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Is the Hunter

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Home Is the Hunter

The James Bay Cree
and Their Land

HANS M. CARLSON

FOREWORD BY GRAEME WYNN



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For my mother and father

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FOREWORD

Dignity and Power

by Graeme Wynn

In the second half of the twentieth century, enormous technological might and great engineering skill were devoted to the construction of massive new hydroelectricity generating facilities to power an expanding Canadian economy and satisfy growing consumer demand for electrical appliances. From the St. Lawrence Seaway (which was as much a power scheme as it was a navigation system) to Kitimat in remote northern British Columbia, megaprojects dominated the news as they re-configured drainage systems, re-ordered landscapes, and re-placed people. Celebrated as modern marvels, widely publicized in the contemporary media, and quickly incorporated into school textbooks around the world as examples of human ingenuity, these projects betokened a new era of confidence in peoples' capacity to order the world to their purposes. They reflected a powerful conviction that shaped Canadian economic development in the quarter-century after the Second World War. Characterized, in general, by political scientist James C. Scott as "high modernism," this ideology is best summarized, in his words, as "a strong, one might even say muscle-bound version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature) and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws."¹

Early in the 1950s, the largest privately funded construction project to that point undertaken in Canada reversed the flow of one of the major northern tributaries of the Fraser River in British Columbia. Behind the

Kenney Dam, in the Nechako River canyon southwest of Prince George, an enormous, sinuous reservoir rose and extended a couple of hundred kilometres upstream. From its western limit the water plunged nearly 800 vertical metres – “nearly 16 times the height of Niagara Falls,” the literature informs readers – through a 16-kilometre-long tunnel “as wide as a two-lane highway, drilled and blasted through the coastal mountains,” into the penstocks of “a cathedral-shaped powerhouse ... drilled and blasted 427 metres inside the granite base of Mount DuBose” near Kemano. There, eight generators – each producing over 100 megawatts – sent power along an 82-kilometre transmission line “across some of the most rugged mountain territory” in the province, to drive an aluminum smelter (that processed alumina concentrated from bauxite drawn from British Guiana and Jamaica) near the newly built town of Kitimat.² But even this “marvel of the time” was overshadowed when the turbines of the Barnhart and Beauharnois powerhouses on the St. Lawrence began to spin later in the decade. They were the second- and third-largest hydroelectric plants in the world (behind “Stalin’s concrete pyramid,” the Kuibyshev Dam on the Volga River), capable of producing 3,600 megawatts of power between them.³

In the 1960s these projects had their counterparts in Manitoba and Newfoundland-Labrador. Faced with the challenge of harnessing low-gradient, north-flowing rivers subject to freeze-up and low flow when demand for electricity is greatest (during the winter), engineers dammed the Churchill River, flooded about 1,500 square kilometres of land, and redirected much of the river’s flow through a 180-kilometre-long network of lakes, channels, and rivers into the Nelson River. At the same time, the outlet of Lake Winnipeg was dammed to allow better regulation of water levels feeding the four electricity generating stations on the Nelson drainage. A few years later the government of Canada’s easternmost province capitalized on the kinetic energy of another Churchill River, in Labrador (which descends 300 metres in approximately 30 kilometres) by blasting an enormous underground powerhouse, 300 metres long and fifteen storeys high, out of the rock of the Canadian Shield at Churchill Falls. Some four hundred huge transmission towers marching across the northern muskeg carried five million or so kilowatts of electricity from this remote location into the Quebec electricity grid, 200 kilometres to the south.⁴

Promotional literature and propaganda films touted the benefits of these developments and boasted that they would have no negative environmental consequences. In retrospect, however, it became clear that their human and ecological effects were profound. As Peter Kulchyski, a leading

scholar of indigenous affairs born and raised in Manitoba noted, the Nelson River, “once a pristine source of life, became silty and dangerous” and Native peoples found “logs blocking access to shores; undrinkable water; water levels that fluctuated according to no locally known logic, making travel unsafe; interred bodies exposed; islands slowly washed away,” in their traditional territories.⁵

Along the St. Lawrence, some 11,000 hectares of land were inundated behind the Long Sault Dam; in all, over 9,000 residents were displaced by the Seaway project and new settlements were built to replace towns and villages flooded by rising waters.⁶ According to the Canadian government’s *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, the Kitimat-Kemano power project proceeded in ways that shocked commissioners hearing the details in the 1990s. By their soberly worded account, the local Cheslatta T’en people were treated as an afterthought, with completely inadequate regard for their rights. The government initiated the surrender negotiations just as the dam was completed and flooding was about to begin. The flooding began before the surrender. The families were told to start moving without assistance the day after the surrender was signed. Because of the spring thaw, they had to leave most of their belongings behind. The homes and many belongings of the Cheslatta were destroyed before most families could move their effects to the new location. There was no housing or land provided for families or livestock at Grassy Plains (50 kilometres north, where they were relocated) for the entire summer. When land was finally purchased for the Cheslatta, moneys were taken from individual compensation allotments to pay for it – contrary to the Cheslatta understanding of the surrender agreement. The new lands were not established as reserve lands, and the rights the Cheslatta had enjoyed as a result of living on reserves were lost for many years. Graveyards above the planned flood level were washed away.⁷

Yet there was little contemporary concern about the collateral costs of these extraordinary efforts at ecological re-engineering. Omelettes could not be made without breaking eggs. Such changes were “a matter of modern progress and international prosperity.”⁸

Like the projects that preceded it, the James Bay hydroelectric initiative began with optimism and happy confidence that great works were under way. Described by Quebec premier Robert Bourassa as “the project of the century,” when he announced it in 1971, the James Bay scheme was to unleash the potential of the underdeveloped north as it confirmed Quebec’s mastery of the brute-force technologies that had enabled so much economic development during the 1960s. It would, said Bourassa, provide

“the key to the economic and social progress ... the political stability ... and ... the future” of his province (see p. 207, this volume).⁹ According to the Bechtel Corporation, the giant engineering firm responsible for the project, it was “appropriately named La Grande,” because it was “one of the largest undertakings ever mounted.” It involved the diversion of several rivers in an area to the east of James Bay that was “larger than the state of New York.” It would generate “a whopping 10,300 megawatts” of power. Millions of cubic yards of fill, hundreds of thousands of tons of steel and concrete, 70,000 tons of explosives, vast engineering skill, and “an enormous amount of determination” were necessary to realize the technocratic, political, and ideological dream of completing the modernization of Quebec.¹⁰ Altering nineteen waterways, creating twenty-seven reservoirs, and spending tens of billions of dollars were, it seemed, all in a proverbial day’s work. The territory, which a Hydro-Quebec brochure later described as “now being molded to man’s needs,” seemed too remote and too vast to warrant much concern.¹¹ Without the necessity of environmental impact assessments, construction of the James Bay access road began soon after Premier Bourassa announced the project. Neither the indigenous Cree nor the Inuit to the north were advised of the province’s plans.

Yet the road to northern development was not simply paved by Bourassa’s good intentions. To the surprise of the Quebec government, indigenous and popular opposition to the James Bay scheme was strong, effective, and almost immediate. In the radical, democratic environment of the late 1960s, marked by the rise of the counterculture movement, student empowerment, the stirrings of popular environmentalism (symbolized in Canada by the establishment of Greenpeace in Vancouver), and a broad-based reaction against the might of what American President Dwight Eisenhower had termed, in 1961, the military-industrial complex, there was growing suspicion of corporate and government megaprojects.¹² Atop all of this, in 1969, the Canadian government raised the political ire of indigenous peoples across the country by proposing plans to further the assimilation of Native Canadians, including the abolition of treaty rights and native reserves. Although these ideas were later set aside, they too contributed to the changed climate of public sentiment into which Premier Bourassa’s James Bay dream was launched.

