

## Ethnoscaping Borealia: Nature, Environment and Whiteness in Canada

“Canadians divide into two groups: those who use and love canoes, and the rest.” According to this statement reverence for the canoe gives rise to a definition of Canadian-ness made to exist apart from an indeterminate “rest.” The statement refuses any reference to race, class, gender or ethnic difference. Yet, ironically, it draws attention to precisely this refusal, and it provokes us to ask *what* Canadians use and love canoes, and *who* precisely is the “rest”?

To get at some of these questions, I consider how a discourse of ‘liberal racism’ worked in the context of a publicity campaign designed to generate awareness about the ecological importance of the boreal forest of northern Canada, a campaign that deployed the wilderness canoe trip as its principal organizing metaphor. (1) Gordon and Newfield define liberal racism as an ideology that explicitly “rejects discrimination on the basis of race or colour...but which upholds and defends systems that produce racializing effects” (Gordon & Newfield 1994). In this essay, I show how the campaign drew upon this form of racism to construct the boreal forest as not simply an environmental space, but as a ‘white’ ethnoscape and to show how an unstated discourse of ‘whiteness’ was central to the campaign.

I build my argument around an analysis of two texts – a film and a book - produced in conjunction with the environmental campaign dubbed the *Boreal Rendezvous: True North Wild and Free* (2). The campaign was carried out in two phases and had the intended purpose of elevating the profile of the boreal forest in the minds of the Canadian public. The first phase of the campaign, staged over the summer of 2003, consisted of ten multi-day canoe expeditions along ten different rivers in the Canadian north (3). Many of the canoe trip participants were Canadian celebrities. The television documentary film was also produced during this phase of the campaign. The second phase of the *Boreal Rendezvous* involved the publication of a coffee table book, which celebrates the Canadian boreal forest through a compilation of written text and images based on the experiences of *Boreal Rendezvous* participants.

A few preliminary remarks about the *Boreal Rendezvous* campaign. First, throughout the campaign the boreal forest was staged as an unmistakably national space, perhaps not surprising given that the boreal forest spans virtually the entire width of Canada. Second, the campaign was celebratory and optimistic in tone, unlike more conventional forest conservation campaigns, which tend to carry dire messages. And third, and undoubtedly most important, the organizers explicitly sought to *include* First Nations peoples in the framing of the *Boreal Rendezvous* message. Importantly, this inclusion represents a significant departure from previous environmental rhetorics in Canada from which First Nations peoples were either excluded or simply marginalized. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely the inclusion of First Nations peoples within the white boreal ethnoscape that allows us to interrogate the campaign’s liberal racist assumptions. What I mean here is that First Nations peoples were inserted into the campaign as a *cultural* presence. At first glance, this appears like a laudable move by the campaign organizers as it sought to reflect the reality that so many First Nations peoples maintain use value and exchange value connections with the land. It also offered First Nations peoples a space from which to speak where such a space may not always have been available. But, for reasons I will elaborate below, this repositioning, for all its amicable intent, was limited, specifically for the way it divorced First Nations’ cultures from politics and assumed away the dense political histories of white oppression that mark First Nations-white relations.

**Slide** Anthony Smith defines ethnoscapas as terrains that “cover a wider extent of land, present a tradition of continuity and are held to constitute an ethnic unity, because the terrain

invested with collective significance is felt to be integral to a particular historical culture community or *ethnie*, and the ethnic community is seen as an intrinsic part of that poetic landscape.” Ethnicity and territory are linked, in this sense, through common history and poetics. There is much about the *Boreal Rendezvous*’s use of the canoe to suggest that it constructed the forest in accordance with Smith’s definition. For instance, as John Ralston Saul writes in an entry to *Rendezvous with the Wild*, “what a [canoe] trip down one of these rushing rivers...reinforces...is that the roots of our existence in our cities, the environmental roots as well as the mythological, lie in the North, in the boreal forests and rivers, and in the Arctic beyond.” Paddling through the boreal forest, for Saul, is, thus, to rediscover and re-enact Canada’s white history and to gain access to what is perceived to be Canada’s founding moment in the wilderness. Here, the canoe is thought to render Canada’s past available to the present. It enables the nation to be imagined as a bounded natural form, one whose “environmental” and “mythological” roots are enmeshed in a history that long precedes Canada’s actual founding moment in 1867. What Saul’s short quote illustrates so clearly is that the canoe can be used to link white identity to the boreal forest through an imagined past, such that *white* identity in Canada is both terrain *and* history as opposed to an identity forged in relation to its non-white Other.

