

Power from the North

Territory, Identity, and the Culture of Hydroelectricity in Quebec

CAROLINE DESBIENS

FOREWORD BY GRAEME WYNN



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FOREWORD

Ideas of North

Graeme Wynn

IN A CHARACTERISTICALLY whimsical essay, written on his retirement from McGill University in 1936, and intended to mark the virtues of Canada's disconnection from European geopolitics – “not for us the angers of the Balkans, the weeping of Vienna and the tumult of Berlin” – the English-born, Canadian-raised humorist Stephen Leacock identified an idea of the North as the source of Canadian distinctiveness:

To all of us here, the vast unknown country of the North, reaching away to the polar seas, supplies a peculiar mental background. I like to think that in a few short hours in a train or a car I can be in the primeval wilderness of the north, that if I like, from my summer home, an hour or two of flight will take me over the divide and down to the mournful shores of James Bay, untenanted till yesterday, now haunted with its flock of airplanes hunting gold in the wilderness. I never have gone to the James Bay; I never go to it; I never shall. But somehow I'd feel lonely without it.¹

Canadians before and since have defined themselves as a northern people, found benefit in the rigours of a northern climate, elevated paintings of northern landscapes to iconic status, and written musical meditations on the Idea of North.² Yet even as it changes and is brought more squarely into the everyday consciousness of Canadians – as a consequence of the great summertime melt of Arctic sea ice, through improved communications with the rest of the world, because of growing interest in its resource wealth, and because of strategic government expenditures across its vast

expanse – the North remains hard to define.³ There is little agreement on where it begins or what its essential characteristics might be. North Bay, on the shores of Lake Nipissing, is indubitably northern to those who live in Toronto, but it lies well south of the forty-ninth parallel that stands in for the southern border of Canada in much everyday conversation. Strong and free though they may feel themselves to be, few Canadians have ventured much beyond the northern limit of the “fertile belt” of the Canadian Prairies (54° N), and even fewer have visited the “true North,” that vastness beyond the sixtieth parallel – or is it the Arctic Circle?

Geographer Caroline Desbiens’s *Power from the North* does much to unpack this paradox. This wide-ranging and thought-provoking study begins arrestingly, and in innocent echo of Leacock perhaps, with the “peculiar mental background” of Desbiens’s early years, when the vast unknown country of the North was suddenly given material substance by the serendipitous passage of an enormous, unfathomable piece of equipment through the Montreal suburb of her childhood. Destined to travel slowly over “the divide,” this object was to take its place amid the subterranean generators of a new kind of gold – hydroelectricity – being extracted from rivers running into James Bay. Forty years after Leacock wrote, this North was much more prominent in the minds of Montrealers than it had been in Leacock’s day. James Bay remained beyond the reach of most Quebecers, but it was rarely out of their minds. Texts and images describing the great engineering works that were transforming a remote river into an industrial engine known as the La Grande complex saturated the contemporary media. To live in Montreal in the late 1970s was to participate, Caroline Desbiens came to realize, in a form of travel in reverse; it was “not we who travelled to the construction sites but the construction sites that travelled to us” (p. 3).

After completing bachelor’s and master’s degrees focused on Quebec literary culture, especially those nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels that explore the attachment of (rural) Quebecers to their land, Desbiens became fascinated by the ways in which discussions of the development of James Bay during the last three decades of the twentieth century – taken for granted by many of her generation – echoed sentiments expressed in those earlier fictional texts that she had subjected to literary analysis. So began the quest at the heart of this book, the quest to understand what the formal language of academic scholarship would characterize as the linkages among discursive, social, and material formations but that might equally well be thought of as an inquiry into the ways in which people come to know, and shape, places. Pursuing this inquiry carried

Desbiens through several disciplines and their expansive literatures, encouraged her to engage with a wide range of contemporary theory, and led her to travel, as Leacock never did, to the shores of James Bay itself.

The result is a quietly seductive, intriguing book that draws strength from its presentation and integration of three “stories,” each familiar in some degree to certain audiences but rarely brought into sustained conversation one with another. Following the path and exploring the genesis of that unidentified piece of equipment that made its way through Desbiens’s suburban neighbourhood on its way north, the first part of *Power from the North* details the historical and political context in which the James Bay–La Grande hydroelectricity project came to fruition. The second part explores several themes in the construction of Québécois identity and the development of a distinct sense of territoriality in Quebec; here, notions of land, place, and identity are explored for their cultural significance to the Québécois people. The third part of this work links the preceding sections by focusing on the pioneers, workers, and spectators who produced the hydroelectric landscape of James Bay and by considering the material consequences of their actions in light of the long-standing discourse of colonization.

Because they deal with such disparate topics in different analytical registers, chapters in this text will resonate differently with readers, depending on their particular interests, experiences, ethnicity, socioeconomic position, and even perhaps their age. Parts may seem familiar, but the book works cumulatively, deriving significance from its juxtapositions and Desbiens’s capacity to draw unexpected insights from seemingly small and innocuous events and circumstances. Overall, the book wears its author’s theoretical wisdom lightly; many claims made in the pages that follow rest upon larger theoretical arguments or connect with literatures unfamiliar to English Canadian scholars, but these linkages are more often traced through the footnotes than belaboured in the text.

Geographers have long distinguished between, and debated definitions of, space and place. Broadly, and starkly, *space* can be thought of in Cartesian terms as “an empty grid of mutually exclusive points ... within which objects exist and events occur”; *place*, in contrast, usually includes cultural or subjective dimensions and is “sometimes defined as a human-wrought transformation of a part of the Earth’s surface.”⁴ Many of this book’s central claims hinge on this distinction, but they do so in distinctive ways. Desbiens’s understanding and discussion of place making is underpinned by ideas drawn from an earlier generation of francophone

geographers who are relatively little known to scholars beyond the French-language community. First among them, perhaps, and certainly in the extent of his influence upon Desbiens's work, is Louis-Edmond Hamelin, doyen of Quebec human geographers, influential student of the North, and promulgator of the concepts of Nordicity and territoriality.⁵ In Hamelin's words, territoriality is "a global concept that brings into relationship human beings with a given space while taking into account prehistoric and historic ties, emotions, economic interests ... [and] political security objectives" (p. 65).

