THE ICONIC NORTH

CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS
OF ABORIGINAL LIFE
IN POSTWAR CANADA

Joan Sangster
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Narrating the North: Sojourning Women and Travel Writing</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Beaver: Northern Indigenous Life in Popular Education</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 North of Schamattawa: “Indians,” “Eskimos,” and RCMP</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 NFB Documentary, Indigenous Peoples, and Canadian Northern Policy</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Irene Baird’s Northern Journeys</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 “Mrs. Bird Flies North”: The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in the North</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

They glamorize and romanticize the Inuit ... and give us status the others don’t have. Canadians like to talk about us eating frozen meat and living in the cold. It gives Canada something that other countries don’t have. Everybody likes the Inuit.

– Nellie Cournoyea, “The Independent Inuit,”
Maclean’s, 14 July 1986¹

Nellie Cournoyea’s sardonic take on how southern Canadians imagine the Inuit North is a pithy summation of decades, if not centuries, of our northward gazing. Since the earliest days of Euro-Canadian incursion into Indigenous lands, the North has been rendered exotic, romantic, terrifying, sublime, enigmatic, otherworldly, and intrinsically Canadian, and some of these adjectives are equated not just with the landscape but with the original inhabitants of the North: its First Nations. Is there really any more that can be written about this fascination with the North and Canadian nordicity, given its firmly entrenched place and multitudinous expressions in artistic production, social science, and historical writing?² Should we not turn the North, including its cultural construction, over to its own First Nations and peoples for re-visioning as they work through the project of decolonization and self-determination?

While I wholeheartedly support that re-visioning project, the recent politically orchestrated announcements, and attendant media hoopla, concerning the discovery of Sir John Franklin’s shipwreck in the Arctic are a salient reminder that we need an ongoing critical analysis of a romanticized North “discovered” by white explorers.³ My examination of northern contact zones – defined as places of cultural interaction characterized by asymmetrical power relations³ – does not attempt to define the
North from the perspectives of Indigenous peoples and northerners but, rather, contributes to a critical interrogation of the colonial relationships that have underpinned Native-newcomer relations in Canada, interlaced as they are with North-South relations. By uncovering and analyzing cultural discourses about northern Indigeneity that circulated in the post–Second World War period, this book extends the discussion of our troubled history of colonialism as it was mapped out on the landscape of popular, educational, and more “highbrow” cultural production.

My questions about how the North was perceived emerged from my previous work on Indigenous women and paid labour. When the federal government introduced labour placement programs for Aboriginal women in the 1950s, it was assumed that women of many First Nations needed a cultural makeover in order to transition to a modern capitalist economy, despite the fact that many had been participating in the market economy since the last century. Cultural suppositions about an “Indian personality,” about the cultural baggage Aboriginal women brought with them from reserves, and about how Native cultures inevitably clashed with modernity figured prominently in these policy discussions. “Industry is moving north,” notes one government pamphlet, and Indians, now “living in simple style ... in places far from cities ... provide a nearby source of labour.” The Indian character, attuned to the “sun, moon and tides” rather than “clocks and calendars,” and Native aversion to material acquisition and individualism, are “disadvantages” to their integration into the life of working-class affluence. While this public-outreach pamphlet also speaks of the need to preserve aspects of Indigenous cultures, it constructs an essentialized Native person it equates with northern “wilderness,” while associating whites with modernity and “industry.”

Understanding the nexus of culture and labour, and how the former became a totalizing explanation that left colonialism unnamed, hidden, and forgotten, thus became an important question for me. How, I asked, was cultural representation an integral part of persisting colonial relations? How were images, understandings, and communications implicated in public perceptions and state policy, in media and education, all part of the daily fabric of life, so “taken for granted” that they allowed...
Indigenous people to be seen as both romanticized and reviled, at the same time backward, childlike, heroic, vanishing – but always needing reinvention? How did relations of gender, class, and colonialism interconnect, and was there appreciable change in the northern imaginary over time?

The northern part of my question emerged in a more happenstance way, typical of historians’ innate curiosity and wandering eye for textual artefacts from the past, as evidentiary clues lead us from one source to another. Since I spend a lot of time in second-hand bookstores with my book-collector partner, I began to sit in the Arctic section and read women’s travel narratives. They became an entrée to my previous question, the first of a series of detours, leads, and queries pointing in other cultural directions. The question of northern colonialism also preoccupied me because I am situated in a research centre with a long-standing interest in the North and a commitment to understanding and critiquing Canada as a colonial project.

It is a fundamental argument of this book that cultural constructions of the North must be framed within the changing political economy and history of postwar Canada. A focus on culture need not generate a culturalist discursive determinism or assume a rejection of historical materialism, feminism, or traditional empirical methods of historical research, all of which assume there is a reality out there to be grasped – perhaps not definitively known, but grasped. This study is materialist in its assumption that the economic and political underpinnings of settler colonial relations are born of struggles for control over land and resources and, thus, domination over other humans: “territoriality,” as Patrick Wolfe concludes, “is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element.”5 Questions of power cannot be separated from the defining elements of material life, including the forms of production and social reproduction that create and sustain societies, and the social and political relations shaping how people survive and produce cultures over time. Colonialism is, however, far more than a set of changing political and economic structures with its own contradictions; it is also a lived experience of domination, negotiation, and resistance – and a profoundly gendered one at that.
Introduction

Historical, materialist, and feminist questions should prompt us to ask: Why these images at this point in time? How might the depictions of Aboriginal peoples have emerged from past cultural resources, yet been reshaped in the postwar period, leaving a profound legacy for the future? Which groups benefited from these images and how? Such an approach recognizes that the commodities, ideologies, and human interactions of northern colonialism were part of (and sometimes replicated) larger global and spatial processes, but they took on historically and regionally specific contours: in the North, Cole Harris argues, dispossession and development were often “telescoped tightly” together within a short time frame, with the former justified in the liberal modernization language of the latter. Similarly, Lisa Piper shows that development in the northwest was distinct from Prairie agricultural settlement: in the North, the state and private enterprise primarily “sought resources suited to industrialized marketplaces” and to “fuel[ling] industrial capitalism.” While Aboriginals perceived a northern landscape integrated into their culture, Euro-Canadians could only see a “physical landscape” that could and should be plumbed for its riches. It is hardly surprising, then, that a dominant anthropological perspective of the time assumed one should study the inevitable: modernization and acculturation.