Let me turn now to the campaigns texts themselves to illustrate more specifically how the use of the canoe figures the boreal forest as a white ethnoscape.

The film *Canada’s Amazon* documents two of the *Boreal Rendezvous* canoe trips, one taken by Justin Trudeau on the South Nahanni River and one along the Athabasca River in northern Alberta, which included Ken Dryden and David Suzuki. Through Trudeau’s trip, we learn that mining operations threaten South Nahanni River watershed. And through the Athabasca trip we learn that tar sands development pose the greatest threat to the boreal forest in northern Alberta.

### ***Adventure and the sacred***

The South Nahanni River trip is troped as adventure and sacred. It opens with Trudeau and his partner setting their canoe into the fast moving river (4). A few scenes later a local outfitter narrates a picturesque scene of the river viewed from above. He says in a very masculine voice,

This is Figure Eight rapid. Raymond Patterson, in his book *The Dangerous River*, called this the meanest piece of water he’d ever seen. It’s a very challenging piece of water, large standing waves, and massive boils that create great instability for your canoe.

This image gives way to one of Trudeau standing on the edge of a cliff several hundred feet above the river, tracing his line through the rapid (5). It is followed by an image of Trudeau’s travel companions rafting through Figure Eight rapid (6). Next, Trudeau and his paddling partner are shown paddling the rapid in their canoe (7). The rapid is safely navigated and the danger passes. Trudeau and his partner manoeuvre their canoe into an eddy where Trudeau lets out a vigorous “Whaohoo!”

Several sequences later, Susza’ Tsetso, a woman from Deh Cho First Nation, another of the trip’s participants, reflects on what the canyon means to her. “It means history to me. It

means power. It means a lot of strength and power and energy being in this scared place.” As Tsetso speaks, her image gives way to one of a rushing rapid followed by another of her crouched by the campfire, praying. She is surrounded by her paddling companions (8). All appear to be men. She is then shown responding to an interview question:

And what this journey means to me is that, it means that there is hope for the wildlife that lives in this area. There’s hope for people to come here in the future and enjoy this beautiful scared place, enjoy the mountains, the water, the land. It’s, this is heaven.

The scene immediately cuts to an image of Trudeau, contemplative, sitting at the river’s edge, writing in his journal (9).

There is no straightforward way of reading this sequence of images. I want to suggest, however, that, among things, it reproduces a racial hierarchy. First, this hierarchy is maintained by the normalcy that attaches to Trudeau’s experience of the river. This is not to say that paddling the South Nahanni River is a run of the mill activity. It is, however, to say we don’t really question Trudeau’s presence on the river. He belongs there. Or, at the very least, we have little reason to question his belonging. Canoeing is, after all, an iconographic national activity, not something available to all equally, but something readily identifiable as Canadian. It is also an activity easily recognized as white. Thus, for Trudeau’s presence on the river to pass unquestioned testifies to the durability *and legitimacy* of such white historical tropes.

Trudeau’s presence on the river also testifies to the incredible distance white Europeans have always had to travel to arrive at the South Nahanni. For instance, Raymond Patterson, author of *The Dangerous River*, referred to in the quote above, was an Englishman, with a homestead in Alberta. For him, the South Nahanni was a profoundly inaccessible place, which could be overcome only by the most impervious gold seekers, like himself. First Nations peoples, on the other hand, had no reason to overcome the region’s inaccessibility since they already lived there. Through the continuous invocation of figures like Patterson in narratives of northern exploration, accessing the inaccessible has become a hallmark of white experience on the South Nahanni, and the north more generally. The point I want to emphasize, here, is the normalcy of the spatial mobility implicit in such activities. Trudeau can move; he travelled considerable distance from his home in Montreal to retrace his father’s famous canoe route along the same river and bear witness to nature’s power. He is, in this sense, a mobile subject, whose agency is, at least in part, a measure of his capacity to move across vast distances and to speak not simply for the South Nahanni River but to abstract from his South Nahanni experience and speak for the *entire* boreal forest.