Within weeks of the Quebec government’s establishment of the James Bay Energy and Development corporations, financial assistance from the Arctic Institute of North America allowed Cree leaders to meet in Mistassini. For some, this marked the beginning of a “process by which the Cree

of Quebec ... [came] to see themselves as belonging not just to family and village but to a regional ethnic and political unit, to a nation."¹³ Before the year was out, rising public unease had led to the establishment of a Federal-Provincial Task Force on James Bay Ecology, and the beginning of work on the social impacts of northern development by researchers in McGill University's Programme in the Anthropology of Development. Within a year, Helene Lajambe, a student at McGill University, and others had founded the James Bay Committee, a grassroots coalition of hunting and fishing groups, indigenous organizations, and several environmental and conservation interests.¹⁴ Buoyed by the support, in May 1972, lawyers for the Indians of Quebec Association (IQA) filed for a permanent injunction against development that would damage Cree land and opened a new segment of what Hans Carlson (p. 21, this volume) describes, felicitously, as "the spider's web of words and meaning that clings so delicately to the forests of the North." Granted after months of hearings (well treated in the pages that follow), in November 1973, the injunction was overturned on appeal a week later. Responding to an offer to negotiate from Premier Bourassa, the IQA and the Cree entered a warren of discussion that led successively to the formation of the Grand Council of the Crees (separate from the IQA) in August 1974, an agreement in principle between Quebec and the Cree people shortly thereafter and, in November 1975, approval of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, a modern-day treaty that awarded resource and governance rights, as well as monetary compensation to Native peoples.¹⁵

Many factors and innumerable individuals shaped this outcome, but the work of journalist and (later) filmmaker Boyce Richardson warrants brief attention here because it was instrumental in reshaping public awareness of (and sympathy for) the plight of the James Bay Cree. Originally from New Zealand, where his career as a journalist began, Richardson arrived in Canada in 1954, after working in various capacities in Australia, India, and England. By 1957 he was with the *Montreal Star*. Between 1960 and 1968 he was the London correspondent of that newspaper and then, after a short stint as drama and film critic, became one of its associate editors. Between 1969 and 1971 he produced a number of important essays on the rising threat of pollution, on Canadian urban problems, and on "the emerging Indian."¹⁶ Then he resigned to pursue a freelance career. Having spoken out against the James Bay scheme, he was invited, shortly thereafter, by the IQA, to make a film about the development proposal. By his own account, Richardson knew very little, at the time, of Native peoples in Canada, of the circumstances of the James Bay Cree, or of the

challenges of filmmaking. He accepted the invitation because he held an inherent sympathy for “the little guys.” Whatever Bourassa’s rhetorical claims for the massive project, Richardson recognized that it would impose unprecedented southern demands and massive change on the Cree people of northern Quebec.

Disappointed by his first impressions of Mistassini, Richardson quickly realized that he was misreading northern circumstances. Common and widely propagated views of the Cree as unsophisticated, dependent people did not fit the more complicated, compelling conditions that he encountered.¹⁷ Possessing the journalist’s concern for the here and now, and a sharp appreciation of the value of human experience as a vehicle for effective communication, Richardson utilized visual images and the spoken word to convey, with attention-grabbing power, both the vulnerability of Cree life ways and “the beauty, harmony, and strength that the Crees found in their most natural habitat, the bush.” His first film, released in 1973 as *Job’s Garden*, found its centre in the gentle wisdom of Cree hunter Job Bearskin and his wife Mary, to illuminate their “profound understanding of the Human role on this Earth.” Technically unsophisticated, it delivered a very clear message. For Bearskin (who stood implicitly for all of his people in this), the land was a garden, both practically and mythologically: it provided resources for daily living and served, in an Edenic sense, as a place of cultural origin.¹⁸

Job’s Garden was soon followed by *Cree Hunters of Mistassini*, which Richardson co-directed with Tony Ianzelo for Canada’s National Film Board. This superbly filmed account of a winter season at Sam Blacksmith’s hunting camp north of Chibougamau echoed Job Bearskin’s point that people, plants, and animals grew and flourished together in the “wilderness.” Charismatic and immensely competent in the bush, Sam Blacksmith (who died, aged at least 95, as this foreword was being written) evinced a simple but profound wisdom and, because the film won international acclaim and a large audience, he “became known and respected in many parts of the world as a quintessential spokesman for the central values of Cree life.” As Richardson reflected years later on hearing of Sam Blacksmith’s death, he and his friends Ronnie Jolly and Abraham Voyageur, who shared his camp in the year that the film was made, “provided a powerful demonstration to the outside world of the viability of Cree hunting life, and its importance in the scheme of things, natural, human and animal.” Indeed, Colin Low, one of Canada’s leading documentary filmmakers in the latter half of the twentieth century, reportedly argued that *Cree Hunters* “created such an impact as to have brought about a profound

change in government policy towards the so-called Indians under their charge.”¹⁹

In the 1970s, Richardson focused on the immediate dangers that hydro development schemes posed to patterns of subsistence in the north. Almost two decades later, as debate over the development of more dams on the Grand-Baleine River intensified, he returned to portray in a third film, *Flooding Job's Garden*, the sweeping, detrimental effects of hydro development upon the environment and upon Cree communities now struggling to find a balance between assimilation and the preservation of their traditional values and way of life.²⁰ Each of these three films document, in ways that are entirely compelling, patterns of contemporary existence among the Crees. They are not beyond critical comment, however. Three shortcomings require consideration. First, Richardson's earliest films construct Cree hunting as a traditional practice. This gives them a very strong retrospective dimension, despite their of-the-moment currency. Yet, by treating customary behaviour as age-old, they render tradition static, flatten the past by denying the possibilities of change and adaptation, and (ironically and surely inadvertently) rob the Cree of agency. Second, as Richardson has explained elsewhere, the filmmakers shaped the picture they portrayed in *Cree Hunters* (by transporting hunters to kill moose and returning the meat to camp by plane, and by flying in nails that allowed construction of a larger-than-usual hunting lodge).²¹ Finally, the fragments of existence offered by these films fascinate and inform, but as Bill Nichols has observed in a general commentary on documentary filmmaking, “the information never vanquishes the fascination.” It is the very “otherness” of indigenous lives that holds the camera and thwarts “the documentarist's urge to move away from the concrete and local in order to provide perspective.”²²

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has reflected upon the inherent tension between a focus on local detail and the search for larger horizons by drawing a distinction between “inscription” and “specification” – “between setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found, and beyond that about social life as such” – and it is here, in the space opened by this tension, that Hans Carlson's *Home Is the Hunter* makes its luminous contribution to improving our understanding of the complex relationships between people and places.²³ Indeed, part of Carlson's purpose in the pages that follow is to think again about the connections that link individuals, cultures, and places. In his view every hunter is

“embedded both in hunting culture and in physical nature” and, unable to separate “cultural self from physical self,” each lives “within a single spatial phenomenon that influences, but does not wholly determine,” his/her actions. This is important because it recognizes the dynamic qualities of cultural life. As Carlson has it: “while various aspects of culture (even traditional culture) and environment may reinforce one another, at times there is a tension between them that pulls the individual in different directions” (p. 20).

In the end, Richardson’s and Carlson’s extended efforts to better understand James Bay and its people point in markedly different – but nonetheless complementary – directions. Richardson, the journalist, offers an historical tableau as he illuminates a particular moment of harrowing change. Carlson, the thoughtful scholar, focuses on the past, but like all historians, he writes out of a particular time and place and his historical inquiries are inflected by current concerns. “Only by taking the long view,” he insists, “do the changes occurring in the present seem understandable as something more than blind, unstoppable decline for both land and people. Only by connecting the history of the land with what is happening to the land today can we find a meaning that will help lead to the future” (p. 25). *Home Is the Hunter* reverberates with a sense of time and change and hope, as it displays the knowledge, insight, and wise judgment that its author has developed through a quarter of a century of thinking about “what lies beyond the spruce trees and the running rivers” of the north (p. xxiii). More than this, Carlson’s book echoes one of the classics of modern social history, E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, in its insistence on rescuing the Cree from the “condescension of posterity” (and the flattening message of the celluloid medium) by recognizing both their human dignity and their competence in maintaining a rich and distinctive (but always supple and evolving) connection with the land through centuries of potentially disruptive contact with fur traders, missionaries, bureaucrats, engineers, and other newcomers to their territory.²⁴

In Carlson’s telling, the story of James Bay and its people “is a prime example of the integration and exploitation of remote environments within an increasingly global economy and, consequently, within the expanding global scope of environmental social justice concerns.” But it is much more than this. Concerned to move beyond the story of “wires and words” (important though it is) that “integrated this distant region into the technical geography of an international electrical grid” as the La Grande project moved to completion, Carlson anchors his account in the

Cree's own complex stories about (and understanding of) their "immemorial phenomenal world," Eeyou Istchee. These two words, he avers, "don't seem to describe a physical territory so much as a complex relationship between land and people, where neither one has control of the other, and where "land" means not just ground but all the various beings with whom the Cree interact. This is the land in all its totality ... and it involves an understanding of all the life that surrounds and includes the Cree." Complicated associations and interactions – "physical and metaphysical, human and other-than-human" – mould place and people together. In this cultural narrative, the land is a web of relationships, Eeyou Istchee, not the resource cornucopia or piece of real estate that newcomers saw in the territory east of James Bay (pp. 4, 6, 11, 204).