As a concept of space and place, the North had exercised an important role in the imaginary construction of the Canadian nation-state since the nineteenth century, influencing political visions and economic power, and it was also shaped by those forces. From the 1940s onward, however, the North assumed a new economic and political significance in Canadian life. Although the fur trade was facing economic difficulties, the North was promoted by other business concerns as Canada’s last economic frontier of development, holding the promise of generating wealth for all and requiring development, just as the western frontier had been portrayed as empty, unused, literally wasted by communally centred Indians until it was developed by white settler-farmers and corporate property holders. Even when Prairie Aboriginals attempted commercial farming, as Sarah Carter shows, the state favoured white agricultural development, rationalizing its policies with a cultural explanation for Aboriginal disinterest in farming. Although situated in a different landscape, her
research should raise our critical antennae when we read later cultural constructions of the Indigenous North.

The state saw Canada’s best interests tied up with northern development, whether this new northern “National Policy” was articulated through Conservative John Diefenbaker’s electioneering vision of a new North or Liberal Jean Lesage’s ministerial call to include Indigenous peoples in resource development. The close connection between the fate of the North, resource development, and Indigenous peoples was symbolized by the changing nomenclature of the federal departments responsible for these areas. Until 1949, many aspects of northern administration came under the Department of Mines and Resources, which was later transmogrified into the Department of Resources and Development, and merged again in 1954 into the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources. In 1965, responsibility for “Indian Affairs,” previously centred in the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, was transferred to the newly created Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. In Ottawa’s eyes, the North was about minerals, resources, and development.

By examining cultural production in this context of political economy, space, and power, we are able to better understand how it was defined by different “positionalities, possibilities, and contradictions.” This “realist” and historical materialist outlook does not assume that cultural representations are the mere epiphenomena of economic structures or the conscious creations of state and capital, any more than it assumes that they flow freely in an ether of ideas, unmoored from social relations. They are linked in a complex process of ideological engagement, in which cultural discourses do the work of communicating, explaining, legitimating, and justifying. Rather than defining culture as a “bounded domain,” Gramscian theorists suggest, it is better conceived of as an organic part of society, encompassing ways of thinking and social practices that explain the world. These are always positioned and precipitated within specific social and historical contexts. Cultural discourses may be shot through with contradiction, and they are neither fixed nor unchangeable, as human agency has a role to play not only in constructing but also in questioning the relationship of culture to “real” lives,
identities, and goals. What is important, then, is not just to define what culture is but to explore how it circulates and how it is implicated in “constellations” of power relations.\textsuperscript{15}

Finally, an approach that explores colonial images predominantly from the perspective of the more powerful – the colonizers – does not assume that the contact zone was a one-way street, with colonizers exercising power unidimensionally. As the documentary \textit{Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny} shows, Inuit people had their own critical, cynical, humorous, incredulous constructions of the Qallunaat.\textsuperscript{16} While some excellent studies explore Aboriginal-settler dialogic “exchanges,”\textsuperscript{17} or, like Mary-Ellen Kelm’s investigation of western Canadian rodeo, human experience, and “hybridity,”\textsuperscript{18} this study focuses more on the culturally dominant settler images employed to define the northern contact zone. As a consequence, it does not attempt to speak \textit{for}, or even definitely \textit{about}, Indigenous actors, a presumption that colonized groups have repeatedly criticized.\textsuperscript{19} However, by suggesting some tensions between and within historical sources, and some disjuncture between colonial images and the reflections of northern Indigenous peoples, it implicitly validates the importance of bringing to light alternative Indigenous understandings of history and colonialism.

\textbf{Keywords: Defining North, Colonialism, Race}

This exploration of various representational contact zones is situated at the intersection of a number of historiographical and theoretical literatures, all of which have been deeply concerned with definitional “keywords” that shape our writing in crucial ways. While I use a shorthand vocabulary of generalized terms, like “North” and “colonialism,” I acknowledge the importance of recurrent debate over the suppositions behind such terminology. The North, as other scholars ranging from geographers to literary theorists have suggested, is not only defined by geography and climate or the officially designated line of the Arctic Circle: it is also an imaginary construct, a “state of mind,”\textsuperscript{20} and, for Canadians, an ideal linked to our national identity. As ads told us during the last Olympic Games, Canadians “\textit{are} winter”: we \textit{are} the North. Like
Sherrill Grace, whose writing has influenced my thinking, I understand the North in Canadian cultural production as an “idea” and a “creative process” as much as a “physical space.” For Grace, the North is a “creation in words, sounds, signs and symbols of northern mentality,” and, while normalized as essential to Canada, it is a product of “habitas, a human construct we have learned to accept as a ‘given.’”

While indebted to the expansive literary perspectives of Grace and others, I am primarily concerned here with the work of culture as it was expressed in the thirty years after the Second World War through practices and images depicting the eastern Arctic and the Northwest Territories (the current Nunavut, Inuvialuit, Nunatsiavut, Yukon, and NWT), and, in one chapter, the western provincial North. Indeed, I selected case studies from a range of northern geographical locations precisely for the diversity they provide. Historians who suggest that our knowledge of the North is best built upon an understanding of the historical and structural characteristics of the region – with an eye to the physical, human, economic, and social “struggles” and conflicts of the area – make eminent sense to me. One of those arenas of struggle identified by Kenneth Coates is that explored here: “the struggle between popular culture and reality.”

Since the North in this time period was constantly invoked in the mainstream media as Canada’s last frontier – one where settlers and Indigenous peoples were engaged in constructing new relationships, in contrast to the old, tattered antagonism of (southern) Indian and white – it provides a scene ripe for the analysis of cultural messages about Natives and newcomers, which many observers equated with the meeting of tradition and modernity. Postwar visitors, sojourners, and state officials often claimed that the Inuit were different from the southern Natives in personality (evidenced by their hospitable relations with whites) and even in their willingness to adapt to Western ways. Was this, however, little more than a rationalization of colonial incursion as this white frontier/Native homeland was increasingly occupied, valued especially for its strategic position in the global Cold War and the resources it might yield? The European “obsession” with the romanticized image of stoic but happy Inuit, facing environmental adversity with unending
cheerfulness, was not entirely new. Writers had long been fascinated with Inuit hunting culture, so diametrically different from “peasant, soil-based” agricultural cultures, as Hugh Brody argues. The political economy of the postwar period could only accentuate this perceived contrast between northern and southern First Nations: while the southern Indians had been “warlike,” standing in the way of “progress” as whites spread aggressively across the western frontier, the Inuit now “smiled happily from the sidelines” as whites carved out their new frontier in the North.24

Indigenous peoples are not categorized in this book as they were by the government of the time – as status Indian, non-status Indian, and Eskimo – though when describing and paraphrasing sources, I sometimes use those designations as if they were in “scare quotes” to replicate the true flavour of the discourse and sensibility of the time. More often I use the terms “Native,” “Indigenous,” “First Nations,” or “Aboriginal” as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) has, basing this designation primarily on people’s self-identification. In some circumstances, nevertheless, it is necessary to disaggregate general terms in order to analyze a more precise cultural construction of Métis, Inuit, Innu, or Indian – because this is what colonial discourse did, creating distinctions between groups that, in turn, revealed much about those creating colonial ideologies.