Trudeau’s spatial mobility and *environmental* agency stand in glaring contrast to Tsetso’s position in the film, which is the embodiment of place. When Tsetso is made to speak in the film, she speaks about sacred place and gives ceremonial prayer. She does not speak for the entire boreal forest, as Trudeau does, but speaks instead for the immediate Nahanni watershed, which falls within Deh Cho First Nations’ traditional territory. In this way, her agency *appears* limited to or fixed in place and constrained within the limits of Deh Cho epistemology.

The important point here is that even while First Nations peoples appear in this white ethnoscape as stakeholders with agency, this agency often figures secondarily within a social order that privileges space over place, mobility over immobility and environmental/political agency over spiritual/ceremonial agency, the former terms signifying a whitened capacity to

transcend *over* and move *through* nature’s vast expanse, the latter a situated agency imprisoned *in* nature. The campaign’s dominant message, of course, was that the *boreal forest* must be safeguarded from industrial land uses. In so doing, it framed space and place as complementary geographies arranged, albeit, in hierarchical relation. Here, situated, local aboriginal agency acquired its legitimacy by complementing the transcendent objectives of white agency, while the campaign simultaneously attained (at least part of) *its* legitimacy by recognizing First Nations peoples as occupiers of discrete places throughout the boreal forest.

### ***Racial Historicism***

My second example is taken from the Athabasca trip depicted in *Canada’s Amazon*. In a short interview segment, Melody Lepine, the Director of Industrial Relations for Mikisew Cree First Nation, speaks about her experience on the Athabasca River canoe trip.

It’s kind of like a homecoming for me. You know, we’re flowing back to where I come from. And I just feel the presence of where my people come and in a sense it’s a rejuvenation for me. Travelling by canoe is just an amazing experience because I’ve always travelled by motorboat. It’s completely different. But now I get to experience it by canoe because it brings me back closer to my ancestors. (slide)

Here Lepine welcomes the opportunity to travel the Athabasca River by canoe since paddling the river allows her to connect with her ancestors. Importantly, Lepine’s comment implies that most Mikisew Cree travel the river by motorboat, suggesting that motorboat travel is a defining experience for people who identify as Mikisew Cree. Here again history, whiteness and the canoe come together, this time through an *inverted* form of what David Theo Goldberg has called racial historicism.

To greatly simplify, Goldberg’s notion of racial historicism is based on the imperial humanitarian assumption that white people were the sole agents of history, could improve non-white colonial subjects through assimilation and conversion and, thus, eradicate non-white difference. Accordingly, racial inferiority is governed in historicist ideology not by genetic predisposition, but by the presumption of developmental immaturity. However, in the ideology of *inverted* racial historicism the direction of improvement is reversed. Instead of the colonizer seeking to improve the colonized by moving the colonized from primitivism to civility, as in Goldberg’s formulation, in the ideology of inverted racial historicism the colonizer seeks to improve the colonized by facilitating his/her positive reoccupation of traditionalism.

Lepine’s statement is important because it reifies the ideology of inverted racial historicism by suggesting that First Nations peoples, like herself, can rediscover their aboriginal heritage through the practice of wilderness canoeing. In saying this I do not want to disparage Lepine. However, we should ask why *this* comment appears in the film, and how it shapes the film’s meaning? I argue that her comment is important for the way it implicitly frames whiteness as a conduit by which aboriginal peoples can reverse their contemporary alienation by helping them regain access to their past. In this sense, wilderness canoeing is framed as a benevolent activity with a moral purpose. Understood this way, I argue that Lepine’s comment greatly bolsters the overall campaign message by suggesting that the campaign espouses not simply a wilderness preservation ethic but that it embraces the preservation of aboriginal ‘culture’ too. Indeed, by helping aboriginal peoples reverse their modern alienation (motorboat travel is

codified as evidence of this alienation), it suggests that aboriginal cultural improvement and environmental protection are mutually legitimating practices.