These two perceptions – one enshrined in the metaphysical understanding of indigenous hunting peoples and the other in the outsiders' marketplace narrative of ownership, control, and sovereignty – are the poles about which Carlson's powerful account circles. For centuries, since Henry Hudson met Chakaapash on the shores of James Bay, they have been central to the long narrative negotiation in which Natives and newcomers have been engaged, not only over land, but also over animals, home, identity, meaning, and history in this remote territory. By recognizing this and by taking the long view, by seeing the changes precipitated by the La Grande project as the most recent in a series of adjustments produced by Cree-white contact through the decades, Carlson renders the arc of Cree history intelligible to outsiders and makes it relevant to the people living east of James Bay today. His is an original, and much-needed, synthesis, a story anchored in the records of newcomers, fur traders, missionaries, scientific explorers, and the work of twentieth-century scholars, that offers new insight into and understanding of the region and its people.

In sum, the message of these pages is that the Cree are a strong and adaptable people who have had impressive success in maintaining their intimate web of relationships to place – their particular metaphysical narrative – against the stories (and the consequences associated with them) that others have told about their land. In the early years of contact, the remoteness of this place from centres of European activity and the meagre numbers of fur traders and missionaries who ventured among the Cree muted the effects of "marketplace" views in Cree territory. Carlson's perspective here is clear and distinct. Rather than pondering the "impact" of the fur trade on indigenous society, he tries to tease out the negotiated meaning of the trade, to understand how it was understood and talked about by people at the time, and how that changed their worlds.²⁵ In this

view, the trade cannot be understood in unequivocal terms. It neither simply shackled the Cree to the mercantile economy (otherwise known as the Hudson's Bay Company) nor enrolled them unambiguously in a partnership with European traders. It was, rather and also, a relationship with the land and with other people on the land that was interpreted from within a Cree understanding of the world. So, too, in religion. The handful of Christian missionaries who worked in the James Bay area never simply imposed their beliefs upon the Cree. Nor, by and large, were their teachings rejected out of hand. Here as elsewhere, interaction produced syncretism. "Christianity changed the Cree, [but] the Cree actively worked to change Christianity to fit with the environment and their understanding of it." European faith gained new meaning "where material need met conceptual need" among the people of James Bay (p. 129).

Late in the nineteenth century, outside pressures on Cree ways of life intensified. More people, trappers, bureaucrats, scientists, tourists, "extractors" all, came into the area from the south to take something (be it furs, knowledge, or pleasure) from the region. Sometimes they brought devastating diseases among its people. Their cumulative effects were enormous; environmental degradation, sickness, and immiseration undermined Cree lifeways and heightened their dependence upon others. More transient, and less dependent upon the resources and inhabitants of the region than Hudson's Bay Company traders and missionaries had been, the growing tide of newcomers also interpreted the area as outsiders, creating a lens through which the region could be understood from afar. Rooted in an epistemology of nature and culture very different from that of the Cree, this outside narrative understanding of the region and its inhabitants relegated Native peoples to the margins of the larger society's perceptions. This marginalization was reversed to some degree in the second quarter of the twentieth century, when the Hudson's Bay Company, the government, and the Cree worked together to establish beaver reserves (that revitalized both the population of *Castor canadensis* and the – somewhat redefined – hunt). As "conservation and Native cultures became a part of popular, intellectual understanding, Cree hunting became more central to the narratives of conservation, government action, and academic study" (p. 170). But indigenous practices were also flattened, remarkably quickly and effectively, by this process "into the story of a museum piece." Although the hunt of 1950 was conducted on leased land, governed by official regulation, and depended upon maps, monitoring, and counting – and differed in all these ways from the hunt of a century before – it was widely regarded as an "ancient tradition reborn." For several of those most closely

involved in the beaver reserve program, “Indian practice” was reduced to “something essential and ahistorical” (pp. 179, 191). By ignoring historical change, or at least foreshortening and simplifying it into a story about the dramatic disruption of age-old practice by white trappers late in the nineteenth century, this view erases precisely what Carlson so deftly and convincingly insists upon in these pages: “the historical power of Cree hunting and Cree hunters in negotiating with Europeans, and all the changes that this negotiation brought – both good and bad” (p. 191).

This is important. Through centuries of perturbation produced by the incursion of newcomers, new ideas, and new technologies into their homeland and the construction of new narratives that challenged their own conception of Eeyou Istchee, the Cree of James Bay have adjusted – and changed – to sustain the core of their ancient narrative. In recognizing this, Carlson acknowledges the resilience of the James Bay Cree but he also marks the roots of their strength, the nucleus of the dignity they exhibited when the legal proceedings of the 1970s “took the material facts of Cree life and placed them into the very different narrative framework of science and progress” (p. 205). Despite all that had gone before, these events revealed, in stark and arresting ways, the enormous inherent differences in the two sides’ understandings of their worlds and themselves. When the judge conducting the hearings against the La Grande development asked Job Bearskin (the central character in Boyce Richardson’s first film) for his address, he was met with incomprehension. Pressed by the court, Bearskin eventually responded, “I have come from what I have survived on,” and then, still perhaps somewhat bemused by the question, that he was “from this land.”²⁶ For those whose home-place it would flood, the hydro project was not simply a matter of dams and reservoirs, but (as the sometime Grand Chief of the Crees, Mathew Coon Come, noted) “a terrible and vast reduction of [their] entire world.”²⁷ Reflecting on the events of the 1970s and the developments that followed, Chief Violet Pachanos, the elected leader of the Cree Nation of Chisasibi, observed that “the price we paid for being modern is high, a lot higher than anyone ever imagined.”²⁸ To read Carlson’s elegant and moving book is to come a little closer to understanding what that price, measured not in dollars and cents but in terms of human worth, might be, to appreciate the importance of understanding the stories by which individuals and societies order experience and act in the world, and to ask whether the histories we construct for ourselves help us to remember – or forget?²⁹

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I

Introduction: Why James Bay?

In some truly unimproved natural setting – one well removed from the reach, the sights, and maybe especially sounds of our wonted culture – surrounded by the immemorial phenomenal world, whether trees, ocean, or the waves of prairie grasses, a change may overtake us, precisely to the extent that we are willing to remain where we are and resist what will be a gathering temptation to return to more certain comforts. It will not quite be fear, but it will be next to this: a kind of existential humility born of a sense of all the life that surrounds and includes us and that will go on without us. And this is the ground of myth – fear or humility and submission to the still unfathomed mystery of Life.

– Frederick Turner,
Beyond Geography¹

It was while sitting in a canoe in the middle of Coldwater Lake in July of 1982 – my usually talkative bowman strangely silent that day, the rest of the group far ahead – that I experienced for the first time something that until then I thought of as simply a figure of speech: deafening silence. Part of it was being in the middle of a large northern lake where we were alone – alone in a way that is hardly possible most places – and part of it, too, was the weather. There wasn't a breath of wind to riffle the water, and the air pressure was falling, dulling the crispness of the world. Low pressure, which usually brings sounds from far off – a dog barking in the distance, birds high up in the forest trees, a decrease in the psychic size of the world that marks the impending rain – that day brought only an absence of sound. The world was all of a sudden unimaginably immense. I had the sense that sounds should be coming to me from across

the water, but all that came was a quiet that made me want to clear my throat, whistle, hum a tune – just for the ludicrous reassurance that I could still hear some noise. It was both disturbing and exhilarating, and we sat, both of us, I think, experiencing the same feelings. I don't know what it was that made us break the moment – not fear, I don't think, though something equally human – there were no words that I can remember, just a seemingly simultaneous decision to pick up our paddles and be on the move. Maybe we both lost our nerve at the same time, but the splash of the blades in the water and the thump of the paddle shafts against the gunwales was comforting. The movement was comforting too.