This is a complicated issue for historical sources sometimes distinguish between, but more often homogenize, Indigenous peoples in the northern imaginary: the Innu and Inuit, no matter where they lived across the vast expanse of the North, from Coppermine to Baffin Island to Labrador (today Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut), were often collapsed in popular parlance into one category – the Eskimo – even though these groups were not just geographically but also socially and culturally distinct.25 Even well-travelled knowledgeable white sojourners succumbed to this unifying tendency, as filmmaker Doug Wilkinson did when he noted of different Inuit regions: “The Eskimo problem is universal; it is present wherever there are Eskimo.”26 Because this book touches down across the North, I inevitably relay images of different First Nations: blurring them together is not my intent, even if discourses
at the time did so. The chapter on women’s travel narratives focuses predominantly on women posted in the eastern Arctic, particularly current Nunavik and Nunavut, while the one on the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) is briefer in its treatment of Inuit settlements since the commission only heard testimony in Yukon and the Northwest Territories, primarily about Athapaskan First Peoples, for example, the Gwich’in (Dene), who were simply described as Indians. The Dene at the time were multiple, comprising about eight language groups, with different resource bases, social groupings, and cultural practices – distinctions not absorbed by the RCSW. My discussion of the National Film Board (NFB) films offers specificity where it can, for example, when the Netsilik or Tununermiut Inuit are featured, but filmmakers also veered towards generalization when they outlined development across the entire Mackenzie district in Canada’s Awakening North, taking in different Dene groups, northern Cree, and Inuit. The RCMP television series was the most unconcerned with ethnographic naming: First Nations were fluid in their hands, hybridized and re-imagined into fictional entities.

Even more contested are the descriptive categories “colonialism,” “Eurocentric,” and “race.” They are all distinct, yet they overlap and may inform or reinforce each other: racism, as Ella Shoat comments, is “not unique to the West” but has often been colonialism’s “ally and by-product.” “Colonialism” is a term now commonly used in Canadian history books dealing with the First Nations, yet a generation ago it often described Anglo-French Canadian or Canada-US relations and, generations before that, Canadian-British ones. If we take “colonial” to denote the power exerted by a metropolitan area over a peripheral one, and the concurrent economic, political, or cultural domination of peoples through formal and/or informal means – ranging from disciplining jurisprudence to acculturating education – then the maxim that the Indigenous North existed in a colonial relationship to the South seems self-evident.

In the postwar period, many northerners used the word “colonial” to evoke their unhappiness with the North’s “colonial status” since the NWT was administered from within a federal department and lacked the
autonomous powers exercised by the provinces. Not until 1967 did this territorial government move north. As Kenneth Coates and Kerry Abel argue, the term “colonial” is particularly meaningful in northern history given the direct control that Ottawa exerted over northern lands, governance, and peoples: “In geographic terms,” they note, “Canada is the largest colonizing power in the contemporary world.” Indigenous peoples increasingly employed the term “colonialism” after the late 1960s quite differently, as a political keyword to describe their relationship to white-dominated governments. Colonialism as a form of rule was critiqued by a growing anticolonial movement that wanted to name the previously unnamed relations of subordination and exploitation Indigenous peoples had experienced. Until that time, non-Indigenous northerners seldom described Native-newcomer relations as essentially colonial in the sense we think of the term: with connotations of race, Eurocentrism, and imperialism. That was to change after the 1960s as some non-Indigenous allies threw their support behind the First Nations political project of decolonization.

Current definitions of colonialism in the Canadian context have been shaped by decades of historical literature detailing Euro-Canadians’ aggressive efforts to lay claim to Indigenous lands and to alter Indigenous cultures and social practices in ways deemed to be better for them: all this rationalized as necessary progress. This is not to designate good and bad people, colonial actors and colonized victims, as popular and conservative historians claim feminist academics do whenever we write critically about past injustices. Rather, it speaks to the importance of understanding historical processes, whereby forms of political, economic, and social power were exercised over less powerful or subordinated groups, and also to identifying the rationale for these power relations. Understanding Canada as an “evolving colonial entity,” with layers of colonial relations that change over time and involve different groups, is an apt way of describing colonialism in its Canadian incarnation. While there can be no doubt that economic, political, and cultural control and regulation of Indigenous lands and peoples is an integral part of our history, the Indigenous North may not always fit comfortably into theories and models of colonialism.
Colonialism remains an overly general term. As Marx and Engels noted in the nineteenth century, the need for markets “chased the bourgeoisie” across the whole world so that colonialism became global: “It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere and establish connections everywhere.” Colonialism might have nestedled everywhere, but settler colonialism, which more accurately describes the dominant Canadian experience, is a distinct variant within the general rubric of colonialism, though this term, too, is highly contested. The older, British definition of “settler colonialism,” which stresses demography – necessarily meaning a numerically dominant white majority – does not apply universally to the Canadian North. Patrick Wolfe’s definition, which equates settler colonialism with differing relationships to land and labour and the dispensability (or not) of Indigenous bodies and work to the colonial project, has far more relevance. Still, his assertion that the settler-colonial project usually replaced Indigenous peoples is also out of kilter with the Nunavut experience, as are Australian definitions of settler colonialism, which emphasize the complete segregation of Indigenous peoples.