To this foundation, Desbiens adds the claims of Swiss geographer Claude Raffestin, whose interest in the exercise of power led him to stress the internal and external dimensions of territoriality, and the insights of Joël Bonnemaïson, a French scholar whose novel approach to cultural geography was shaped by his roots in the countryside of Gascony and his extended periods of field work in Madagascar and Melanesia. For Raffestin, all geographical inquiry had a political dimension: "Those who pretend not to do politics are only unconsciously perpetuating the balance of power of the context they are situated in," he wrote in 1976.⁶ His approach was eclectic: he accepted Foucault's assertion that "space is fundamental to any form of communal life and any exercise of power," reflected the influence of Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the production of space, and drew from many others in shaping his most widely known work, *Pour une géographie du pouvoir*.⁷ Bonnemaïson sought to better understand the bonds between people and place by focusing on what he described as "the issues dealing with the geography of cultures and the anthropology of space."⁸ Drawing on an earlier tradition of geographical writing in France (most commonly associated with the work of Paul Vidal de la Blache), with its focus on *genres de vie* and the roles of human agency and historical contingency in the shaping of cultures and countrysides, Bonnemaïson saw culture as "the necessary, if contested and fragile, outcome" of disruption and movement as well as of rootedness in place.⁹ From this foundation, he argued that cultural differences between groups of people are strongly shaped by their spatial sensibilities. More than this, "he thought of places (or territories as he would call them) in profoundly emotional terms" and stressed the importance of understanding the consequences of peoples' emotional attachments to, and detachments from, particular locales.

From these building blocks, Desbiens constructs the spine of her book. One of its central arguments is that various ideas (or what Desbiens calls geographical imaginings) of the North carried elements of Southern Quebec life "away from their initial geographical anchor in the St. Lawrence Valley

into new territories and new forms of interactions with the land” (p. 69). This habit of mind was established early. In Desbiens’s account, which eschews the task of tracing the narrative arc of Quebec history to offer a cultural interpretation of historical events, the intellectual and emotional construction of Quebec territory and identity turns on the social mobilization of such events as the British Conquest of New France in 1759, the Patriote Rebellion of 1837-38, and the church-led effort to resist the exodus of Québécois to New England in the second half of the nineteenth century. These developments prepared the ground for the popularity of the *roman de la terre*, each an amalgam of “fiction, moral pamphlet and social commentary” that presented “a mythical image of the land” intended both “to explain and orient the historical trajectory of French Canadians” (p. 95).

More than this, Desbiens argues that just as the mammoth equipment transporter carried imaginations northward, and just as heavy equipment engineered an admired space for its cargo in the La Grande powerhouse, so the larger hydroelectricity development project led residents of Quebec to construct new ideas about the northern reaches of their province, “to weave ... [a new] tapestry of identification and attachment to what was to most of them a foreign geography” (p. 56). There is, in other words and in Desbiens’s reading, a “surprising continuity” between earlier ideas about the redemptive power of the North and late twentieth-century representations of the importance of hydroelectricity development in the region. Although the La Grande project appears in one view as a triumph of the brute force industrialization favoured by the high modernist ethos of the late twentieth century, and thus stands in stark contrast to older views of Quebec as a rural society rooted in tradition, Desbiens insists, intriguingly, that the relationship between land and identity in Quebec has long been hybrid and ambiguous.¹⁰ Despite Maria Chapedelaine’s fervent hope, expressed in the novel of that name and much repeated since its publication, that “in the country of Québec, nothing must die and nothing must change,” the *roman de la terre* collectively reflect the oppositional challenges of “permanence and change, stability and expansion, roots and mobility.”¹¹ Nature and territory have been consistent anchors of Quebec identity, but their symbolic resonances have shifted with the times, and there is a clear line of connection, as the title of *Power from the North’s* fourth chapter suggests, between the *roman de la terre* and recent rhetoric about northern resource development. Although the hydroelectric landscape of James Bay is usually portrayed as “resolutely modern and exemplary of Quebec’s (post)industrial economy, its symbolic content is framed by historical Québécois modes of interaction with the land” (p. 59).

Hydroelectric development in the North has shaped the identity of twenty-first-century Québécois: “nature, North, and nation” have been woven together in and around the dams and powerhouses to construct a powerful sense of Quebec territoriality.

For all that this account contributes to understanding the ways in which people in Southern Quebec interpreted the push for hydroelectricity development in the James Bay drainage, and assimilated the La Grande project to earlier cultural imaginings of the North, Desbiens recognizes that this is only a part of the story. Writing three quarters of a century after Leacock, aware of the criticism and resistance spawned by the James Bay development, and having spent time among the indigenous people of the North, Desbiens offers a strong corrective to Leacock’s blithe embrace of a commonplace assumption of the interwar years: that the North was *terra nullius*, unoccupied until the arrival of southern prospectors. Hers is not an ethnography of indigenous understandings of this territory. This she leaves to others to explicate. But she takes the indigenous presence in the North seriously, even as she seeks to elucidate the cultural construction of James Bay by Québécois. Acknowledging that the eastern slopes of the Precambrian Shield draining into James Bay were a Native homeland, now known as Eeyou Istchee, long before the bay was named in honour of the English sea captain who explored its shores in 1630–31, she notes that “Cree, Inuit, Naskapi, and Innu peoples were fully present” in the larger region of Northern Quebec and that their legends, place names, and intimate knowledge of the territory attest to their own cultural attachment to and understanding of this place. Although their knowledge might have been a “complete mystery” to generations of Southern Québécois, she writes, indigenous people knew a great deal about the James Bay area. Their knowledge was “both extensive and cumulative”; it guided their everyday activities on the land, generated meaning, and preserved cultural memory (p. 143). Indeed, Desbiens emphasizes that even into the 1960s indigenous people were predominant across the vast expanse of Northern Quebec and that there were few indicators of the provincial government’s jurisdiction over the region: remarkably, the geographer Michel Brochu lamented, in 1962, that to visit almost any part of this area (which accounted for two-thirds of the province’s land area) was “to find oneself completely transposed outside of Quebec” (p. 9)

