their own quotas. In all other respects, officials were happy to let them regulate their land as long as they could put the government stamp of approval on the numbers.

The process was useful for individual hunters, but more importantly it made the *indoh-hoh istchee* system a legal manifestation of political hopes in that era, as well as a cultural artifact. Today it's the Grand Council that negotiates and signs treaties and agreements, but back then it was hunters on the land who began the modern political engagement with both governments. It's important to remember that these agreements were not formal treaties, but the codification of a system of land use, which helped the land and the Cree rebound from a period of hardship caused by the breakdown of Kaanoowapmaakin control. Everyone at the time agreed that the system was part of the *longue durée*, here in Eeyou Istchee, but this new use of tradition created part of the current political context.

If we step back, then, from the larger story driven by resource extraction, if we jump scales, then history and political ecology together allow us to see that Cree political existence begins with the creation of beaver reserves, rather than with the JBNQA as I claimed earlier. The Kaanoowapmaakin role is changed now, but it's important to see that these men are both the archive of traditional knowledge and land use—this aspect of political ecology—and a key to the political history of Eeyou Istchee. Kaanoowapmaakin were and often still are leaders in Cree communities, and their actions from the 1930s to the 1950s speak to the adaptability of Cree land tenure. They also speak of the Cree fight for their land since the damming and logging.

The Kaanoowapmaakin continue to interact with the Ministry of Natural Resources and other government bureaus, though things have

changed. The recognition of the Kaanoowapmaakin was one of the concessions that Quebec made in the Paix des Braves agreement to get the Rupert diversion. These men are now “consulted” over what will be done by forestry companies on their lands, though consultation has turned out to be a deeply one-sided affair—despite the fact that the province likes to talk about Cree participation. The Kaanoowapmaakin can at best only blunt the effects of development, but they continue to try in different ways, and this is the point.<sup>51</sup>

In continuing to hunt their lands, these men are carrying on a long cultural tradition, but in continuing to negotiate, the Kaanoowapmaakin are also continuing a political tradition that is part of the more-obvious struggle for political control and sovereignty. Here is where Offen’s “field-informed” historical research is vital, because the history of this process is here on the land, and with these people, and in stories like Solomon’s. Here is the history and ecology that is found in the archive of the land—the history at which other archives only hint.

## Concluding Thoughts

As I think about this place where I’m sitting tonight, as I think about that tent site at the other end of the portage trail and the story connected to it, I want to be clear about the ways that land and story are being acted upon by the larger forces of political economy. I also want to make clear how they continue to exist as places that are defined within Cree culture and Cree history. These two processes are connected, and I think they ought to be connected in both our historical and our present understanding of this place. Adapting academic methodology is part of this, but I want to be clear that in many ways the Cree themselves are pushing me to grapple with the full meaning of the narrative ecology with which I began. They push me to do this in the ways they themselves think about both their land and their stories; and they do it through the actions they take to protect both land and culture together.

Since 2011, the community of Waswanipi has been trying to protect an area north of the Broadback River, which the province and Eacom (the parent company of Domtar) aim to clearcut. This is the Assinica Valley, one of the last unbroken valleys in Quebec’s boreal forest and one of the

last intact habitats for the threatened woodland caribou. Many environmental groups want to see it protected for these reasons, and thus seek to work cooperatively with the Cree. There is a great deal of room for cooperation, but for the Cree the area is known as *Mishigamish*, the Big Sea, and it takes in four or five Waswanipi *indoh-hoh istchee*. These are hunting lands that have not been touched by logging, so the Waswanipi Cree want to protect this area for its environmental value, certainly—but they also want to protect its cultural and political value in maintaining their traditional presence on their land.

Traditional practice on these *indoh-hoh istchee* has not been affected by development; hunters there have not had to make compromises because of cutting or the changes brought by roads. Nor have they been tempted to change their hunting practices because of the convenience of roads. The Cree know that people change for reasons other than being forced. They have a nuanced understanding of how and why culture and land change, and they also understand that cultural adaptation is the heart of their relationship with the land. This is one of the lessons in the adaptation of the *indoh-hoh istchee* in the twentieth century: adaptation, participation, even politicization, are not loss of tradition. In fact, not only should they be seen as signs of a healthy tradition, they actually explain much about what is going on in Eeyou Istchee today.

There are issues, however, in protecting the land this way. Provincial environmental agencies and independent scientists are increasingly moving toward a model of ecosystem management in dealing with issues of preservation and conservation. There is a good deal to recommend this approach in purely ecological terms, but the ecosystems that science defines are not the same as the *indoh-hoh istchee* defined by Cree culture. Ecosystems are not the bush either, and part of the Cree desire to protect these places where older hunting methods still exist is also to protect those older ideas on the land, as well. Like the caribou, these ideas need an intact forest to thrive.