Even if colonial and settler-colonial forms “interpenetrate” one another, as Lorenzo Veracini argues in his theoretical text on the subject, they are still “antithetical” in nature, with settler colonialism characterized particularly by its desire and capacity to “control the population economy” as a “marker of its sovereignty.” Settler colonialism is not only shaped by a different political economy from “trading post” or “franchise” colonialism, but it also develops distinct means of self-legitimation, particularly that of storytelling, with respect to its meaning and existence. Veracini’s characterization of these “narratives forms” as modes of “transfer” is useful to my discussion of the Indigenous North because he emphasizes multiple forms of transfer, or of control, that range from forceful relocation to far more subtle marginalization. The transfer of Indigenous peoples from their homeland might involve not only their physical and geographical removal but also forms of conceptual, narrative, accounting, or assimilative transfers – to name a few. Still, this characterization of settler colonialism might also be understood within the conceptual framework of ideology, which, as Patrick Wolfe argues, is also peppered with contradictions. Ideas that promote “elimination” of
the Native from the land (because settlers “use it better”) may be accompanied by the symbolic celebration and recuperation of Native cultural forms, claimed by settlers as part of their nationalist self-construction.39

Since the 1960s, some have also used the designation “internal colonialism” to describe Indian reservations and minorities of colour in the United States as well as Canadian Indigenous-settler relations; indeed, the concept burst into northern studies with particular force in the Berger Commission era, when it was employed by Mel Watkins to describe Canada and the Dene nation.40 The concept of internal colonialism, when first advanced by Robert Blauer (and more recently reiterated by Russell Benjamin), embodied a strong political and moral critique of US imperialism. They argue that colonialism may involve both transnational and internal political and economic domination, with both Native and Mexican Americans key examples of the latter.41 E. San Juan makes a strong case for its continuing effectiveness in the theoretical toolkit of anticolonial analysis. He explicates the areas of overlap between transnational and internal colonialism, arguing that the latter term remains a compelling descriptor of the cultural domination of people of colour within the United States who are “alienated from their land base” and “structurally disadvantaged” by the way they are “integrated into the national polity.”42 There are obvious similarities to the Canadian Indigenous North.

It is no accident that the term “internal colonialism” was first taken up during the 1970s, when Marxist concepts such as exploitation, underdevelopment, and imperialism were au courant and radicals outlined clear winners and losers in the processes of the capitalist search for marketable resources on Native lands. For Aboriginal activists at the time, internal colonialism became a Fanon-like description of the daily racist assaults on Native peoples’ inner being as well as an economic model that involved economic dispossession, political paternalism, and ideologies of racial superiority.43 Such political concerns have not evaporated. Shari Huhndorf’s more recent study of American whites “going Native” uses the term “internal colonialism” as a means of disputing popular misconceptions of American “exceptionalism” to global imperialism: she
wants to remind Americans that they, too, were involved with the “dis-
possession” of their own Native peoples. Attempting a Canadian definition of internal colonialism, J.S. Frideres
developed a model denoting requisite indicators, including incursion into Native territory, destruction of social and cultural norms, political control, economic dependency, reserves as hinterlands to a metropolitan centre, the provision of low-quality services, and an ideology of racism. While ideal-type models like this one have been refined, they have also been critiqued. The historical process of colonialism may need a less stiffly reified mode of analysis, one that takes into account historical complexity, changing modes of production, Aboriginal agency, and differences within and between Aboriginal communities. Colonialism proceeded unevenly and in a different manner across the country; moreover, the internal-colonialism model often focuses primarily on reserves, which are home to only some Indigenous peoples. The term also simplifies a complex history of racialization in Canada that encompasses many groups and homogenizes the assumed opposing interests of white versus Indigenous. Such a polarized model fundamentally sidelines class and gender divisions within these overly homogenized categories, as if all whites have the same economic interests. The state, too, can become a singular, unified, and purposeful enterprise of domination when research suggests a more complicated picture. For all its failings, however, the term has a particular political and moral resonance, especially for the North, even if it lacks rigour as a confirmable model for all Indigenous nations. As Linda Gordon suggests in her rethinking of the term for American usage, it may be an apt political metaphor for a historical relationship that, on the one hand, involved dispossession, segregation, and cultural denigration, yet, on the other hand, also created forms of resistance, self-definitions, and longings for self-determination.

Colonialism may or may not be buttressed by Eurocentrism, the ethnocentric view emanating from Europe of an advanced Western culture, political institutions, and economic organization. Eurocentric ideas often assume a linear history with Europe at the centre of progress, spreading superior ideas, science, and culture outward to the less developed (or
perhaps “slower to develop”) peripheries. Various rationales – race, culture, environment – are used to explain why the West is a unique and autonomous world leader, always the “Inside diffusing its culture to the Outside.”49 European norms (better termed “Euro-Canadian” in this book) are equated with the necessary path of progress, including development and democracy – ironically, as some European nations “appropriated [the] culture and material production” of other groups, and suppressed their own forms of democracy.50 Rather than seeing Eurocentric ideas as mere “prejudice,” argues J.M. Blaut, it is important to analyze their ideological role and subtle incorporation into expert, academic, scientific forms of knowledge, so taken for granted that they appear to be reality or truth.51

Moreover, explaining colonialism only through the power of Eurocentrism ignores the history of non-European colonial relations, problematically occludes class, and denies diversity and distinctions between European groups – some of which were also racialized. Nor does it fully explain the timing and intensity of colonial activity, such as the nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialist era of European conquest – in Marxist terminology, the “last stage of capitalism.” Eurocentrism is better seen as a set of “historically situated discourses,” not a “genetic inheritance” of all white Europeans or the sole cause of colonialism.52 Moreover, critiques of colonial power and oppression are also part of the European, Western political tradition. These theories provide useful tools in scrutinizing colonialism in all its varieties. As Andrea Smith and Joyce Green show, for instance, feminism is not a theory fatally encumbered by its Western origins: it offers insight into the connections between colonialism, patriarchal ideologies, and capitalist social relations.53

“Eurocentrism,” Blaut argues in his classic on the subject, is the “colonizers’ model of the world.” But Eurocentrism has a complex association with “race,” which must always be historically situated in relation to specific colonizing projects. Race, most academic writing agrees, is a socially constructed category, even though it was often equated with identifiable physical differences, such as the “Oriental look” and “slanted eyes” on which whites commented so often in their writing on the Inuit. Like class, race is better thought of as a process or evolving formation
rather than as a thing or objective category. It is “relational, contingent
dand contextual,” always created within a historical dialectic of structure
and agency. The connection of race to colonial projects also shifts over
time: in the nineteenth century, race increasingly became the “organizing
grammar” for colonialism, supplanting a more varied list of organizing
principles and justifications. As this transpired, race became a means
of ideologically ordering humans into unchanging categories, linking
“natural essences and physical characteristics” to unchangeable “social
hierarchies.” Most often, these categories constructed an axis of white
supremacy and black inferiority, with other peoples situated in complex
manifestations along a continuum in between, though this varied with
the colonial project. Ideologies of racial difference may be theoretically
dismissed as ideological constructions, but they are remarkably resilient,
often anchored in material relations of power, privilege, expropriation,
and exploitation. Renisa Mawani’s work on Canadian legal discourses
exposes the shifting truths asserted by colonial powers about race, show-
ing how these categories never had any “ontological essence.” Still, it is
revealing that, no matter how they shifted, they consistently buttressed
white European authority and state policies.