What we experienced that day, I think, was the bush – the land in some of its totality. That's the only way to describe it, for the bush is a presence in James Bay, it is manifest and obvious in its size and reality. There's no avoiding it, even if you travel, as we did, with a good supply of food and a radio for communication and safety. I don't want to portray the bush as a harsh place, though it certainly can be at times. I've spent many summers there but only a little time in the winter, and I have to rely on the stories of those who know, and on my own imagination, to understand the work needed to traverse that country in the snow and cold: hard work, involving a flow of energy from the land, focused through human activity and put back into the land in the act of living; hard work, too, involving a flow of imagination, focused through human culture, and fitted to the world in stories of people and place that explain the immensity that I glimpsed. It's the land that I want to investigate in this book – not simply the environment, but that larger presence manifest in that silence on Coldwater Lake.

The Cree name this land “Eeyou Istchee,” which is translated most often as “The People's Land” but refers to more than simply the physical or political occupation of this northern region – important though these are to the Cree today. Sometimes it seems as though “Eeyou Istchee” would be better translated as “The Land's People” as this pushes against the inherent notions of ownership and control present in the usual translation. The words don't seem to describe a physical territory so much as a complex relationship between land and people, where neither one has control of the other and where “land” means not just ground but all the various beings with whom the Cree interact. This is the land in all its totality, I think, and it involves an understanding of all the life that surrounds and includes the Cree.

And so while I want to look at Frederick Turner's “immemorial phenomenal world,” I don't believe that it's the fear that he references that is the grounding of the story of the land that I want to tell (at least, I want

to believe that it isn't). His notion of humility provides a better way of seeing the land as it offers an acknowledgment of the futility – maybe the irrationality – of human hubris, and this resonates with what I know about the worldview of the Cree people who live on the land in James Bay. The fear, I think, comes from another place, a non-Native place, and, oddly, perhaps it comes from our cultural perception of the humility, the hope in the land, that is so central to the Native hunter's perspective. The hunter's humility seems quaint to us. The sense of hope that the hunter cultivates scares us, too; it scares us because we don't dare to believe in it, knowing as much as we think we do about the material world that surrounds us. And we do know so much about this world and its makeup. The sheer weight of that "rational" knowledge demands a faith of its own, which, in many ways, drives away hope in anything else. These are the seeds of fear and hubris in our modern world that so disturb the Cree and other Native peoples. I have been affected by that hope in the land, even as it challenged me that day twenty-five years ago and still confuses me today. James Bay has taught me that hope makes some sense, that we ought to pay it some attention, and that maybe there is another "rational" way of understanding this northern land. If there is a larger, philosophical reason for telling this story, then this is it.

This is a story about Cree hunters and their relationship with the land of James Bay, but it's also the story of how James Bay has become integrated into the rational vision and economy of North America and how local energy and imagination have been challenged – not lost – in the process. Both the energy flow and the imagination are important here. A very real part of James Bay's integration has involved the disruption of local energy flows through the environment; this has been the primary economic link with the South. For thirty-five years, Quebec has been developing hydro power in the bay, and now megawatts of power are generated where falls of water once shook the earth around them. Energy once spent in sound and natural motion has been transformed into the hum and crackle of electricity, siphoned off to the South, and the power in these places that once moved the human imagination has now been lost. Their ability to thunder in the heart is gone, and for every unit of energy that is gained in this process something less tangible is certainly lost. The power and the noise are now in our control, are being controlled for our needs, and here is the major social/environmental reason for telling this story.

James Bay is a prime example of the integration and exploitation of remote environments within an increasingly global economy and, consequently, within the expanding global scope of environmental social

justice concerns. Like so many places around the world, James Bay is a place where our desire for resources has disrupted environments and the local cultures that depend on them. The reshaping of the landscape in order to extract energy from this remote region is, in part, an environmental issue, but it has a significant cultural component as well. In reality, there are few environmental concerns that do not involve concerns about people too, and, as I look at culture and environment in these pages, it is with this in mind. We can learn meaningful lessons from events in northern Quebec, but we will have to think carefully about how culture and environment, past and present, are linked in both our words and our actions. Much land has been flooded, but more has been changed by the introduction of multiple and massive high-tension lines across the landscape and by the network of roads that transport logs to the South just as the wires transport electricity. These things have changed the way people can think about their land as well as how they can use it. The Cree hunter, who does not know what loggers have done to his land, arrives on his trapline with a sense of foreboding that was unknown in the past. The Cree mother who is told that methyl mercury from decaying plants beneath the new waters has poisoned the fish receives a warning that may save her body but that jeopardizes her faith in a traditional food supply that, for millennia, has fed her people both physically and spiritually. All of this calls into question our use of James Bay for our own needs – our alteration of culture and nature – and makes clear the importance of investigating the long history of this land.²

In addition to what we extract, what we bring into the region is also transformative. This is maybe best seen in the introduction into the James Bay region of fossil-fuel technologies. Like most places on the earth now, James Bay is full of engines and furnaces that ease people's lives but that also change their relationships with the land around them. There is no doubt that technology changes our perceptions of the environment and that travelling at 100 kilometres per hour in a truck or on a snowmobile potentially allows a sense of power and separation, a sense of hubris, that is not possible in a canoe or on a sled. Engines have a sound that breaks the quiet of the bush, they speak out and comfort humans by assuring them that they can still hear something familiar. In their own way, they are telling a story about all of us; or maybe it's better to say that they are pushing people towards changing the story they tell about the land. Theirs can be a harsh guttural sound, a Greek chorus behind a new narrative – adding emphasis, maybe heightening emotions – feeding technological hubris to narratives of people's place in the environment.

Technology has the potential to do all this, although, for a long time, the James Bay Cree have maintained themselves through many narrative and technological encounters. Some of our stories, like our technology, are old news now, so simple formulations of the ways that technology brings environmental and cultural change are of little value. Some of those changes were forged into the knife blades and metal pots that Henry Hudson traded near Waskaganish, in 1608; others were embedded in the Cree-language bibles and prayer books produced by John Horden and his fellow missionaries in the nineteenth century. There are analogies here for the present, but these phenomena were in large part domesticated, even indigenized, by the Cree and were added to traditional culture even as that culture changed. So care is needed in defining the nature of change.

That said, the new stories that are recited to the metre of modern technology may be different from the old stories – harder to domesticate – because these stories and technologies function so closely together. These are the stories that, as Marx pointed out, redefine the world as commodity, not simply as raw material for production, and that allow technology a free reign. They abstract nature into manipulable pieces that can be ordered, harnessed to human need with the aid of modern technology, and sold. These two aspects of our culture also work together with the stories of sovereignty, an advancing Canadian jurisdiction over the Canadian Shield and the Arctic that began in the late nineteenth century and came to maturity after the Second World War. The North is resource-rich and is the economic foundation for a nation – two nations really, for the sovereignty inherent in “Maître chez nous” is also important to understanding James Bay history. In the 1960s, the flowering of Quebec nationalism and the assertion of Québécois control over their economic and cultural lives changed the world both inside and outside the St. Lawrence Valley. And the Québécois, more than any others, have carried both new technologies and new stories onto the lands of the Cree. More than any others, they have also tied this region to the global marketplace, and all this marks today as a new period in James Bay, albeit one connected to other historical processes occurring on this continent.

And here is a final reason for telling this story. Much of North America was transformed by the combined power of the Christian, yeoman narrative, with the economics and technology of proto-capitalist and capitalist agriculture, but this cultural package came up hard against the rocks and muskeg of the Canadian Shield. On Cree land, hunting and its narrative remained dominant, interacting with the world outside but remaining internally defined for centuries, until this new package of stories and

technology arrived. Rapid and dramatic change came to James Bay not with the mere arrival of white fur traders, or even later with Anglicans and Roman Catholics and their application of certain aspects of Western narrative culture, but only with the combined power of modern technology and narratives about people's place on the land. The Cree, like other Natives in the past and many other people around the world today, are dealing with these combined forces. So James Bay is an important part of our modern environmental awareness, but it can also teach us something important about the meaning of our cultural expansion on this continent both in the past and in the present.