Ecosystems do not define the cultural or political space that is central to Cree culture and to their desire for protection. There will have to be another negotiation over land, how it will be defined, and this is not simply a matter traditional culture versus Western thinking. It's not that simple anymore—if it ever was that simple—and this is true of many issues in Eeyou Istchee today. This is true across the whole of the Canadian north,

and it's the challenge for those of us writing about this land, its history, and its people. In all these places, stories like Solomon's continue to cycle, continuing the present-ness of First Nations' culture and history.

The north comprises a wide variety of communities of place and all of them have deep traditions of seeing the land as central to the idea of community. They see the land as community. The Kaanoowapmaakin and all the people living on the lands of Eeyou Istchee are the continuation of traditional Cree practice, but also embody a larger intellectual tradition concerning how humans live in these places. They represent a political argument, too, and now, nearly everywhere, the press of development and its concomitant politics is part of the local ecology of story. The challenge is telling our histories in a way that does justice to this reality.

## Notes

- 1 I am referring specifically to Sigurd Olsen, *The Lonely Land* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), but generally to all romantic portrayals of the Canadian North.
- 2 The Ouje Bougoumou Cree were not recognized and given land to build a new village until the 1990s. They did not achieve full status under the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement—and subsequent treaties with Quebec—until November 2011.
- 3 N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words: Essay, Stories, and Passages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 187.
- 4 Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 29. See also Donald L. Fixico, "Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History," 84–99, and Vine Deloria Jr., "Comfortable Fictions and the Struggle for Turf: An Essay Review of the *Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies*," 65–84, both in *Natives and Academics: Researching And Writing about American Indians*, ed. Devon A. Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
- 5 Matthew Coon Come, "Survival in the Context of Mega-Resource Development: Experiences of the James Bay Cree and the First Nations of Canada," in *In the Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization*, ed. Mario Blaser, Harvey A. Fiet, and Glenn McRae (New York: Zed Books, 2004), 158.
- 6 Tina Loo, "Disturbing the Peace: Environmental Change and the Scales of Justice on a Northern River," *Environmental History* 12 (October 2007): 895–919; George Towers, "Applying the Political Geography of Scale: Grassroots Strategies and Environmental Justice," *Professional Geographer* 52 (2000): 25; Andrew Herod and Melissa W. Wright, "Placing Scale: An Introduction," in *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale*, ed. Andrew

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- 7 Matthew Coon Come, "Shafted By Hydro-Québec: The Cree, the Environment, and Quebec," *Canada Speeches* 5, no. 5 (September–October 1991).
- 8 Janet Armstrong, "Voices of the Land," in *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, ed. Simon Ortiz (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 181.
- 9 King, *Truth About Stories*, 92.
- 10 Robert Bringhurst, "The Polyhistorical Mind," in *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind, and Ecology* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006), 28.
- 11 The best of these are: Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits In Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005); Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000). For a more philosophical discussion, see Tim Ingold, *The Perceptions of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 12 For a primer on this debate, see Donald Worster, "Doing Environmental History," in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 289–307; Donald Worster, "History as Natural History: An Essay on Theory and Method," *Pacific Historical Review* (1984): 1–19; William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992): 1347–76; "In Search of Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 23–68.
- 13 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 64.
- 14 Bringhurst, "The Polyhistorical Mind," 33–34.
- 15 Harvey Feit, "Gifts of the Land: Hunting Territories, Guaranteed Incomes and the Construction of Social Relations in James Bay Cree Society," *Senri Ethnologica Studies* 30 (1991): 223–68; Harvey Feit, "James Bay Crees' Life Projects and Politics: Histories of Place, Animal Partners, and Enduring Relationships," in *In the Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization*, ed. Mario Blaser, Harvey A. Fiet, and Glenn McRae (New York: Zed Books, 2004); Adrian Tanner, *Bringing Home Animals: Religious Ideology and Mode of Production of the Mistassini Cree Hunters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979); Richard Preston, *Cree Narrative* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).
- 16 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); for his ideas on "thick description," see pp. 1–29; also see Gilbert Ryle, "The Thinking of Thoughts: What is *le penseur* Doing?," *University Lectures* 18 (1968).