Writing on race in a postcolonial vein points to its fluidity, hybridity,
even capricious redefinitions, but the effects of racism have been un-
deniably real: violence, dispossession, hatred, both external and inter-
 nalized. Its manifestation in Canadian history is evidenced in writing
on culture, law, immigration, education, the economy, politics, and in
many specific examples of racialized groups constructed as “other” to the
preferred white nation. That “white” nation was itself a construct rather
than a reality. While I may abstractly juxtapose the “white” South to an
“Indigenous” North in this book, this schematic shorthand does not
mean that I assume that the southern population was undifferentiated
by class, race, and ethnicity: quite the contrary, for it, too, was rent with
differentiation and division. Such racial categorization may have been
invoked at the time, but contemporary critiques of race would now mil-
itate against pronouncement about a white South. Indeed, scholars inter-
rogating the national narrative of race, space, and nature are now
directing their attention to the “imaginary” of the “Great White North.”

Sample Material © 2016 UBC Press
Introduction

Although some classical racist ideas about innate physical differences grounded in biology still existed in the post–Second World War period, it was expositions of cultural difference that more profoundly shaped writing on Indigenous peoples in Canada – a reflection of international intellectual trends in the “transposition of racial arguments into cultural ones.”59 Most academic and cultural writing equated ideas about the natural superiority of the white race, negatively, with the Ku Klux Klan or Nazism, ideas that had supposedly been overthrown along with Hitler. The post-1945 era saw new human rights claims articulated in intellectual circles and international organizations like the United Nations as well as some emerging rights-based legislation in Canada. When the word “race” was still used, as it was for French Canadians, it might actually be a synonym for culture or ethnicity. Even if classical racism was subdued in postwar Canada, the term “culture” could act as a stand-in for “race” – still denoting evolutionary ideas about superiority/inferiority through concepts of progress, development, and cultural sophistication. As in Britain’s imperial colonies, ideas of race still “underwrote the distinctions of colonial rule” long after the colonizers adopted the rhetoric of racial equality.60 Cultural relativism and a rhetorical nod to racial equality could coexist alongside practices of racialization. As Blaut argues, racial thinking became more difficult to identify and critique for precisely this reason. In depictions of the Inuit especially, race was sometimes reinscribed as a “false compliment” through an emphasis on Inuit people’s “primitivism and exoticism,” which idealized their “natural” state but also kept them encased in a static history of the past.61

History and Theory in Dialogue

My understanding of the cultural construction of northern contact zones has been shaped by intersecting areas of scholarship on cultural production, debates about colonialism and postcolonialism, and analyses of northern history. Each chapter delves into more specific debates about using novels, women’s travel writing, documentary film, television studies, and so on. Because my case studies are so diverse in nature, I have kept much of this expository discussion chapter-specific. Nonetheless,
broader debates about history, culture, and colonialism have provided an overall framework for *The Iconic North*. Since context is critical to how I interpret texts, I am indebted to the extensive northern historical scholarship in Canada. It would be impossible to reflect on images of the North without an understanding of the state, the politics of northern development, and histories of settlers and Indigenous peoples, among other topics explored by historians of the North. Moreover, both historians’ and political economists’ modernist assumptions about the importance of excavating human experience, grasping evidentiary reality, and uncovering the interplay of social and material structures with human agency resonate in important ways for my research.

The North as a symbol of national identity has its own extensive historiography. It has preoccupied historians, from the late-nineteenth-century Canada First nationalists to W.L. Morton’s twentieth-century claim that the nation is an ever-moving northern frontier to more recent Foucauldian claims that the Canadian North is produced through a “discourse of power.” Though historians may differ on the exact origins, meaning, and effects of this equation of Canadian history with nordinicity, they find common agreement that the “country as North” has been a changing theme in interpretations of history. As Sherrill Grace points out, this extends to art, music, fiction, and theatre. That many of the earliest Euro-Canadian historians integrated assumptions of white racial superiority into their interpretation of nordinicity and obscured Indigenous peoples as the North’s first inhabitants is now widely understood. Contemporary historians, whose work is more attuned to a critique of racial hierarchies and colonial relations, are attempting to create different debates, themes, and understandings of Canada as North. While they point to unanswered questions and debate the best conceptual frameworks for researchers, historians’ academic production of northern histories has proliferated and diversified remarkably in the last few decades and is often characterized by a vibrant interdisciplinarity.

Overviews of northern history, studies of the evolving political institutions and government policies in the territorial and Arctic North, and examinations of the interface between foreign and domestic policy interests, especially over the sovereignty question, have been critical
in setting the stage for my work, as have more in-depth studies of Indigenous-settler relations, including relocations of Indigenous communities.66 Without understanding the government’s priorities on economic development, one cannot understand the NFB films funded and produced in this time period. Without historians’ discussions of the immense political, economic, and social changes over the postwar period in the North, including the contradictions these changes created, one cannot read Irene Baird’s fiction productively. Moreover, one cannot interpret any of this cultural change without attention to history, the environment, and political economy. As Frank Tough argues of subarctic Manitoba, an approach lacking political economy can, ironically, “generate a history which exculpates colonialism” by overemphasizing culture and ignoring differing modes of labour,67 the accumulation and distribution of wealth, and the resulting processes of dependency and exploitation.

Historians have also been sensitive to the sensual and spatial difference of the North, pointing to the importance of cold, space, and distance “not only as a physical reality but as a state of mind” in writing on the North.68 Comparative thinking about the structural characteristics of the North, in comparison to other remote regions also faced with “struggles of human populations against external and internal forces, both conceptual and physical,” has opened up into studies of land, resources, and conflict between groups, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.69 One of the more transformative shifts in northern historical work since the 1980s has been the focus on First Nations histories as well as the importance of gender as a category of historical analysis.70 While some historians have redeveloped concerns articulated years ago in staples writing on the fur trade, now giving agency and presence to Aboriginal peoples, others have explored Indigenous cultures, legal traditions, health, and political mobilizations.71 Writing on Indigenous-settler relations has emerged not only from documentary and archival research but also from methodologies of anthropological fieldwork, participant observation, and oral histories collected both by outside researchers and Indigenous and non-Indigenous northerners on a path of historical self-recovery.
The documenting of life histories, as Chapter 7 notes, was a nascent method used in one of the northern studies conducted by feminist and socially conscious anthropologists for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

Historical writing on Native-newcomer interactions through trade, missions, law, labour, and white exploration — the latter not only a predominantly masculine enterprise but also one in masculinity — have been invaluable, and they sometimes serve as a revealing foil to the cultural constructions of the North during the 1940s and 1950s. While contributions to The Beaver and/or sojourner narratives suggest a battle between Christianity and “primitive” shamanism or paganism, for instance, historians have unearthed a more complex story of the interchange and overlap of religious beliefs. Historical and anthropological research on economic shifts in men and women’s work in northern communities have altered our understanding of gender, challenging the simplistic postwar image relayed through film of universally patriarchal hunting cultures. (Admittedly, more stereotypical images of the northern male prospector, red-coated policeman, and venturesome white woman entrepreneur may still find their appeal in popular histories.)