Against this backdrop, the rhetorical question posed in Gaëtan Hayeur’s interestingly titled *Summary of Knowledge Acquired in Northern Environments from 1970 to 2000* – “what would we know about northern Québec today were it not for a decision made in 1971 to develop its hydroelectric

potential?” – assumes new potency.¹² The work of assimilating the unknown North to the Cartesian grid of southern topographic maps began in the 1960s as surveyors “crisscrossed, examined, [and] scrutinized the entire territory of James Bay” (p. 137), measuring distances and elevations, conducting geodesic surveys, and charting the regional topography. But this form of basic scientific assessment gave way to the collection of environmental data once the decision to dam the La Grande was taken. Over the following decades, hundreds of scientists produced thousands of reports, maps, and other documents about the area, and these were loosely synthesized every ten years or so; in short order, the neglected territory became an ecological laboratory. Hayeur and his colleagues were understandably proud of the scope and diversity of their research accomplishments in a challenging environment – by their account and by many measures, the knowledge they produced represented “a major scientific contribution to the understanding of the biophysical and social environment in northern regions.”¹³

There are other sides to this story, however, and it is Desbiens’s singular achievement to bring these into focus in the third part of *Power from the North*. Here, she begins by recognizing that while there are good reasons for Hydro-Québec to be pleased with the extensive environmental knowledge its employees have produced, this information was acquired as the environment was being radically transformed. Moreover, as students of traditional ecological knowledge have often noted, data collected to meet the protocols of scientific ecology can say very little about the sensory, emotional dimensions of human-environment relations, or about the feelings that people have for their land. Here, too, there are echoes of Joël Bonnemaïson’s insistence on the importance of emotional attachments in the development of territoriality. Further, Desbiens reminds her readers that even a thirty-year data series pales by comparison with “the knowledge archive the Eeyouch have accumulated over thousands of years” (p. 203). Building on her earlier discussions of the course of hydro development and the various ideas of the North held by Québécois, this section offers an insightful discussion and sharp analysis of the ways in which human engagements with the James Bay area through the La Grande project reshaped conceptions of nature and territory in Quebec.

Tracing the rapid remaking of the North (from “a nondescript to a scripted space,” as she nicely puts it), Desbiens makes several important points (p. 187). The surveyors and scientific pioneers who linked up the dots on their transects to inscribe their new understanding on maps were engaged in a process of abstraction. The environmental researchers who

produced a “veritable bible” of information that shed light on many questions were also people of their time, people enthusiastic about the benefits of development and convinced that changes to local ecosystems produced by the damming and rerouting of rivers and the clearing and flooding of land could well improve upon “nature.” Scientific representations of the North made it difficult for southern Quebecers to see and understand the area as its indigenous inhabitants did and allowed residents of the south to reframe indigenous homelands as a series of landscapes onto which they could project their economic and political aspirations.

For all the rhetoric characterizing workers at La Grande as the kin of those nineteenth-century colonizers who had been encouraged to farm the Shield and Clay Belt – some described them as *défricheurs* (clearers) preparing the ground to harvest millions of kilowatts of electricity – these men (and the very small minority of women employed there) were largely precluded from close contact with the northern environment. Confined to camps, under strict rules, working long hours, and generally operating heavy equipment, they hardly came to know nature through work (or recreation). Rather than turning muscle and energy to felling trees and turning the soil, these workers were “making land” in the symbolic and abstract sense of extending the Quebec culture area and claiming title to its resources.

Presenting and re-presenting the saga of hydroelectricity development in the North has been a large part of the story of La Grande. From the first announcement of the project – which Premier Robert Bourassa remembered as “quite a show” with “huge pictures, sound, [and] light” that left some watchers trembling – through the regular release of dramatic photographs of enormous engineered structures, to written accounts that recite impressive statistics to describe engineering achievements and portray the region as a wilderness devoid of human presence, the development has been presented as an awesome spectacle, exceptional in scale and importance. In the last quarter century or so, it has also become a tourist site, organized and interpreted (or re-presented) for those who journey north. The enormous dams and spillways are still the main attractions on the visitor tour, and they are often presented to Québécois as their equivalent of the pyramids for Egyptians or cathedrals for the French. But the tour also includes opportunities to learn something of the social and ecological histories of the area. These are much less fabulous stories: workers are remembered and memorialized as “giants,” but the camp that marks their presence is more spectre than spectacular. The buildings have been removed, and the history recounted on a few interpretive signs scattered

among the trees foregrounds the heroic narrative of Southern Quebec's northward expansion. So too the ecological restoration of wetlands at Upichiwuun Bay near the LG-1 generating station suggests the importance of sustainability initiatives, but it is heavily engineered, only partly successful, and encompasses but a fraction of the land disturbed by the La Grande project. In both places, there is scant recognition of an earlier, not very remote, and important Cree presence.