- 17 Hans M. Carlson, *Home Is The Hunter: The James Bay Cree and Their Land* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).
- 18 Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: The Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972); Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 15–31.
- 19 See, for example, Bruce Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985); Karen Kupperman, *Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Kenneth M. Morrison, *The Embattled Northeast: The Elusive Ideal of Alliance in Abenaki-Euroamerican Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1884); James D. Drake, *King Philip's War: Civil War in New England, 1675–1676* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); Evan Haifeli and Kevin Sweeney, *Captors and Captive: The 1704 French and Indian Raid on Deerfield* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); John G. Reid, ed., *The "Conquest" of Acadia, 1710: Imperial, Colonial, and Aboriginal Constructions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
- 20 For an understanding of the roots of ethnohistory as a sub-discipline, see Alfred G. Bailey, "Retrospective Thoughts of an Ethnohistorian," *Historical Papers* (1977); James Axtell, "Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint," *Ethnohistory* 26 (Winter 1979); Bruce Trigger, "Ethnohistory: Problems and Prospects," *Ethnohistory* 29 (Fall 1982); and Francis Jennings, "A Growing Partnership: Historians, Anthropologists and American Indian History," *Ethnohistory* 29 (Fall 1982).
- 21 Jennifer S. H. Brown, "Ethnohistorians: Strange Bedfellows, Kindred Spirits," *Ethnohistory* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 117; see also James Taylor Carson, "Ethnogeography and the Native American Past," *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 770–88; and R. Cole Harris, *Making Native Spaces: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002).
- 22 Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relations in the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Shepard Krech, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 1999); Ken S. Coates and Robin Fisher, eds., *Out of the Background: Readings on Canadian Native History* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996); Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partner in Fur: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay, 1600–1870* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983); Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1980); Sylvia Vankirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Deny D elage, *Le pays renverse: amindiens et europeens en Amerique du nord-est, 1600–1664* (Montreal: Boreal Express, 1985).

- 23 In works like William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); and David Rich Lewis, *Neither Wolf Nor Dog: American Indians, Environment, and Agrarian Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), we are given thoughtful regional studies that show the agency of Native people and their cultural understandings of the land they lived on. At the same time, these works perpetuate a narrative fall from grace, as Native people's worlds disappear in the face of European colonization. Native people themselves often disappear, if they are not the direct focus of a work, leaving the impression that there are no Native people left in places like New England. This declensionist narrative trope is something that William Cronon wrestled with in "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992), but it's still a powerful force in the writing of history. This is not just a problem of environmental history, and has deep roots; see Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 24 Paul Sutter, "Reflections: What Can U.S. Environmental Historians Learn from Non-U.S. Environmental Historiography?" *Environmental History* 8 (January 2003); Lynda Jessup, "The Group of Seven and the Tourist Landscape in Western Canada, or The More Things Change..." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37 (Spring 2002): 146–47; George Colpitts, *Game in the Garden: A Human History of Wildlife in Western Canada to 1940* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002).
- 25 I'm thinking of those original works by Harold Innis and W. A. Mackintosh, but also more recent work, as well. See Daniel Drache, ed., *Staples, Markets and Cultural Change: The Centenary Edition of Harold Innis' Collected Essays* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Larry A. Glassford, "The Evolution of 'New Political History' in English-Canadian Historiography: From Cliometrics to Cliodiversity," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 32 (Autumn 2002): 349–50; Gary Burrill and Ian McKay, *People, Resources, and Power: Critical Perspectives on Underdevelopment and Primary Industries in the Atlantic Region* (Fredericton, NB: Gorsebrook Research Institute of Atlantic Canada Studies and Acadensis Press, 1987); J. I. (Hans) Bakker, "Canadian Political Economy and Rural Sociology: Early History of Rural Studies in Canada," *Rural Sociologist* 7 (September 1987); Robert J. Brym and R. James Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1979); John McCallum,

- Unequal Beginnings: Agriculture and Economic Development in Quebec and Ontario Until 1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).
- 26 For an in-depth investigation of this, see Caroline Desbiens, *Power from the North: Territory, Identity, and the Culture of Hydroelectricity in Quebec* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013); and "Producing North and South: A political geography of hydro development in Québec," *Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien* 48, no. 2 (2004):101–18.
- 27 William Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 17 (Fall 1993); Richard White, "Afterword: Environmental History: Watching a Historical Field Mature," *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (February 2001); Alfred W. Crosby, "The Past and Present of Environmental History," *American Historical Review* 100 (October 1995).
- 28 Desbiens, *Power from the North*, 133.
- 29 Personal email, 4 November 2010.
- 30 For my interpretation of the beginnings of these negotiations, see Hans M. Carlson, "A Watershed of Words: Litigating and Negotiating Nature in Eastern James Bay, 1971–1975," in *Contemporary Quebec: Selected Readings and Commentaries*, ed. Matthew Hayday and Michael Behiels (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).
- 31 Government of Quebec, *James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement* (Quebec City: Editeur officiel du Québec, 1976), 291.
- 32 Carlson, *Home Is the Hunter*, 287–333; *James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement*, 332, 359.
- 33 Roy MacGregor, *Chief: The Fearless Vision of Billy Diamond* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1990), 123–25; Naila Clerici, "The Cree of James Bay and the Construction of Their Identity for the Media," *Canadian Issues-Themes Canadiens* 21(1999): 143–65.
- 34 Matthew Coon-Come, "A Reduction of Our World," in *Our People, Our Land: Perspectives on the Columbus Quincentenary*, ed. Kurt Russo (Bellingham, WA: Lummi Tribe and Kluckhohn Center, 1992), 82; Glenn McRae, "Grassroots Transnationalism and Life Projects of Vermonters in the Great Whale Campaign," in *In the Way of Development*, ed. Mario Blaser, Harvey A. Fiet, and Glenn McRae (New York: Zed Books, 2004), 111–29.
- 35 Steve Turner and Todd Nachowitz, "The Damming of Native Lands," *The Nation*, 21 October 1991, 473–77; Jeff Jones, "Power Struggle: Will New York's Search for Clean Energy Destroy Cree and Inuit Homelands in Northern Quebec," *UpRiver/DownRiver*, March–April 1991, 24–28; Chris Busby, "Bourassa's Dream for Quebec: An Environmental Knockout Punch," *Borealis* 2, no. 4 (1991): 8–13; Sam Howe Verhovek, "Power Struggle: Flooding Quebec to Light New York," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 January 1992, 17–21; André Picard, "James Bay II," excerpted from the *Globe and Mail*, *Amicus Journal*, Fall 1990, 10–16; Harry Thurston, "Power in a Land of Remembrance," *Audubon*, November 1991, 52–59.
- 36 For more on logging issues and the Paix des Braves agreement, see Naomi C. Heindel, "The Cree and