These are the larger issues that I want to cover as they relate to James Bay, but before I do that I want to engage briefly with my own personal history with the land as it has a great deal to do with my interpretation of larger events. In canoeing through this country my companions and I were lucky enough to be guided by hunters who had been born in the bush and who had been raised there before the massive intrusion of outsiders and their technology. On my first trip our guide was Daniel Blacksmith, on future trips it was Charlot Gunner. It is to these men that I owe a great part of the inspiration to write in the first place, and part of what I perceived that day on Coldwater Lake has to do with them. I make no claims to writing this from the Cree perspective (I genuinely hope to see that story written someday); rather, I am writing this as a white American who caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye while travelling up there and who has attempted to understand the great quiet that he sensed on the land and also the quiet sense of place that struck him in watching the grace with which Daniel and Charlot move through the bush. I don't use the term "grace" lightly as I see the tinge of romanticism there, but the word works for me, freighted as it is. There was a sense of connectedness, of selflessness in relation to their surroundings that made the bush that Daniel and Charlot moved through a different place from the "wilderness" that I traversed. It would probably be better to say that they were moving through a different story – one that was intimately connected with that great quiet.

I went north at first to find a wilderness and to live out some very romantic images that I had in my head from reading fur trade stories. The fur trade, for all the revisions that have been made of it, is still one of the great epics of North American history, and my imagination was captured by the sweep of that story – the grand adventure, as I saw it. I suppose I found some of what I was looking for, but it became clear to me very

early on that for those Cree trappers this was not a wilderness, not an adventurous re-enactment, not a scenic getaway from the world to the south. This was a present-day world that was whole, self-contained, and internally defined if you were in tune enough to understand it. I was not that bright. All I can say is that I caught a glimpse of something and that I have spent quite a while trying to figure it out, trying to see it as a part of the modern world.

In 1982, my first impression of Mistissini Post – one of the then eight Cree communities in the region – was not positive: it seemed like a squalid little town on the edge of the forest, and I was anxious to get out of it. I didn't understand then that all of the Cree villages were in the process of rapid transformation due to the massive hydroelectric project that had been started on the La Grande River. I was disappointed in the Hudson's Bay Company trading post, which looked like any hardware store back home; I was disappointed with all of the motorized canoes I saw on the beach (the Cree boy waterskiing behind one of them was almost more than I could take); I was just disappointed. I had a story in my head – one that I am more than a little ashamed of now – and this place was not living up to my expectations. My expectations, of course, had come from stories about the past, from the belief that the Cree had been unaltered by the passage of time; and this was not so different from my perception that the region's environment, "the wilderness," had not changed either. Both of these were serious errors.

When we left the village and began to travel along the eastern shore of Lake Mistassini, things were more like what I had expected. The bush, hardly unchanged from time immemorial, at least gave that impression. It was the cultural juxtaposition of that which I expected and that which I didn't expect that continued to confuse me. Daniel had a proficiency in the woods that I admired greatly. He used the traditional crooked knife (*mogedagen*) to carve everything from axe handles to ladles; he also carried a radio (today it would be a satellite phone) to talk to his wife when he could get reception. The cognitive space here was as vast and as confusing as was the silence on Coldwater Lake, and it was even harder to put into words, particularly since I was expecting to find some kind of mythic Indian in the forest primeval. I continue to have these experiences up North, sitting in a traditional tent listening to someone speaking Cree on a cellphone and hearing the occasional reference to some professional hockey team or Hollywood movie. I have learned to laugh at the irony that my mind insists on creating out of those moments. It really is all in my head.

Over the course of seven summers I had the opportunity to travel more in the region – far to the north along the Arctic Ocean, too – and to continue to ponder the world up there and its relationship both to the world I had expected to find and to my own world back here at home. This book is largely my attempt to figure out that relationship, though it is more than that too. I came very quickly to care about the Cree and their land. I have been compelled to try to speak to them through this story, though I am sure that Charlot and Daniel will never read it. I find myself enmeshed in a conversation with this place that makes me want to tell about it, and this seems all the more pressing to me since Quebec has, this last January 2007, announced the beginning of the next phase of hydro development in James Bay. This time it will be the Rupert River that will be dammed and its energy harnessed to the power grid. This will bring another wave of environmental and cultural change to the region, and I am involved in it not only because of my relationship to the region but also because of my relationship to the northeastern electrical grid. Hydro-Québec wants to generate more power to grow the Quebec economy; it also wants to sell some of it to me for my computer, lights, and woodshop. The electrical ligaments that tie the regions together are important and so, too, are the intellectual sinews that will continue to bind cultures even more closely together. We need to think about the meaning of all of this not only from a material, environmental point of view but also from a cultural, even metaphysical, point of view. If the resources of James Bay are going to be a part of our world, then so are the people who live there and their worldviews. We need to engage all of this as best we can.

So for me, discussing current issues also means coming to grips with our past cultural interactions and the fact that we have still not fully integrated Aboriginal peoples and their land into our own history. My hope in meditating on James Bay is not only to identify some of the many environmental issues but also to raise some of the related cultural issues that linger in our relationship to Aboriginal peoples everywhere. I even go as far as to hope that I can offer something that will help to identify some solutions to these issues. There is something in the Cree story, as I have been able to put it together, that goes right back to that day on Coldwater Lake, to the humbling sense brought on by the immensity of the bush, and the hope that lies out there still.

I'm aware that I am taking on a responsibility in speaking about the Cree and their land. This has the potential to be useful, although there is no assurance of that. I've talked a lot about the lessons that James Bay

can teach us and what we need to consider, but, if we are not careful, this use of their land and their history has the potential to be just as exploitatively extractive as has our resource use. The words of Kiowa writer and philosopher N. Scott Momaday seem appropriate here to emphasize this potential danger: the storyteller, he writes,

is he who takes it upon himself to speak formally. He assumes responsibility for his words, for what is created at the level of his human voice. He runs the risk of language, and language is full of risk – it might miscarry, it might be abused in one or more of a thousand ways. His function is essentially creative, inasmuch as language is essentially creative. He creates himself, and his listeners, through the power of his perception, his imagination, his expression. He realizes the power and beauty of language; he believes in the efficacy of words.³

I am creating something in language here, in my own language, and Momaday's words remind me to keep in mind that other story of the land, the one that is not in my language – the story I believe our guides were moving through and that I believe is still very much alive in James Bay. His words push me to try to find a way to incorporate that story's presence into my own, even if I don't understand it in all its complexity. They also continue to remind me that this is not the only story that can be told, it's simply the one that I am capable of telling.⁴

As I touched on above, when the Cree speak of their land they mean more than just the ground on which they stand, the land that can be mapped two-dimensionally and scattered with cadastral lines to show property, jurisdiction, even sovereignty. What they mean by land is the entire multidimensional web of beings that occupies eastern James Bay: people, animals, plants, earth. So their story is one of place but also one of the complicated relationships – physical and metaphysical, human and other-than-human – that have shaped land and people together. The land is full of their names, their stories, their personal memories about these relationships, and all of these inhabit the remembered earth. These narratives, even if they remain something of a mystery, a linguistic and symbolic world that we are as unprepared for as we are to make our living by hunting on the land of the bay, become a responsibility for anyone who wishes to speak about the Cree and their land. The responsibility is to remember that these stories are not curiosities but, rather, have past and present meaning on the land.⁵

In 1492, this continent was not only demographically robust but also imaginatively and narratively robust, and the latter is relevant to the way that the past led into the present. In James Bay it was Cree words and stories that formed part of the geography that was the local environment, a place where hunting defined the Cree world, where humans and other-than-humans lived together in the reciprocal gift exchange of the hunt. And, most important, those stories continued to shape historical events even when, in the seventeenth century, the region became connected with the economy and discourse of European peoples.⁶ I say “connected with,” not “overshadowed by,” because European stories did not flourish on the land there any more than did English wheat. All that the English brought became part of James Bay’s geography and needs consideration, but not as the dominant force that shaped the history and environment of James Bay as it exists today. In the specific events and chronology of its history, James Bay is different from many places where Europeans came and stayed; however, in that James Bay today demands more than an understanding of what was brought there from the outside, it is just like other places.⁷