"The North" remains an enigmatic place. Coming into focus once again, early in the twenty-first century, as a promising storehouse of wealth, the generic "North" remains an abstraction for most Canadians, whose visceral engagements remain largely confined to a narrow stripe of territory within a few hundred miles of the American border. In advertisements and the popular mind, the North takes form as "a place as beautiful as a poem and as wide as ... [one's] dreams," a locale beyond time and history, and a cornucopia of valuable resources (p. 208) Now, as in Leacock's day, the North is an important element of the "peculiar mental background" of Canadians, but now more than ever, perhaps, as society struggles to find a balance between economic security and environmental well-being and grapples with the various challenges posed by social and environmental injustices, the freighted implications of popular ideas of the North need to be better understood. *Power from the North* can and should help in this. Although the particular history and specific details upon which this book rests are drawn almost exclusively from Quebec, Caroline Desbiens's shrewd and unusual arguments speak to much wider considerations. They remind us of the importance of reading economic development through a cultural lens; they enjoin us to think again about the multiple ways in which ideas have consequences; and they demonstrate both the challenge and importance of "intertwining cultural heritage, development and conservation into effective resource management" (p. 14) One day, perhaps, they might bring concerned citizens, and even their leaders, to ponder the wisdom and wider salience of a refrain that threads its way through this story and echoes the conviction developed by French geographer Joël Bonnemaïson through his work in places far from James Bay: "that it is more important to survive culturally than it is to survive materially."¹⁴

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Abbreviations

CEN	Centre d'études nordiques
CRA	Cree Regional Authority
CTQ	Commission de toponymie du Québec
GCC	Grand Council of the Crees
IQA	Indians of Quebec Association
JBNQA	James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement
NBC	National Battlefields Commission
OQLF	Office québécois de la langue française
SAGMAI	Secrétariat des activités gouvernementales en milieu amérindien et inuit
SDBJ	Société de développement de la Baie James
SÉBJ	Société d'énergie de la Baie James

INTRODUCTION

Looking North

It will not be said that we will live poorly on such a rich land.

*– Robert Bourassa, premier of Quebec, James Bay
launching ceremony, 30 April 1971¹*

ON 30 APRIL 1971, QUEBEC Premier Robert Bourassa launched the James Bay hydroelectric plan in a ceremony meant to affirm his leadership and inspire Quebecers to embark on a new national project. If the nearly four decades that followed this initial announcement were an important era for the people of Quebec, they also hold personal significance for me because they stretch across the span of my own life. As I grew up in a suburb of Montreal during the 1970s and '80s, James Bay was the only faraway place that had a tangible presence. Since the project provided a source of income for many of our neighbours and family friends, its effects were palpable in my working-class, francophone milieu. My own mother supported my sister and me by working for one of the many engineering firms involved in the building of the dams. Kitchen table discussions yielded endless details about the mammoth scale of the venture or the power of technology to subdue nature. Inequalities between workers and bosses were a source of indignation, but not as much as the affront by a handful of “Indians” – as they were portrayed – who dared to oppose the project. In those casual, sometimes heated exchanges, James Bay emerged as an almost mythical location. It was larger than life and richly defined through the language and imagination of those who had stories to tell.

One memorable day, this imaginary place was rendered more concrete by the sight of a gigantic piece of machinery resting on a flatbed transport trailer. The driver of this convoy was a neighbour of ours about to undertake the long journey to the La Grande 2 (LG-2) work site where the part would be fitted into the powerhouse, along with hundreds like it. He had

caused quite a stir by taking a detour through a succession of small suburban streets, intent on showing off his cargo. Just as the size of a whale can suggest something of the ocean's expanse, so the magnitude of this metal mass gave us a sense of the scale of the James Bay construction site and of the territory in which it lay. For me, and I think for many of the people gathered around this spectacle, the idea that such a vast and remote space could be part of Quebec required a stretch of imagination beyond any mental map we may have had of this territory. I knew people from the Saguenay or Abitibi regions who were descendants of agricultural settlers who had established themselves in the far reaches of the Saint Lawrence Valley one or two generations ago. But James Bay was another space altogether. Unable to trace kin or culture to this implausible geography, my mind was blank. But it was also open and anxious to know.

This book is about the process of filling this geographical blank for Quebecers during the first phase of development in the 1970s and early 1980s. My own sense of Québécois identity grew out of this era; therefore, life experience, academic interest, and cultural identity are closely linked throughout this study. As the La Grande River was being transformed, the fleurs-de-lis that bloomed across the balconies of our working-class lives were sure signs that a nation was in the making. The shape and contours of its territory, however, were much harder to grasp, even while political discourses repeatedly assured us that James Bay "belonged to all the Québécois." As the Cree opposition to the project made clear, whether the privilege of this collective ownership could be claimed by all the inhabitants of the geographical area known as Quebec was a question that could redefine the terms of the nationalism debate. For the indigenous population of Northern Quebec, the development scheme that would make many Southern Quebec residents so proud spelled one more phase of territorial loss and attempted cultural assimilation. Emerging out of the Quiet Revolution and coinciding with the decade that would culminate in Quebec's first referendum on sovereignty, hydroelectric development in James Bay underscored at least three questions that are at the heart of the nationalist movement but also extend to Canada as a whole: Who are the Québécois people? What are the contours of their national territory? Is their claim to Aboriginal lands and resources legitimate?