Understanding the changing cultural construction of Indigeneity has been a major preoccupation in cultural history and cultural studies, although, with a few notable exceptions, authors have focused more on Indigenous peoples in the United States and southern areas of Canada than on Indigenous peoples in the North. Indigenous scholars have spoken powerfully about the dominant mass media images that historically bombarded their own communities, distorting Native experiences and cultures and, tragically, internalized by their own people. Harold Adams, a Native rights advocate in the 1970s, urged his fellow Native peoples to simply abandon efforts to “improve our image ... because native people did not create these images,” and, if Indigenous peoples tried to improve them, white society “would simply create new racist images.” Contrary to Adams’s pessimism, many Indigenous writers and artists subsequently took up the project, creating their own cultural imaginary and sometimes turning the colonial images back on themselves.
Critical investigations of the disjuncture between a colonial image of Indigeneity and “real” Indigenous peoples were thus increasingly stimulated not only by Indigenous organizing, self-articulation, and objections to the stereotypes that had long plagued them, but also by sympathetic historians’ recognition that racism and colonialism were integral parts of the Canadian nation-building project. Most historical writing assumes that one can disentangle racist construction from historical reality: the very use of the word “stereotype” discloses this assumption. Uncertain about imposing their own decisive images on Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous historians may protest that they don’t want to “argue” with the stereotypes but simply have us “think about them” – yet their writing indicates that this line is not so easily drawn, with all judgment avoided.79 Stereotypes, as Homi Bhabha writes, are the mainstay of imperialism, but, unlike his postmodern-inflected writing, historians tend to operate under the assumption that stereotypes can be dissected, challenged, and differentiated from interpretations that come far closer to the truth.

The imaginary Indian, in particular, has been the subject of many studies, drawing on a wide array of textual and visual sources from photography and film to literature, folklore, cartoons, art, mass media, history, and other expert academic discourses.80 Historical analyses have the advantage of encouraging historicization, with their attendant emphasis on contextualization and change over time. American studies opened up discussion of the ways in which changing constructions of the Indian were also efforts to articulate a truly American white identity, often through whites encountering an “authentic” antimodern, primitive, traditional Aboriginal identity: the modern and premodern were thus “mutually constituted.”81 “Playing Indian” and “going Native” were not just exercises in cultural exchange: they were tied up with processes of domination and subordination, and with efforts to assuage white anxiety, creating comforting justifications for white political domination and the dispossession of Native land.82

The “Imaginary Indian” in Canada, as Douglas Francis similarly shows, reflects the “changing values” of whites, revealing a process whereby Euro-Canadians defined and redefined themselves in distinction to the Indigenous other.83 Euro-Canadians wanted to make themselves
into what Indians were not: that is, committed to progress, development, rationality, and cultural sophistication (often seen as masculine attributes as well). The precise nature of this “othering” altered over time: the early idealization of the noble Native gave way to demonization when Aboriginal peoples were perceived to be standing in the way of political and economic objectives – namely, settler control of land and resources. The created fantasy of the Indian therefore had an important legitimating task – though it was also fraught with contradictions, with Indians both othered and integrated as folkloric mementoes into the Canadian identity. The latter observation was true of the Inuit, too, as Nellie Cournoyea’s opening comment indicates. Some postcolonial theorists of settler-colonial societies place this contradictory process of “desire and disavowal” at the heart of their analysis: the settler occupies a place between two worlds of authority and authenticity, the “imperial culture from which he is separated” and the world of the First Nations whose authority he “replaced and effaced, but also desired.”

The legitimization of white settler societies also buttressed a particular gender as well as racial order. Fantasies of the female Indian acted as a foil to idealized, middle-class, white female identity by suggesting an opposite – the Native “wild woman.” If Indigenous women were integrated into or appeared to justify the colonizing project, they were assessed more positively, as the extensive literature on the Pocahontas myth and its opposite, the debased “squaw,” suggest. Many nineteenth-century studies of colonial image making indicate how gender ideology literally underwrote the formation of the settler-colonial nation-state. Sarah Carter’s work on nineteenth-century captivity narratives and the political ferment surrounding the 1885 Rebellion, for instance, highlights how normative discourses about white women constructed in opposition to images of Indigenous women became forms of regulation that, in themselves, were “useful to those in power,” fitting into a settlement-and-pacification agenda. The imperative of protecting white women from the danger of Indigenous men and the need to transform Indigenous women’s moral values were both part of the rationalizing ideology of colonial domination. Moreover, these colonial ideas were transnational, shared across white settler societies through colonial discourses and
shared policy objectives, including efforts to “domesticate” Indigenous women into appropriate familial roles. The part that white women play in the colonial project does differ across time, place, and according to women’s social location. I argue that this nineteenth-century emphasis on the vulnerability of white women and the imperative of instructing Aboriginal peoples on the virtues of a patriarchal family could no longer be employed in 1950s Canada. Instead, white women were now portrayed as beneficiaries of the modern family, enjoying equal and companionate relations with men: this was the contemporary version of femininity to which Indigenous women were to aspire in their cultural makeover.

Contextualizing Indigenous imagery in terms of the prevailing social formation and historical period is also critical for visual historians who explore the changing representation of Canadian Native peoples in state-sponsored images produced by the NFB. For Carol Payne and Zoe Druick, for instance, we can only understand the intent of images and film, and the objectives they accomplish, within a political context of power relations: they ask what kind of citizen identity was being created at this time, why, and by whom. Their writing defines power relations in a more Foucauldian manner than mine, with more emphasis on governmentality and the “impersonal networks of power that buttress authority;” however, they also trace processes of cultural hegemony and are acutely attuned to the power of the state without reducing NFB personnel to historical actors lacking agency or complexity. As Payne shows, many NFB photographers embraced an idealized image of the multicultural Canadian nation, inclusive of Indigenous peoples. Their intended project was to convey this message of tolerance to the wider population. Moreover, what we interpret as colonial and racialized images can also play a different role for Indigenous peoples when these images are repatriated to Indigenous communities for their reinterpretation and use.