Momaday again points the way in his own telling of Kiowa history. With his inclusion of personal as well as documented ecological and even mythological events, he pushes the reader to feel the weight of multiple ideas, even if they cannot be completely understood or assimilated within the framework of our expectations of what history should be. All the words created around a people are meaningful for him, all of them function to shape the historical events that involved Natives and non-Natives. Significantly, too, he demands a consideration not only of people and their words about each other but also of nature and our various cultural and personal relationships to it. The individual, he tells us in an often-quoted line, “ought to concentrate his mind on the remembered earth. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.” For him, the land is sacred, invested with human meanings and actions that supersede any economic or political definitions of it.⁸ Momaday’s words are quoted so often because they resonate. They echo within my own desire to consider more carefully the role of environment and human culture in James Bay; they also echo in modern Native demands for the inclusion of their perspectives in our dealings with them over land and resources.⁹

This centrality of both land and language, I believe, means conceiving of the Cree and James Bay before contact as a self-contained environment of work and words into which Europeans entered in order to trade, proselytize, and inquire. As Europeans worked to survive, they worked to change this environment, though they never reshaped James Bay exclusively in their own image: for centuries, they did not have the numbers or power to even try. As in so many other places, in James Bay European modes of subsistence were not immediately successful, and newcomers were thrown back on Native subsistence. Unlike in other places, in James Bay European methods never flourished and Europeans continued to be bounded by the hunter's work and, increasingly, the hunter's words. I think it is important here to consider that, while the larger history of contact between Natives and Europeans illustrates how dramatically European work and words reshaped the Native world, nowhere did this happen without a period of cultural discourse and negotiation over the meaning of both. James Bay offers a protracted example of this important phase. Whereas in other places periods of negotiation lasted only a generation or two, in James Bay they were much longer, which is rare if not unique.

We struggle with these periods of negotiation that often occurred in the distant past and that linger tentatively in unclear and incomplete records, with the result that their meaning within the larger history suffers. In this regard, the Cree experience offers a different perspective on the larger process of contact for Native peoples and on their place in the histories of North America. For centuries before the Cree mounted the stage of law and politics, outsiders worked within a Cree context that maintained its local relevance. This is vital: the Cree remained imaginatively robust over a huge geography for hundreds of years, and outsiders moved through that story of the land. The far more radical changes that came in other places, as Europeans adapted the environment materially and conceptually to their own ends, may also help to bring into focus more recent events in James Bay, though the process of paradigmatic change is not a *fait accompli*. In other words, what's going on today should look familiar in many ways, but because of a very different history, the end result is anything but a foregone conclusion, either for the Cree or the land.¹⁰

Seeing the huge and lasting landscape of Cree narrative allows us to conceive of Native culture spatially and to acknowledge that there are still Native environments in every part of North America – vastly reduced in size though they may be – and that Native peoples continue to resist the wholesale imposition of Western narratives upon themselves and those

places. Part of this resistance is political, and it is worth remembering Momaday's words here: narratives like this one are potentially dangerous in that they represent a powerful aspect of Western politics, and histories are, after all, inherently political and have not often worked in the favour of Native peoples. Historical narrative is probably vital to the Cree in their new legal and political relationship with modern Canada, however, as they now find themselves in the midst of the same negotiations over sovereignty and rights as do other Natives in Canada and the United States. Yet, while it is important to interpret the historical path that led to Eeyou Istchee as a semi-sovereign entity, at the same time it is also important not to conflate Cree politics and Cree culture: they are not the same thing. The larger definition of Eeyou Istchee is still the most important: it is more than a government, or lines on a map, or even a nation (as it is defined in Western political terms). Thinking about the Cree's narrative landscape allows us to range much farther than that.¹¹

More to the point, this spatial way of thinking about narrative and culture allows us to get at questions about the processes of cultural interaction, which I think need to be fleshed out more before getting to the actual historical events. This way of thinking helps us get at questions like: What did it mean for widely divergent cultures to come together as they did all across the continent? How did the interaction between these very different peoples change them and the land over time? How, in fact, did they interact as people, and how do they continue to interact within the political and economic structures of the modern world? What should be created at the level of our historical narratives and what are the responsibilities in writing down the history of a people and their landscape? At a more personal level, how should my perception of the vastness of the bush as well as the other different ways it is perceived be incorporated into the story?

Maybe we can begin to answer these kinds of questions by looking at the relationship between human culture and stories. This relationship is central to my way of seeing the process of contact in James Bay because, as philosopher David Carr points out, all people are striving for the position of storyteller in their own lives, in the lives of constituent groups, and in the lives of other peoples. And, as he says, "we must go even further and say that it [narrative] is literally *constitutive* of the group." By extension, it is also one of the primary ways that groups interact. In this competition of stories, "culture is contested, temporal, and emergent" for anthropologist James Clifford, and "representation and explanation – by insiders and outsiders – is implicated in this emergence." So individual people – insiders

and outsiders – speaking into a narrative space constitutes one of the ways that culture is created, maintained, and altered. And environment is central to this emergence because vital modes of living and working in nature are always wrapped in words and explanations. We negotiate not only over how to use nature but also over definitions of natural and unnatural, the underlying meaning of nature in our lives, and the relative human position in the hierarchy of nature – again the physical and metaphysical. This is never truer than in the relationship between Natives and non-Natives, where land is the chief subject in that contested emergence both in the past and the present.¹²

But seeing the history of a land as a negotiation over meaning has the potential to get very abstract and rarefied, and it's important to remember that, by definition, environments are also specific places that must be capable of sustaining physical bodies as well as the more abstract cultural soul. There are dynamic tensions here – between individual needs and cultural expectations and between physical nature and storied environments – and these create the kinds of forces that also drive historical change. These are the forces that shaped James Bay, and, in thinking about culture spatially and narratively, I want to see not only how the Cree moved back and forth between their land and the islands of European culture at the trading posts but also how European cultural artifacts, both material and intellectual, were integrated into the act (and meaning) of hunting. Equally important, I want to see those traders, missionaries, scientists, and government officials who moved out into the bush and who depended on their own ability to integrate themselves to some degree within the Cree narrative in order to survive in James Bay. Thinking about language spatially in relation to individual human action allows us not only to take up the idea that the meaning of words buttresses our use of particular places but also to stay grounded in the fact that use is the foundation of meaning. Language is certainly heuristic: its form predetermines what we see and how we interpret it. But these observations and interpretations are then put into practice in the physical world, reshaping it and our modes of observation and interpretation. In many ways, the Cree were prepared to meet the challenges of the last thirty-five years through their prolonged history of environmental and cultural negotiation with Europeans within their own physical and heuristic geography: a place where hunting – in its largest sense – fed bodies and soul.¹³

This interpretation comes first and foremost from the heart of the continent and the history that we have written about it. It comes from a place apart, from Native America – a place that Euro-Americans hardly know

because we do not know the languages and the narratives that would enable us to locate ourselves there. Historian Calvin Martin argues provocatively that Europeans and their generations have never in fact reached this Native America, landing instead on a dark and bloody continent that was the product of their own fecund imaginations rather than on the island riding on the back of a great turtle (where Natives had lived for millennia). Trapped within our own cultural expectations and discourse – what he refers to as the ontology of fear – we have never grasped the Native reality that spanned the continent. This is a foundational idea for me, and Martin, as always, rightly reminds us to remember Native consciousness and language as integral to our history. However, I wonder if, in one respect, his analysis is not anachronistic.¹⁴

Forgetting Native reality seems a present danger – a point of valid self-criticism – far more than it was a danger for those who actually stepped out onto this continent five hundred years ago. It is important to remember that, in one way, narrative is an act of remembering; it can also be an act of forgetting. No matter what they said or wrote afterwards, no matter their forgetfulness, those first Europeans entered into both the material and narrative realities of Native America. They contacted a powerful conceptual reality, an intellectual tradition that challenged what they understood about the world. It was only when they re-entered European space – if they chose to do so – that they began the process of communication and interpretation to which we have access in the written record. The history we tell is in some respects the continuation of a narrative process that goes back almost as far as contact, and this poses a clear danger for those Natives about whom we are writing. Will our history be an act of remembering or an act of forgetting?¹⁵