The production of texts and images that described and documented the initial building phase of James Bay helped to overcome the general population's lack of knowledge about the region; by so doing, it provided specific answers to these questions. When I imagine myself back at the kitchen

table or on the sidewalk where my friends and I contemplated that giant machine, the extent to which the James Bay project inhabited our lives becomes vivid again. If James Bay was out of reach, it was never out of view. Rivalled only perhaps by the 1976 Montreal Olympics, its constant presence in the media provided a framework for social interaction in my immediate community as well as a point of reference for political events. It was like a form of travel in reverse: it is not we who travelled to the construction sites, but the construction sites that travelled to us, thanks to the widespread broadcasting of texts and images. In large measure, this media campaign was a response to the negative publicity the project had initially received. In addition to the injunction obtained by the Crees and Inuit that paralyzed the work site for a week in 1973, a labour conflict that escalated into a riot halted construction once more during March and April 1974. It was not until the labour dispute was resolved and the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) signed with Cree and Inuit people in 1975 that the project was somewhat rehabilitated. Once dam building was freely underway, Hydro-Québec and the Société de développement de la Baie James (SDBJ) had to improve their image and regain some form of public approval. From 1977 to 1983, the La Grande complex kept a filmmaker-photographer in residence who produced numerous short films that were shown across Quebec, in addition to other visual documents and slide shows. Simultaneously, an extensive public relations campaign generated brochures, pictures, and company publications that were made available through travelling information kiosks. Each major stage of accomplishment was marked by an inauguration, with a special TV broadcast for the activation of the LG-2 powerhouse in 1979.² Dam building in the North also possessed a literary dimension in that it was *emplotted*, to use Hayden White's expression, as a heroic epic, showing that the exploitation of the symbolic power of dams is integral to the exploitation of the water resources they are connected to.³ Electricity is a prime icon of modernity, and, among all forms of natural resource exploitation, dams and hydroelectric power provide perhaps the most versatile reservoir of symbolic meaning that can be accessed by political power.⁴

In those representations, James Bay emerged as a new cultural landscape: in a very intense and relatively short span of time, the traditional homeland of the Eastern James Bay Crees was resignified according to different ways of knowing nature and a different ontology about the place of humans within it. Today, the Quebec Crees refer to themselves as *Eeyouch* and to James Bay as *Eeyou Istchee* (meaning "the Cree people's land" in

their native language), and Southern Quebecers are likely to know and accept these terms, especially since the signing in 2002 of the “Nation to Nation Agreement,” popularly known as the “Peace of the Brave.”⁵ This rapprochement is not entirely new: with the establishment and expansion of the fur trade network, James Bay had been a site of intercultural exchange between Aboriginal peoples and newcomers since the seventeenth century.⁶

The rich legacy of those exchanges took a back seat when hydroelectricity became the focal point of the Liberals’ economic policies in the province. Bourassa’s global approach to northern development was consistent with the growth of government that had begun with the Quiet Revolution. In light of this growth, both Bourassa’s leadership and that of his predecessor Jean Lesage can be understood as a “governmentalizing” of the Québécois state: “To govern is to predict, know and decide. The knowledge that we have of this dossier, the unequivocal advice of experts and specialists, the imperatives of economic revival, everything pushes us to begin without delay the development of James Bay, for the progress of the Québec North-West and of Québec as a whole.”⁷ Michel Foucault used the term *governmentality* to refer to a gradual shift in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe characterized by an “economic” turn in the art of government, by which he means that politics is no longer about maintaining the sovereignty of the prince over his territory but about organizing the relations between “men and things” in an effort to foster wealth and well-being from within. Reviewing a corpus of post-Machiavellian literature, Foucault proposes that

The art of government, as becomes apparent in this literature, is essentially concerned with answering the question of how to introduce economy – that is to say, the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family (which a good father is expected to do in relation to his wife, children and servants) and of making the family fortunes prosper – how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the state.⁸

We cannot assume that there is an unbroken historical link between the forms of governmentality that Foucault was analyzing in the Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to recent state structures on the American continent. And yet the idea that government should be concerned with “making the family fortunes prosper” resonates strongly in relation to Quebec where new forms of resource exploitation in the North



FIGURE 1 Robert Bourassa, “Father of James Bay,” 2005. *Author’s personal collection*

corresponded with a strengthening of what could be regarded as an extended family, that of the national community. James Bay was seen to be forging a bond between members of this community, as Bourassa put it: “The Québécois have never been so close to each other nor so typical, I would say, of the historical vitality that has made them cling to their land, to their soil, with such exemplary stubbornness and determination.”⁹

The premier was trained as an economist and, as his political legacy shows, for him the question of how to introduce economy into the management of the state was paramount – and motivated no doubt by the underdevelopment and lack of industrial infrastructure in the province at the time, compared to the rest of Canada and the United States. This situation prompted the *rattrapage* (catching up) set in motion by the Quiet Revolution. It is therefore fitting that Bourassa was eventually referred to in popular discourse as the “Father of James Bay” and that he is represented as such in the hydroelectric landscape. The viewing platform facing the iconic LG-2 spillway – which is known as the Giant’s Staircase (L’Escalier du géant) – features a photomontage with a life-sized picture of Bourassa superimposed against the spillway. The caption identifies Bourassa as the

“father of James Bay” and lists key biographical details about him. Proportions have been altered so that the ex-premier is not dwarfed by the spillway but appears equally gigantic standing next to it (see Figure 1).

Although this image and moniker may be lighthearted, the nature of the political rationality that was deployed in James Bay through what Foucault characterized as the “correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family” in turn carries more weight. Foucault never fully addressed this question, yet the gender, race, and class dynamics of governmentality are suggested in his image of the family as a model of government, and in his analysis of the transition from sovereign power to governmentality, which he identifies as the point of entrance of “biopower” into the political sphere.¹⁰ For Foucault, modern forms of state power had to do less with territory than with “a sort of complex composed of men and things”; property and territory, he adds, are merely some of the variables of this complex.¹¹ When governmentality is analyzed from a geographical perspective, territory becomes a decisive element of the “correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth,” and the term *men* cannot be understood as generic. Interaction with the territory and the things it contains generates different subject positions for men and women; in addition, race and class also modulate which kinds of interaction are considered “correct” so as to “make the family fortunes prosper.” Michael Watts has delved into how the production of governable subjects is a key aspect of development and how “the new practices of the State shape human conduct by ‘working through our desire, aspirations, interests and beliefs for definite but shifting ends.’”¹² Who were these governable subjects – subjects of the nation – produced in James Bay? What kinds of desires, aspirations, interests, and beliefs were generated through their interaction with water? A look at representations of nature and national identity through hydro governmentality provides some elements of an answer.