Understanding the manufacturing of consent through an ideology of multiculturalism is critically important for this era. As Eva McKay argues, after the Second World War, but especially after the 1960s, the state promoted a discourse of multicultural tolerance that many civil
society organizations took up with considerable enthusiasm. On the one hand, Indigenous peoples were still represented as racialized others – the case of the stoic, happy, childlike but adaptable Eskimo being a case in point. On the other hand, cultural diversity and tolerance were increasingly popularized and became “intrinsic to the Canadian identity,” literally a “national resource” to be treasured. This, too, reflected international shifts in the meaning of race as “cultural pluralism, value relativism, and mutual tolerance” became the liberal means of “discussing social difference.” The end goal, however, was not equality but, rather, “an alternative society of tolerance of difference,” an ideal that left colonial relationships, including an imaginary “ladder of progress” from primitive to modernity, unquestioned.

The Elusiveness of Representation

Many cultural historians raise the thorny question of whether representation can be understood outside its discursive creation, pointing out that “we only have access to the real through representation.” The elusiveness of representation is often discussed with relation to how the reader or viewer negotiates the image or text. As Peter Geller points out in his analysis of northern photography before 1945, most visual historians try to analyze the “production, circulation and reception” of the image, but the latter always remains something of a question mark in comparison to the other two categories. The ambiguous “unreliability” of texts, visual or otherwise, produced about the Indigenous North is particularly obvious and concerning because many forms of representation were purposely – but also unwittingly – produced in the service of the colonial gaze, often by non-Indigenous people. An interpretive middle ground is explored in one collection on photography and the Arctic “imaginary”: while the legacy of postmodernism no longer permits a completely “realist” interpretation of images as literal reflections of the past, representations are created and interpreted within identifiable historical and social contexts, which suggests that there are not unlimited interpretations to be extracted from them. If representation can no longer be cast as a vehicle of truth, it does construct “certain truths about certain categories of people.”
When studying colonialism and representation, it is impossible to escape the immense influence of postcolonial theory – especially in visual and literary studies, where postcolonialism has arguably had its most profound impact. Writing labelled “postcolonial” is so diffuse in theoretical approach that it is risky to make generalizations. Critics have also equated this vagueness, and the universalizing assumptions of its most enthusiastic advocates, with its lack of explanatory rigour. All forms of colonialism, they point out, cannot be homogenized across time periods, peoples, and empires; attempting to do so effectively collapses temporal, spatial, and historical specificities into a linear story of moving “beyond colonialism,” highly problematic nomenclature in a world of continuing colonial relations.

The most general intention of much postcolonial theory – to better understand and challenge the discursive means and methods of colonialism’s cultural reproduction – is congruent with the project of this book.98 Insights from postcolonial writing are apparent in the way I read the texts and images in *The Beaver*, for instance. Works like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* immediately come to mind. Drawing on Foucault and Gramsci, Said explores the Western imaginary of the Orient, created through an array of expert knowledges and producing powerful discourses of white and colonial superiority. The North, similarly, was orientalized, particularly in writing on the Inuit, which often stressed the exotic, primitive, and spiritual nature of Inuit life, with the latter simultaneously impugned and idealized as distinct from Western modernity. According to Said, orientalism obscured not only certain histories but also the “interests” of those involved in “this perpetuation.”99 The connections he makes between Western forms of knowledge and political power, and his argument, via Gramscian theory, that the exercise of colonial power was “purposeful” in serving political and economic ends, also resonates with *The Iconic North*.100

So, too, do feminist arguments that postcolonial writing has productively championed more critical analyses of sexuality, subjectivity, and gender as part of the overall “social fabric” of colonial relations.101 Orientalism was never gender neutral: it relayed interconnected ideologies of race and gender, and women colonizers were also active participants in
creating orientalizing texts and images. The emphasis in postcolonial writing on analyzing the metropole and its periphery as part of the same discourse of power; on tracing the transmission of, and resistance to, colonial power through narrative, text, and discourse; on questioning narratives that link the higher “good” of modernizing progress with Eurocentric ideas; and on interrogating varying categories of race as they interconnect with gender and class are all themes important to this book.

However, many of these very general theoretical aspirations are also integral to other approaches to history, and the “post” part of postcolonialism raises troubling questions about its apolitical positioning, lack of historical rigour, and idealist suppositions. The “failed historicity” and homogenized “singularity” of postcolonialism, Sara Ahmed argues, limits its effectiveness as an explanatory historical tool. Ironically, postcolonial theory also ends up not “decentring, but recentring time around Europe and capitalist modernity.” It is no accident that the critiques of postcolonialism that I find most powerful are advanced by authors concerned about its denial of history. They insist on more attention to social and material context, on a more realist analysis of power relations, and on a truly political critique of colonialism rather than on a playful dance around its fluidity, ambiguities, hybridization, indeterminacy, and so on. While the latter preoccupations may be particularly characteristic of the postcolonial writers who are most indebted to postmodern French “high theory,” such as Homi Bhabha, their influence has been so pervasive that these problems trickle down into other writing. Ironically, as critics such as Benita Parry point out, postcolonialists often deviate from the very originating anticolonial namesakes they would like to claim, like Frantz Fanon, who saw discourse born out of the politics of active, even violent, anticolonial struggle, not the reverse. Alfred Memmi, too, often claimed as postcolonial, was clear about the origins of colonial ideologies: “colonizers’ basic economic needs became the logic of colonialism.” Glen Coulthard’s critique of the liberal politics of recognition currently hindering Indigenous resistance in Canada perhaps best draws these strands of critique together. His prognosis for “anticolonial empowerment” unites the original insights of Fanon concerning...
the external and internal subjectifying nature of Indigenous oppression with a thorough critique of capitalist social relations and the colonial state.\textsuperscript{108}

As global historian Arif Dirlik argues, postcolonialism, with its aversion to grand narratives and structural explanations, its emphasis on narrativization rather than evidence, its obscuring of class relations and global capitalism, and its sidelining of human agency, is limiting as a theory aimed at understanding the history of colonialism or addressing the actual experiences of exploitation and marginalization suffered by Fourth World Indigenous peoples. Ignoring the international division of labour and global capitalism are only two of the many problems identified by literary theorist E. San Juan, who critiques the way many postcolonial writers over-emphasize cultural differences, ignore the nation “as a historical product,” and narrativize social relations so thoroughly that they disappear into “the realm of floating signifiers and exorbitant metaphors.” The result: the “asymmetry of power relations and resources between hegemonic blocs and subaltern groups ... disappears.”\textsuperscript{109}

The most trenchant critics see postcolonial theory – the word itself distorted from its original meaning – as symptomatic of the crisis of late imperial culture, promulgated by a Western-situated class faction of Third World intellectuals cut off from the material realities of Third World life, creating a politics quite compatible with that of the global bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{110} Postcolonialism is thus just one more “product of flexible post-Fordist capitalism, not its antithesis.”\textsuperscript{111}