### ***Dehistoricizing Self-determination and Economic Renewal***

My third example comes from the book *Rendezvous with the Wild* (10). A considerable portion of the book is given to the issue of aboriginal resource control, notably Pikangikum First Nation’s Whitefeather Forest Initiative in northwestern Ontario. In a campaign that otherwise conflated aboriginal agency with culture, this plot is exceptional for it presents aboriginal agency in terms of economic development, foregrounding the efforts of Pikangikum to repossess a 1.3 million ha portion of its traditional territory through a state-sanctioned forestry land use plan based on Pikangikum’s epistemology. PIK (11). Here, we learn that in August 2003 a consortium of environmental groups entered into a landmark agreement with Pik in which both parties agreed to a host of principles, which, if implemented, would ensure that the Whitefeather Forest would be managed by Pik to the highest environmental standard. Importantly, the agreement was signed at Pikangikum, in a ceremony that served as the finale of the Berens River canoe trip, one of the *Boreal Rendezvous* trips.

The agreement is a significant achievement since it represents a rapprochement between aboriginal peoples and conservation organizations, two constituencies frequently at odds over land-use decision-making and practices. For some, the agreement represented a new standard for conservation practice in the boreal forest. Perhaps most important, this storyline included entries from of Pik elders written in Ojibway with English translation. 12As with the film, there is no straightforward way of reading this particular storyline. Placing these subaltern voices into a text about boreal forest conservation contains both hegemonic *and* counter-hegemonic possibilities.

However, despite its ambivalence, the portrayal of this agreement in *Rendezvous with the Wild* is shot through with racialized power relations. To illustrate this I focus on how Pik’s struggle for economic self-determination is framed in the text as a cooperative innovation with the PPL. Before I do, though, it is important to realize that Pik’s struggle for self-determination has a history that dating at least to the signing of Treaty’s 5 and 3. Pik’s territorial dispossession accelerated with the loss of commercial traplines to white settlers following World War Two such that by the time industrial forestry reached the southern limit of Pikangikum’s traditional territory in 1970s, the Pik elders recognized the need to assert more control over their lands. In 1996, Pik initiated bilateral negotiations with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources over the acquisition of a tribal forestry licence. This negotiation culminated in 2006 with the approval of the “Keeping the Land” Land Use Strategy, which is the basis of an economic development program called the Whitefeather Forest Initiative (WFI).

*Rendezvous with the Wild*, however, elides this important history and glosses over Pik’s political motivations for establishing the WFI and for entering into a cooperative land-use agreement with the PPL. This is a crucial elision. Instead of representing the WFI as a contingent strategy in Pik’s ongoing struggle for self-determination, *Rendezvous With the Wild*, instead, frames the WFI as a cooperative arrangement *between* Pik and PPL, one that is made to represent a new standard of cooperation between boreal forest conservation groups and First Nations peoples. The difference between these framings is subtle, but extremely important. The first frames Pik as independent political agents with a political history that stands apart from and at times opposed to conservation ideology. The second frames Pik and, by extension, other First Nations peoples, as an important, indeed indispensable, facet of conservation ideology, a politics that complements the higher moral objectives of conservation ideology. The former is a politics

of territorial control and self-determination. The second is a politics of contemporary cooperation, which conveniently excludes any historical referents to white hegemony or racial oppression.

One very important effect of this framing, I believe, is that it normalizes aboriginal-conservationist political relations around the signing of such agreements, a move that implicitly constructs those First Nations groups willing to enter such agreements as virtuous while, conversely, drawing into question the political intentions of those who are not. This point is crucial for understanding how liberal racism governs much boreal forest conservation discourse. Liberal racism here operates by rejecting the marginalization of First Nations peoples in conservation narratives, yet, paradoxically, places normative constraints around the political possibilities available to First Nations peoples regardless of the unique political circumstances faced by each First Nations group. It prefigures a place for First Nations peoples within the conservation narrative and holds them to this imagined ideal through partnership agreements with conservation groups. In this mode of liberal racism, whiteness can be construed as not merely law, as in colonial law, but also a representational system that constitutes how First Nations peoples are made to appear in broader political debates about the future of the boreal forest, while at the same time refusing its own positionality.

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Why does any of this matter? What is to be gained by rendering liberal racism and whiteness transparent in the context of boreal forest conservation in Canada? I want to argue that doing so draws attention to a very deep paradox running through so many (but not all) environmental narratives. The paradox is this: Environmental narratives produce a form of subjective innocence rooted in a presupposed authenticity, whose point of origin lies outside the ravages of history, and which can be easily deployed in opposition to the alienating effects of transnational capitalism. The durability of this innocence, however, lies exactly in its capacity to forget its own complicity in naturalizing hierarchies of racial difference.



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