The media discourse around James Bay reiterated key elements of a Québécois relationship to place, which was defined, among other things, by the province’s history of territorial settlement and expansion through agriculture. If the French Canadian agricultural life could not be transplanted as far north as James Bay, the symbolic universe it had given rise to over four centuries of colonization could be recontextualized in a new time and space. The constant iteration of Québécois ideas of land, nature, and identity worked to integrate James Bay – a land historically inhabited and used by the Crees – into the Québécois national territory.¹³ While James Bay was a new space for Québécois nation building, the symbolic discourse that represented it to southern Quebecers was well known. If,

as proponents of the project often stated, James Bay belonged to all the Québécois, these discourses ensured that the Québécois, in turn, belonged in James Bay.¹⁴

Such belonging was at the time much more of an ambition than a reality. Analysis of the discourses and images that were circulated during the initial phase of the James Bay project reveal a fervent aspiration, by Southern Quebecers, to a northern aboriginality of their own: the Québécois claimed to have been there from the beginning by rewriting the origins of the region through a discourse of discovery, conquest, and pioneering via development. Their past, as much as their genes, was seen to connect them to that land, driven as they were by “an atavism that comes to them from far away ancestors, fur traders, coureurs de bois, crossbred with Indian blood.”¹⁵ Ironically, this colonial vision of the North was part and parcel of the Québécois’s own movement of decolonization, which gathered up strength during the Quiet Revolution. In their efforts to improve their economic condition and gain access to the reins of government as the province’s majority, French Quebecers were themselves treating northern Aboriginal lands as a colony of the South. By regarding James Bay as a *terra nullius*, political and economic actors in the province sought to universalize their own particular vision of the land and its resources so as to put into place mechanisms of resource exploitation advantageous to the South. As the Eeyouch and their allies have demonstrated from the moment the project was announced, nature, North, and nation are cultural constructions. As such, they are rooted in epistemologies that vary between Aboriginal and newcomer societies, and according to the political and economic objectives that motivate their deployment. If nothing else, cultural ways of using the land through the ages have yielded different ways of knowing and valuing nature. Proponents of the James Bay project gathered these ways into a geographical imagination that was unambiguously springing from a settler mentality and moving toward intensive resource exploitation as the development path Quebec should adopt. The patrimonial landscapes of the Eeyouch would become the terrain for this development and hydroelectricity the chief engine behind this national trajectory.

What James Bay underscores, then, is the importance of reading economic development through a cultural lens. The production of James Bay as a landscape that the Québécois could relate to culturally was a necessary step in creating access to its resources and legitimizing their exploitation. After all, this region – which was formally Rupert’s Land – was a recent addition to Quebec’s territory after the province’s northern limit had been



FIGURE 2 Quebec boundary extension, 1898 and 1912. *Laval Department of Geography*

extended by two federal acts. The Quebec Boundary Extension Act of 1898 set the provincial border along the eastern shore of James Bay to the mouth of the Eastmain River, then northeast to the Hamilton River and down to the western boundary of Labrador. In 1912, this boundary was expanded to the Hudson Strait and Ungava Bay to its present location (see Figure 2). Still, it would take close to half a century for a provincial administration to be developed in this newly annexed territory, largely because Quebec considered the provision of services to the Inuit population to be a federal responsibility. In 1936, the province went to the Supreme

Court of Canada to argue that Inuit constituted an “Indian” population in the terms defined by the British North America Act of 1967. On 5 April 1939, the Supreme Court issued a decision that was favourable to Quebec by stating that, according to those terms, Inuit indeed possessed such a status and therefore fell under federal jurisdiction. Two decades later, Quebec would make an about-turn as it sought to regain its administrative powers over the region. In 1960, the “Direction générale du ‘Nouveau’ (New) Québec” (DGNQ), as the region would subsequently be referred to, was created under the initiative of René Lévesque who was minister of natural resources at the time.¹⁶

As geographer Michel Brochu stated in his 1962 book, *Le défi du Nouveau-Québec*, despite the fact that it amounted to almost two-thirds of Quebec’s territory, the region was utterly devoid of any markers of presence by the provincial government, be it in terms of language, education, commerce, or administration: “What is striking when one sets foot in any of the human establishments in New Quebec is to find oneself completely transposed outside of Quebec.”¹⁷ Brochu added that, in the absence of provincial governance, Northern Quebec was no different from the Northwest Territories, which were under federal jurisdiction. He enjoined the Quebec government to urgently rectify this situation. This view would be echoed a few years later by Henri Dorion, who led the Commission d’étude sur l’intégrité du territoire du Québec (Inquiry on the Integrity of Quebec’s Territory). In his recommendations, Dorion insisted on the urgency of structuring “a governmental presence that would be as active in the territory of New Quebec as it was in the South.”¹⁸ The absence of a visible presence of the provincial government in Northern Quebec, the report stated, gave Ottawa free rein to fill this space.

During the latter part of the twentieth century, the expansion of the provincial government in the area would be bolstered by resource development. If politics and economic development have gone hand in hand in Northern Quebec, culture can be viewed as a third element that sustains both. This North that was now part of Quebec and the object of provincial policies also had to be integrated into the mainstream geographical imagination. Even though Quebec’s territory was extended to the Hudson Strait in 1912, the cultural area occupied by the francophone majority of the province was still stretched very thin over this expanse. On the other hand, the Cree, Inuit, Naskapi, and Innu peoples were fully present in the region, as their communities, history, legends, place names, and modes of production attested. Legal and political access by Southern Quebec to the North’s territorial resources was one thing, but the creation of a sense of

cultural attachment and relevance in this area was another matter altogether. The development of these two elements is precisely the work of culture, and it is by no means a negligible aspect of the political and economic expansion of a nation.