Indigenous writers also suggest that the more relativist “post” disavowals of essentialism and authentic identity can become another form of paternalism, effectively denying Native peoples the ability to define their identities in ways distinct from existing negative and dehumanizing ones. Fourth World First Nations may “wish to lay claim to their history, their land, and their rights based on a very real or authentic Aboriginal identity or ideologies.”\textsuperscript{112} The celebration of hybridity, ambivalence, border crossing, immensurability, and multiculturalism suggests we set aside the search for, and preservation of, “original” communities – such as the First Nations. This not only “glosses over processes of global hegemony” but can also undermine the very premises on which calls for redress,
land, and survival are based. As Coulthard argues, the “place-based” self-determination sought by the Dene as an alternative to dispossession relied on the mobilization of national, political, and cultural discourses of distinctiveness. Native American Philip Deloria puts it more bluntly: it is fine for academics to talk about the infinite constructedness of culture, space, and border crossing if you have control of your borders, if you have not been denied a cultural and material space. Even if I avoid defining an essential identity for Indigenous peoples, in other words, I recognize their political reasons for wanting to do so.

Of course, not all literary approaches embrace postcolonial theory uncritically. Some writing on the Canadian northern imaginary draws on theories of discourse, but with an eye to incorporating Bakhtin’s dialogic of social, reciprocal relations. Discourse and narrative are analyzed as textual expressions of power but also as part of a larger historical context. Renée Hulan confronts the contradictions of postcolonial theory, with its postmodern aversion to truth claims, in her excellent study of the North, noting the “unresolvable tension between the claim to expose colonialism” and the “acceptance of postmodern play of invention and indeterminacy.” Her approach also puts the construction of masculinity and femininity, as socially and historically generated processes, at the heart of the national mythology of Canada as North, also a feminist goal of The Iconic North. By highlighting the incongruence of postcolonial theory with Aboriginal women’s stated goal of reclaiming their authentic experiences, one can also highlight the current political intentions of Indigenous women in the North. As one recent collection makes clear, Inuit women want to speak back to some constructed images of themselves in colonial literature, correcting texts in which they appear as pathetic victims of patriarchal cultures, with “men mak[ing] the decisions and women obey[ing] orders.”

A critique of the gendered nature of colonialism, Sara Mills argues, is better served by incorporating insights from feminist and materialist perspectives stressing context and causation. If we explore stereotypes, for example, we must account for their different meanings, the functions they fulfill, and their relationships to political and economic structures. The goal of writing about the white-Indigenous colonial encounter, she
contends, should be a critique of the politics of “colonial destruction” rather than a postcolonial “obsession with text and discourse” or with psychoanalytic analyses of “fantasy and desire.” Colonialism raises feminist questions not just about the oppression of the colonized but also about the privileges of some women in relation to others and the ways class intersects with colonial power, a key theme in the chapters on women sojourners and on the Royal Commission on the Status of Women.

Similarly, *The Iconic North* assumes that we can never fully discern colonial representations as text without attention to context: in the case of the North, this meant the economic and political promotion of a northern frontier of resource development, the marketization of goods and peoples, the increasing alienation of Indigenous people from their land, more intensive interventions by state and civil society institutions in managing Indigenous lives, an augmented presence of white sojourners, and emerging articulations of Indigenous resistance. As many international theorists of imperialism argue, we should never underestimate the “cultural work” associated with colonialism, but the conditions of cultural production are constituted in specific, local, material and social relations. Thinking of the “work” that culture does – entertaining, explaining, exemplifying, legitimizing, rationalizing – directs us to the concept of ideology, in contradistinction to a more Foucauldian emphasis on the “truth effects of discourse.” The latter obscures centralized power and “opposing social forces” in society, while the former opens up questions of lived ideas and practices that are bound up with social relations of power and processes that create and sustain hegemony.

The cultural practices and products discussed in this monograph were shaped by inherited traditions from the past as well as the possibilities and conditions of the present. Perceived audiences and “tastes,” narrative conventions, local and national knowledges, aesthetic practices, and expert and scientific discourses (among other contingencies) are deeply embedded in the “social,” which connects to the “cultural,” arena. Cultural producers, in Gramsci’s terms, do not just produce for their “own recollection ... Every artist-individual is ‘historical’ and ‘social’ to a
greater or lesser degree.” Cultural production also embodies a dynamic of reproduction – and possible contestation. As Frank Tester argues regarding his reading of government records about the North, texts can be seen on one level as “representations” and interpretations, yet they become “events in themselves,” sustaining and reshaping the “textual means by which relations of ruling” operate. A contextualized and historicized reading of cultural texts also implies that we can identify some disjunctures between representation and real lives by looking for tensions and contradictions in and between our sources. It is these very gaps and tensions that the Indigenous women discussed in my conclusion identify in their objections to white constructions of their lives.

In the chapters that follow, I approach the overarching questions of how colonialism is mediated by and constituted through culture by using quite different case studies. Chapter 1 examines white women visitors and sojourners who popularized their northern experiences in published memoirs. Women’s recollections indicate common anxieties, observations, and self-positioning in this literary format, but I also argue that, over time, there were some differences in their views as well as changes in their perspectives. Chapter 2 explores The Beaver, a popular magazine produced by the Hudson’s Bay Company that drew on expert knowledge, visual display, and first-hand settler accounts of northern living to create a distinctly nationalist story of the Canadian North. Two examples of the visual North follow in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4: the former explores documentary NFB films, particularly those to which the federal state gave “two thumbs up” or down; the latter looks at constructions of white and Indigenous masculinity in RCMP, a popular television show. Chapter 5 explores the writing of a northern traveller, commentator, and federal civil servant, Irene Baird, whose northern oeuvre has been too long ignored by literary scholarship. In Chapter 6, an exploration of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women’s trip to the North, the construction of Indigenous women by those testifying, the commissioners, and the media, takes the reader into the 1960s and early 1970s. Finally, in the conclusion, I reflect briefly on the lives of three northern Indigenous women who, in this same time period, gazed back at white colonizers.
This chapter is a call for further explorations of northern Indigenous views of white sojourners, colonialism, and the South, reversing the dominant trends in writing – including my own. Suffusing The Iconic North is this very contradiction: my understanding that, however useful it is to critically analyze cultural contact zones of colonial encounter, we always run the risk of refocusing our attention on the metropole. Contemporary cultural production in writing, film, art, and performance emanating from the North, especially from First Nations, suggests that the traditional colonial gaze is being subverted in no small part through their retelling of history.