- the Crown: Management Stories From North America's Northern, Northern Woodlands," *Northern Woodlands* 75 (Winter 2012): 26–37; see also Hans M. Carlson, "Strangers Still and the Land Nearly Devoured," *Yellow Medicine Review* (Spring 2014): 50–61.
- 37 This was during the second administration of Grand Chief Ted Moses (1999–2005). The initiative was forwarded by his chief negotiator, Abel Bosum.
- 38 Carlson, *Home Is the Hunter*, 54–56.
- 39 Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology* (New York: Blackwell, 2004), 5.
- 40 See J. B. Greenberg and T. K. Park, "Political Ecology," *Journal of Political Ecology* 1 (1994): 1–12; R. Peet and M. Watts, "Liberation Ecology: Development, Sustainability, and Environment in an Age of Market Triumphalism," in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1–45. For an example that touches on Solomon's statement, see Kristín Loftsdóttir, "Where My Cord Is Buried: *WoDaaBe* Use and Conceptualization of Land," *Journal of Political Ecology* 8 (2001): 1–24.
- 41 Christian Brannstrom, "What Kind of History for What Kind of Political Ecology?," *Historical Geography* 32 (2004): 71.
- 42 Karl H. Offen, "Historical Political Ecology: An Introduction," *Historical Geography* 32 (2004): 33.
- 43 Offen, "Historical Political Ecology," 21–22.
- 44 The use of the word "garden" was first recorded in Boyce Richardson, *Strangers Devour the Land* (New York: Knopf, 1976), in an interview with Job Bearskin. Whether he innovated this usage is not known, but he was always very careful to say that the land was "like" a garden, according to Richardson (personal communication).
- 45 For some of the pitfalls in making too much of this analogy, see Paul Nadasdy, "'We Don't Harvest Animals; We Kill Them': Agricultural Metaphors and the Politics of Wildlife Management in the Yukon," in *Knowing Nature: Conversations at the Intersection of Political Ecology and Science Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 135–51.
- 46 Carlson, *Home Is The Hunter*, 4.
- 47 J. M. Cooper, "Is the Algonquian Family Hunting Ground System Pre-Columbian?," *American Anthropologist* 41 (1939): 66–90; Harvey Feit, "The Construction of Algonquian Hunting Territories," in *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*, History of Anthropology, vol. 7, ed. G. Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 109–34. National Archives of Canada, Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 6752, file 420-10-1-3, 1943 Report for Indian Affairs Branch.
- 48 For a detailed description of the modern *Indoh-hoh* system, see "Eeyou Indoh-Hoh Weeshou Wehwun," [http://creetrappers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/CTA\\_EEYOU\\_HUNTING\\_LAW.pdf](http://creetrappers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/CTA_EEYOU_HUNTING_LAW.pdf). This is a link off of the Cree Trapper's Association homepage ([www.creetrappers.ca](http://www.creetrappers.ca)).
- 49 Carlson, *Home Is The Hunter*, 167–201.

- 50 This was before the formation of the Grand Council of the Cree in 1974.
- 51 My interpretation of the negotiations between *Kaanoowap-maakin* and the MNR and forestry companies comes from personal experience. These meetings are a fascinating mix of cordiality, resignation, and some outright hostility, depending on the age and

personality of the *Kaanoowap-maakin*. The non-Natives involved are for the most part sympathetic to the Cree desire to protect land and culture, but there is an agenda driving these meetings written outside the region, which no one present is in a position to change. See also Heindel, n37.