The chief objective of this book, then, is to analyze the work of culture in laying out paths of economic development in Northern Quebec. If “deep description” guides this study, it must be noted that this is not an ethnography of the Eeyou cultural experience of Eeyou Istchee.¹⁹ In my view, the most ethical approach for a researcher working in an intercultural context is to delimit clearly the location from where he or she has the ability to speak. Mine is an attempt to isolate and make explicit the Québécois cultural construction of James Bay by adopting the perspective that the writing of culture must be a two-way street – what Bruno Latour has termed symmetrical anthropology – and even more so in a (post)colonial context.²⁰ To step outside of accepted categories is the only way to open a genuinely multicultural dialogue about northern development. The creation of such an exchange requires that dominant perspectives about nature, the North, or development not be taken for granted but understood as culturally, geographically, and temporally specific, and therefore subject to challenge and change. In collaboration with Cree researchers and elders, researchers such as Hans M. Carlson, Harvey Feit, Toby Morantz, Monica Mulrennan, Richard Preston, Colin Scott, and Adrian Tanner, among others, have produced outstanding works on different aspects of Cree culture and environmental philosophy; in addition, Eeyou cultural workers are actively documenting and transferring cultural knowledge, in their communities and beyond.²¹ In comparison, the cultural anchors of a Québécois understanding of land and resources in James Bay have not been studied to the same extent, and rarely with a critical approach. This vacuum perpetuates the narrative of heroic conquest that underscores so much historical writing about the region, to say nothing about the development practices these narratives sustain in the North.

Sustainable resource management in Northern Quebec demands that all actors come to the table with, first, an awareness of their own cultural histories of nature and, second, a willingness to expand the worldview these histories produce via a collaborative definition of development goals. Sustainability is impossible without equity and reciprocity. Moreover, equity and reciprocity cannot be defined narrowly in economic terms. Increasingly, the many disciplines that study cultures question why geographically remote or so-called traditional societies have disproportionately been the object of ethnographic studies compared to their more urban

and industrialized counterparts. The colonial roots of these disciplines – anthropology and human geography among them – partly explain why writing about the “Other” has been, until recently, a central focus. Given current efforts toward co-management and harmonization between different stakeholders, it would seem that critical studies about the “Same” – that is, about the dominant cosmologies that underlie development, resource exploitation, and industrialization – is where researchers should concentrate their efforts. Many are pursuing that avenue with critical and self-reflective research, notably in the fields of science studies, environmental history, or anthropology of development, all of which analyze the cultural sites of production of different ontologies of nature and the effects of their diffusion in diverse societies.²²

While, over the last thirty years, an important process of cross-fertilization has occurred in terms of how Crees and Québécois view nature, resources, and development, the lack of in-depth understanding of each group’s own cultural approach to the land continues to pose various challenges to the construction of a cross-cultural framework of co-management. It has become customary to speak of the cultural adaptation northern Aboriginal people have had to undergo in order to adjust to the lifestyle changes that have come as a result of industrial development in their home territories. On the other hand, little discussion or analysis has taken place regarding the cultural shift that needs to take place within Québécois – and Canadian – mainstream society regarding its own approach to resource development; if it is to depart from the colonial model, co-management demands the integration of multiple ontologies of land and resources into creative management models. Unfortunately, the speed at which new projects occur, in addition to their compounding effects, often challenge the capacity both for Aboriginal cultures to integrate change adequately and for new cultural knowledges about the North to be disseminated across southern society. The struggles or partnerships between northern peoples and other Québécois often revolve around the politics of knowledge, a process that is intertwined with each culture’s distinct and context-specific experience of colonial power. As Adrian Tanner puts it, resource use and management in Northern Quebec is strongly determined by a pivotal question: “Can distinct cultural groups, including aboriginal people and, significantly, Québécois, be given power to direct their own futures within the Canadian state rather than be directed by people of other cultural backgrounds and understandings?”²³ In order to be culturally sensitive, any answer to this question must be historically informed. On the eve of the second wave of nationalization of electricity in the 1960s, René Lévesque

spoke of the need for a “decolonizing” of the energy sector. Half a century later, at a time when the environmental crisis looms large, this decolonizing of the energy sector is in need perhaps of a second wave; the terms and content of this process, however, have yet to be more clearly spelled out. This book is an attempt to offer some avenues for debate and reflection.

How then did a Québécois cultural identification with the land and resources of James Bay come about, and what are some of its contours? To use the terminology developed by geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin in his landmark book *Canadian Nordicity* (1979), Quebec needed to be “nordified” after its territorial extension, that is, it had to generate a cultural consciousness of its new northern reality.²⁴ As historical analysis reveals, the terms of that consciousness are highly variable. The symbolic discourse of the 1970s and early 1980s represented Northern Quebec as a space of conquest by a modern industrial nation. In recent decades, climate change and the affirmation of Aboriginal land rights have modified the tone and themes that constitute such a discourse, although there are also elements of continuity. This is not to say that the North was ever monolithic in its representations: “To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.”²⁵