Culturally and historically we have certainly and wilfully forgotten Native reality – in many respects we have actively worked to erase it – but those early travellers entered that reality and had to learn to navigate and to partake in the environment that they found here in North America. They had to do this in order to survive. This is one of the larger lessons of James Bay history: Native narrative reality meant material survival in the form of food from the land. Martin is quite right in casting this Native American narrative reality in concrete and geographical terms, but room should be made to differentiate between both the experiences of individuals who entered the cultural space of Native people, and how those experiences were later interpreted within a European narrative space. Narrative spaces, as well as material spaces, are part of the equation, and the historical challenge of Native America is, to a large degree, its continuing existence as a

narrative place apart. Contact was not so much a moment in time as an ongoing process through which two culturally different peoples began to live with and speak to and about one another.¹⁶

All of this discussion of cultural and environmental negotiation, connecting cultural space to physical nature, comes together because, as I have said, the negotiation was and still is largely about the land, that web of relationships the Cree define in opposition to our understanding of real estate. The land was what the Cree went to court to protect when Quebec began to develop the region in 1971, and they continue to try to protect it in their current negotiations with Canadians. This is what all Native peoples are struggling to maintain: the use and understanding of their lands. The negotiation of these narrative spaces continues as the Cree try to work within the legal, political framework of the West. This framework is inherently tied up with historical and cultural writing; thus it is clear that to write responsibly is to write about the past with the realization that one's words have power in the present. Most ominously, because it challenges some of the ways that we have defined Native cultures, what I want to say about Cree hunting and its relationship to the land has the potential to miscarry. So here I want to be particularly careful.

The historical facts are that Cree hunting in the twentieth century was not the same as Cree hunting in the nineteenth century and that Cree hunting in the nineteenth century was not the same as Cree hunting in the past. Hunting in the twenty-first century will no doubt be different still. But are historical change and cultural continuity mutually exclusive? This is the dangerous political question raised by the way in which many Native histories are told. Often there is a tacit assumption that the older practice is always somehow "more Native" and that if Native people have moved away from that older practice then they have somehow forfeited their ability to define their environments and their rights on the land. Many anthropologists see this as an old and outmoded concept, but it continues to have popular and political currency. And it gets reinforced when histories do not connect the Native past with the Native present, thus leaving the impression that "real Indians" dwelt in the former. Sadly, this is an idea that has taken root within Native culture too. I'm reminded of the words novelist Leslie Silko puts in the mouth of the old shaman Betonie:

They always think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they have always been done, maybe because one slip-up or mistake and the whole ceremony must be stopped and the sand painting destroyed. That much is

true. They think that if a singer tampers with any part of the ritual, great harm can be done, great power unleashed. That much can be true also. But long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing.¹⁷

Describing a continuity in cultural daylight on the changing landscape of history, as Momaday rightly asks us to do, will help to dispel the idea of changelessness that I carried with me when I first went north. So will a focus on the land and on telling the story into the present, taking care to connect both to recent events.

My own initial disappointment with Mistissini eventually led to my questioning the roots of the popular belief in the static nature of traditional cultures. I was naïve when I first went north, but I was not completely ignorant of culture as a concept. I think, though, that I saw cultures as discrete, as naturally separate from one another, and I believed that Native cultures had only been contaminated by Western culture. This in some ways hearkens back to American anthropology's original mission to "preserve" traditional cultures (which, after contact, were seen as fading away), and it was fed by my assumption that all the modern things I saw in the village had either been forced upon the Cree or were indicative of some cultural lapse on their part. I think my misunderstanding of culture can also be explained by my inability to process the myriad ways that culture has been explained to the public in the years since anthropology moved away from the preservationist model. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz somewhat wryly points out, with regard to defining "culture," anthropology "seems to have asserted almost everything at one time or another." Structuralism, functionalism, Freudian analysis, semiotics – all of these and more have been used as foundational criteria for understanding human culture. Not surprisingly, this has left a somewhat confused picture.¹⁸

In looking at James Bay, this confusion coloured my thinking for quite a while. Just as on my first visit to the North, the historical record continually presented me with a picture of cultural complexity that challenged static notions of culture. The mythic Indian and the forest primeval are not to be found there either. It wasn't until I came upon Edward Sapir's criticism – made in the early twentieth century – that, in general, anthropological approaches only think "of the individual as a more or less passive carrier

of tradition or, to speak more dynamically, as the infinitely variable actualizer of ideas and of modes of behavior which are implicit in the structures and tradition of a given society," that I found some room for what I was seeing in the record. Sapir's criticism indicates that definitions of culture leave no room for individuality and no mechanism for changing Native traditions other than through the forced imposition of outside ideas. The Geertzian conviction "that men unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist," seems true enough; but it is individual people who make and modify cultures, and this is a historical process. What I have come to see is that, with regard to our understanding of Native history, the concept of culture has come at a price.¹⁹

The concept of culture has helped us to reinterpret Euro-American records in the light of anthropological evidence and methodology, thus enabling us to gain new understandings of the Native past and activities such as hunting. Anthropological studies of Native peoples have discovered threads of culture that run back to a time before white contact, and this has allowed a rethinking of the often pejorative descriptions of Natives and has given new meaning to their historical actions.²⁰ This has allowed us to find meaning in Native words and actions that those who recorded them saw only as savage and meaningless. But our reliance upon anthropology's tools has limited our thinking insofar as anthropology is not centrally concerned with explaining change over time. It is not that anthropology is ahistorical (this is a common complaint about the discipline and it is one that I do not share); rather, it is that its concentration on group behaviour has led to a totalizing understanding of culture that resists explanations of historical change that, so often, come down to individual choice and action.²¹

I am not suggesting that we impose our modern legal and political understanding of the individual as a near-sovereign entity onto past cultures, but, in order to understand changes in traditional Native hunting in James Bay, it is important to see individuals. I want to rethink the relationship between the individual and culture, and here, I think, is where Geertz's focus on "particular places" becomes important to understanding culture (just as, earlier, place was important in understanding narrative). Place implies a local geography, a local environment, and it implies individual people fitting into place in some specific and divergent ways. Individuals are cultural in all the ways that anthropologists have described, true enough, but they are also *Homo sapiens*, units of human biology in a physical world

in which they have to make their living. Individual hunters, then, are embedded both in hunting culture and in physical nature, and, because they cannot separate cultural self from physical self, they live within a single spatial phenomenon that influences, but does not wholly determine, their actions within it. Historical change is explained because, while various aspects of culture (even traditional culture) and environment may reinforce one another, at times there is a tension between them that pulls the individual in different directions. Thus, Native cultures were changing long before the coming of Europeans, but these changes were exacerbated in situations where individuals entered into another cultural environment, as happened with contact in places like James Bay. The proximity of heuristic geographies offers new avenues for individuals by presenting them with alternatives to their own cultural space, and these individuals, depending on their abilities and desires, can move between environments, testing and changing one space with objects and concepts from the other. This may result in direct changes within the cultural environment, and whereas goods and ideas must be internally communicated (in all the ways mentioned above), they may also be internally redefined in the language of the environment within which they are occurring. In other words, people may understand change without having recourse to outside imposition. Significantly, if it happens slowly enough, change may not be seen at all. All of this requires relative parity in cultural strength, of course; however, as I have noted, this was the case in James Bay for a much longer time than it was in many places.²²

So rather than defining individuals as separately infused with cultural consciousness – computers programmed with certain software – and also inhabiting physical nature, it is better to see them as moving within cultural environments that are materially and narratively tied together by the presence of those individuals who are constantly negotiating among themselves. We see clearly that culture makes it possible for humans to survive individually in nature, but we should also see that the individual human makes it possible for culture to exist in nature. Individuals survive because culture gives them the tools and concepts they need, but culture recreates itself within individuals through their ability and willingness to communicate with others both inside and outside the group (i.e., to continue the narrative) and their ability to feed, clothe, and reproduce themselves. Individual humans, then, are the nexus of culture and nature and are the engines of historical change within both. Here the meaning of culture connects with the meaning of narrative, and both relate back to the lands of James Bay.²³