What is important to note is that the strategic play of discourses and representations about the North between various actors determines how Quebec relates to this territory and the resources it contains. Discursive formations have concrete material impacts. Edward Said and other post-colonial theorists powerfully underscore this point as their work shows the links between culture and power in colonial societies of the past and traces those links to contemporary manifestations.” In *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Said treated culture not as a superficial aspect of social life, nor as a screen for supposedly more fundamental politico-economic relations.²⁶ He also stressed the important fact that culture is *not* a mere reflection of the world. Rather, throughout his work, Said viewed culture as a series of representations, practices, and performances that enter fully into the constitution of the world. In that vein, we might speak of a “Norientalist” discourse that gave rise to the James Bay that so many Southern Quebecers know and relate to. Clearly, there are many cultural experiences of the North and the diversity of this spectrum needs to be circulated more widely. Across Canada, much remains to be

done in order to shift from wilderness to multiculturalism as a framework of intelligibility for northern regions.²⁷

Although Said's arguments were developed in another context, the materiality of culture is a fundamental aspect of the present book and one that also signals its interdisciplinary bent, which follows the path that led me to geography. After studying literature and liberal arts, my first graduate degree was in comparative literature. I wrote my master's thesis on the Quebec literary genre known as the *roman de la terre* (rural literature). Studying this corpus, my interest lay chiefly in identifying and analyzing the terms whereby attachment to the land was signified and symbolized by the authors of that genre. Although they were clearly being updated and reinterpreted, the symbols and language that had channelled the development of my own cultural identity in post-Quiet Revolution Quebec were soon recognizable to me in the discourses of James Bay. As a result, James Bay emerged as the obvious next phase for this research, and geography emerged as the ideal discipline to study the linkages between discursive, social, and material formations.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which shows a different angle of what I call the culture and cultural geography of hydroelectricity in Quebec. Part 1 presents an overview of the James Bay project and the historical and political context in which it emerged. Part 2 explores how the relationship to the land is symbolized in Québécois culture through different historical markers and within the popular literary genre of the *roman de la terre*. Part 3 centres on the La Grande project in order to trace the narratives previously examined to their landscape materialization. Three types of actors in the production and diffusion of the hydroelectric landscape shape the focus of the analysis: pioneers, workers, and spectators. Pioneering and the production of knowledge about James Bay were key factors in readying the territory for development. Through the figure of the "hydro pioneer," I examine the surveying of land and the inventory of resources as tools that narrowly set the boundaries of access and decision making in the region, with the result that indigenous knowledge and economic interests fell outside the terms of the discourse. Workers in James Bay intersect with another pivotal identity figure in the Quebec of this era, that of the "*homo hydroquebecensis*." Social relations in the work camps and the figure of the worker as a national hero were important elements of the culture of hydroelectricity during the building of the La Grande complex, and both were the result of specific constructions of nature and nation. By looking at the social geography of the work camps, I analyze the merging of nature with national identity and the ways in which it

creates subjects of the nation. In concluding the third section, the mechanisms for showing the region bring together my analysis of the cultural practices that fashioned the landscape of hydroelectricity in Quebec. I discuss how the spectacular display of the dams and the expansion of hydro tourism in James Bay continue to externalize the indigenous subjectivity of Northern Quebec by gathering the Québécois nation as a community looking north, while located chiefly in the south.

The conclusion of the book reflects on the contemporary landscape of hydroelectricity in what is now more widely known as Eeyou Istchee. The development of political institutions and of a civic society since the 1970s has provided the backbone for the affirmation of the Eeyouch as a political community and of Eeyou Istchee as a national territory. Nevertheless, the cultural production of James Bay from a southern perspective is a process that, in many regards, continues unabated. The recent Plan Nord that the Liberal government of Jean Charest officially launched in May 2011 may be the best measure of where cross-cultural resource management is headed in Northern Quebec, but it is too soon to say whether place-based knowledges will be an integral component of development in the upcoming decades.²⁸ I discuss what I see as limitations in the current approach and offer alternatives. Taking the long view, it might be possible to re-envision Northern Quebec as a space of sustained cross-cultural exchange between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Recent agreements have strengthened the cultural, economic, and political ties between Northern and Southern Quebec, hopefully paving the way for a policy shift that many actors are trying to effect not just in Quebec but across Canada. Everywhere in Canada, northern development faces the challenge of intertwining cultural heritage, development, and conservation into effective resource management. This challenge can only be met by sharpening our vision of the role culture plays in structuring the landscapes in which resources are embedded.

A note about the methodological and conceptual approach that informs the book. I have tried to avoid the abstractions and simplifications that inevitably come with the use of a strict theoretical framework. Theory is invaluable in its capacity to ask original questions and open new avenues of inquiry. Unfortunately, the realities social researchers try to grasp rarely fit themselves neatly into discrete theoretical models. If there is such a model in this study – or rather a school of thought – it is that of historical and cultural geography, which tackle the messy dialectic between society and space. Countless writers and scholars from various

disciplines have addressed this dialectic; I call on them and on the concepts they have elaborated throughout the book as a means to leverage my own thinking.

The task of understanding cultural geographies, and doing so with a historical perspective, is by no means straightforward. But it is worth pursuing. While culture is a dense and slippery object, teaching and researching as a human geographer I have found that it does bring great rewards. Sometimes the most mundane event will have a depth that reaches to the core of a community's heritage, identity, and aspirations. I go back to the image of that large piece of machinery that clogged up our suburban street one sunny afternoon. It is as good a place to start as any other. A few cars had to drive halfway onto the sidewalk and very slowly detour this massive, steel limb. Later, my mother, sister, and I went up to our balcony in time to see our neighbour who was driving the truck turn his noisy engines on. Craning their necks and leaning on the balcony rails like so many spectators at the opera, a whole crowd was watching this show. The driver blew his horn a few times, then moved up the street while waving at us. With great caution, he managed to manoeuvre around the block – no doubt shocking a few more residents with the size of his cargo – and reappeared facing the boulevard. Then he lumbered out of view onto the highway that would take him the unfathomable distance north. That unknown region would soon assume the contours of James Bay, a place where our small crowd had not been but – for a brief moment that still reverberates today – collectively imagined ourselves to be.

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