Culture may have determined what was proper for the Cree hunter to eat, but it did not determine his need to eat. Nor could it predict or determine what would happen when culturally acceptable food was absent or was simply the more desirable option to an individual Cree. Individuals made different choices on these kinds of issues and then narrated those choices to others in an attempt to fit those actions within the framework of common understanding. While Cree hunting remained important for survival, it also remained the context of a larger cultural negotiation. Fur traders particularly became part of this context because the fur trade in James Bay was bounded by the realities of hunting food. Two very different systems of consciousness, both of which were internally coherent, met one another in the similar physical hunger of individuals. These individuals helped feed one another, all the while narrating and negotiating the meaning of words and signs. And this continues in a different way today as the Cree deal with their recent integration into the Canadian national consciousness.²⁴

If we begin by trying to see the spider's web of words and meaning that clings so delicately to the forests of the North – so often invisible except in the diffuse light of dawn – then we get a sense of the scope and the longevity of this hunter's landscape. In 1914, as a concrete example, white travellers on the Rupert River came upon red marks painted on a large rock by the river; they were glyphs, signs of an older Cree world, and were clearly something outside of Western understanding. The simple explanation given on the spot, that they were "the Devil's Marks," is important, but so is the fact that the paint was fresh and clear, part of an ongoing cultural discourse, literally written on the land – a thread of precontact narrative that some individual Cree were still using to negotiate their place in the world in the early twentieth century. These marks expressed a cultural knowledge about hunting on the land that continued to mediate cultural and political power in the region between whites and Cree as well as among the Cree themselves. This is part of the history of the James Bay environment, and its power must shape how we view the European alternatives that were carried to James Bay, beginning in the seventeenth century.²⁵

All of this is to say that words form – or should form – part of the connecting tissue that binds individuals to the land that sustains them. This is part of the power and the efficacy of the words of which Momaday speaks; it is the meaning of change for Silko's *Betonie*.²⁶ The play between narratives and their material partners makes it possible to believe in the creative power of words because the Cree engaged them so fully, bending

them to their needs and adapting them. The Cree show us something very important with regard to how we think about contact with Europeans. This does not deny the potentially disruptive, even destructive power of narratives' claims to objective truth – particularly the narratives of religion, economics, and politics. The Foucauldian connection between official language, knowledge, and the imposition of political power will be important to James Bay in the end, but only after centuries of cultural interaction within Cree narratives, the most dominant of which is the narrative of the hunt. The hunter's narrative is still being used and adapted.²⁷

At this moment the Cree and James Bay have undergone thirty-five years of dramatic cultural and environmental change. Many of these changes have not been for the better, but nothing in the history of the region indicates that this trend need be permanent. Nothing in the history of the region indicates that change, as such, need be a problem for the Cree – only specific changes. Defining the historical context of change and continuity seems particularly pressing in light of these recent events in James Bay. The Cree past needs to be connected clearly with the Cree present in a way that takes the Cree environment into consideration. This is because, when the Cree today appear in court, or at a press conference, or in front of government officials, they are continuing a long negotiation with white culture, and they are trying to explain the meaning of a long cultural narrative about the lands of James Bay. They are trying to explain their environment to us and, in doing so, are attempting to maintain some control over it.

Again, within the larger understanding of Native America, change has often been forced, but it has occurred spatially, and Native cultural environments still exist everywhere. For the Cree, forced change has occurred not only in the form of flooded lands but also in the form of conceptual changes that were brought to the unflooded lands. Through treaties, the Cree have gained a great deal of political control over their villages, but they have lost a great deal of their historical ability to define the lands of the region within their own narrative. The problems in James Bay today come not only from material alterations to the land but also from alterations to the cultural narrative of hunting that, in the past, was meaningful for everyone. This is a process that connects them with the larger story of contact, just as the details of Cree history add texture and colour to the story of that larger event.

Significantly, it was only when political and economic need, along with technical ability, made it possible for Quebec to apply a purely outside narrative directly to the lands of James Bay that change became so disruptive.

This is the last lesson of James Bay: European economic activity could go on for centuries within a largely Native narrative space; the missionary narrative could be controlled and made useful within the material reality of the hunt; an outside narrative of ownership, control, and sovereignty could exist apart from James Bay even as the hunt and its narrative continued because the lands of James Bay were deemed not useful. Only when these narrative lines converged was the effect revolutionary. The significant aspect of this story is the increasing scope and power of an outside narrative understanding of the region and its environment. This is an understanding that was created within a non-Cree epistemology of nature and culture, and it is one that came to challenge the Cree in 1970 and that continues to threaten what philosopher Pierre Bourdieu calls a “dispossession of the instruments of symbolic production” in James Bay.²⁸

Over the last thirty-five years, numerous studies have been carried out in James Bay. Environmental impact studies have looked at changes in ecology caused by flooding tens of thousands of square kilometres of land and rerouting major rivers. Sociological studies have looked at how the Cree have been affected by increasing numbers of outsiders (brought in by the new roads), by changes in diet, and by drugs and alcohol. Few would question the connection between environmental change and cultural change, but little has been done to show how they have worked together, how they are really part of the same process of change, and how they are part of a much longer process of change both locally and globally. At the same time, many have romanticized the Cree hunter and the bush, choosing to ignore change in an attempt to hold on to an image that fits well within our own notions of environmentalism and wilderness preservation (an image that omits our own part in this story of change). All of these perspectives fit into a larger picture that involves not only the environmental and cultural issues of the present but also all those of the past. So while I’ve spent a great deal of time in recent years reading historical records (Hudson’s Bay Company documents, Anglican missionary documents, and any others I could find that related to the Cree and the lands of James Bay), and while I believe there’s an important story in the region’s past, the importance of the present and of staying focused on the land – that great complexity that, in the North, still bounds people’s lives – cannot be separated from historical inquiry. This was brought home to me on a recent winter trip made in reaction to the announcement of the Rupert River Project.

I went North because I wanted to see what was going on and to hear how people were talking about it. I arrived in a steady snowfall in the village of Chisasibi, just as school was letting out and people were driving off

to pick up their kids. All the four-way stops were backed up six or seven cars deep (another of those ironies – rush hour at, quite literally, the end of the road). Chisasibi is the biggest of the nine Cree communities and a creation of the La Grande projects. In 1980, the old fur trade community on Fort George Island was in the path of the newly increased flow of the La Grande River, and fear of erosion led the government to relocate the people to this new place along the south shore of the river. It was one of those forced relocations all too familiar in the Canadian North, and I know from talking to people that, among the older generation, a great deal of sadness and bad feelings continue to be associated with this move. For the Cree who lived through it, there is a sense of dislocation that will likely never go away; and for the younger generation there is a break with the past – a dislocation in their history as well as their geography. The past is now another place, and while they can visit the island and tell stories about their lives there, it will never again be a truly living place.

I went to the band offices to introduce myself and to ask some questions about the dams and how the land is doing now. I had already received a full dose of the Hydro-Québec version of things that morning while touring the hydroelectric facility, and I wanted to hear the other side of the story. I was a stranger there, and the people I knew in town were away, so those I met were understandably wary about who I was and why I was asking questions. I knew it was unfair of me to drop in unannounced, but for a few minutes there were a half-dozen of us standing in the hallway and a couple of people began to express their unhappiness with the Rupert River project, saying that they wanted it stopped. When I told them that I'd like to stop it too but that the Grand Council had told those of us from the South to stay out of it this time, one young man reminded me that there was still free speech in the world – “for a little while longer anyway.” He made a point of telling me that he still used the word “if” when speaking about the Rupert diversion: the thing does not have any physical reality yet, and he will not grant it any narrative reality either. But I saw that many people were very tense; starting yet another fight did not appear to be universally popular.

In the following pages I want to think about the past and present of James Bay in relation to the hydro dams that have already been built but, more important, in relation to the dams that were started in the summer of 2007. It had been seven years since my last trip, and though I'd been warned, I was still astounded by the changes that are happening within the Cree communities and out in the bush due to our use of their land. First, I drove everywhere I wanted to go, something I could not have

done even five years ago. And of course, as I travelled, I saw all the other changes that made the roads necessary. Logging is going on all over, and, for the last fifteen years, clear-cutting has been a much bigger problem than flooding. The Cree communities are changing so fast that it's hard to know where to begin to tell the story of how all these changes came about. But in order to understand them one has to go right back to the land itself, back to the human interaction with the land that has been going on for so long. Only by taking the long view do the changes occurring in the present seem understandable as something more than blind, unstoppable decline for both land and people. Only by connecting the history of the land with what is happening to the land today can we find a meaning that will help lead to the future.