"Death by Landscape"

Race, Nature, and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology

BY EVA MACKEY

Cet article montre comment la représentation des ethnies, des genres et de la nature s'entrecroisent dans les idéaux nationalistes canadiens présents dans "Canada First Movement," Le Groupe des sept, Margaret Atwood, et Northrop Frye. Ces images forment un ensemble de ressources symboliques qui sont utilisées librement pour différencier et définir les frontières de la nation rêvée tout en excluant et s'appropriant à la fois, le point de vue des populations marginalisées.

This paper examines the cultural politics of race, gender, and nature in the nationalist ideas of the Canada First Movement, the Group of Seven, Margaret Atwood, and Northrop Frye. It argues that symbols of nationhood are used flexibly to differentiate and define the boundaries of the imagined nation, often switching between defining "others" and nature as noble and/or ignoble savages, and the nation as male or female, depending on the needs of nation-building. The way such images are used reflect and reinforce the broader contradictions and inequalities of Canada's settler past and its current officially "multicultural" nationhood. This is because they sometimes exclude and sometimes appropriate the cultural symbols and points of view of marginalized populations, without creating genuine respect and equality. Nationalist representations of nature also reflect a central conflict about whose "native land" the settler nation of Canada now occupies.

Nature, power, and national identity

Of course we all want identities, and having a national identity is often seen as natural, necessary, and inevitable. The search for Canadian identity is long-standing and passionate (Mackey 1999), and Canada has produced a "veritable canon of strategical exploration and description of its ongoing identity crisis" (Berland 514). It is important to remember, however, that nations are rather recent phenomena, a result of specifically modern economic, political and cultural processes (Greenfeld). Nations, as Anderson points out, are "imagined communities" they do not emerge spontaneously from some primordial source, but are shared fictions created and maintained through media, education, cultural products, and government programs.

In nationalist mythology the nation is often represented as if embodied in the landscape itself (Mackey 1998). Not surprisingly, such natural/nationalist images of the nation also often reflect assumptions about gender and race. McClintock argues that "all nationalisms are gendered" (352) and Yuval-Davis shows how women have been important to nation-building in multiple ways: biologically, as reproducers of the nation; culturally, as producers and defenders of culture; and symbolically as symbolic border guards and as embodiments of the collective will.

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Identity is formed through definitions of similarity, continuity, and difference and different versions of identity work to include and exclude populations in specific ways. As numerous critics have stressed (see Said; Hall; McClintock). Colonialist and Orientalist images of "others" have historically been mobilized to justify race, class, and gender inequalities. They are also integral to constructions of complex forms of western identity. Such images work in a dualist manner. Whites and males and the upper classes were often seen as more developed and civilized, and therefore more distant from nature. Women, the colonized, the racialized, and the working classes were placed in the opposing position, and therefore seen as closer to nature, less developed, and therefore inferior. Such ideas about inferiority, development, and nature are also central to racial ideology as developed on a global scale (Banton). Power, therefore—especially in relation to representations of land, race and gender—is always part of identity formation, especially in the case of nationalism.

Building the nation—managing and imagining populations

As I argue elsewhere, the nation building project in Canada depended upon flexible and constantly transforming race and cultural politics with a twofold aim: *managing* the diverse populations of the country and also doing the symbolic work of *imagining* and creating national identity (Mackey 1999). Throughout Canada's history the economy was based on extracting resources, appropriating Native lands, and importing labour for the

purpose of nation-building. The politics of the nation has been based on the flexible management of diverse populations flexible management of diverse populations to build the nation. Finally, mythologies have been developed and changed in order to build national identity in changing circumstances. Up until WWII such mythologies were based on the exclusion of racial and cultural difference and the highlighting of a hegemonic British nationality. Since then, with the introduction of multicultural policy, a mythology has developed of the nation as officially pluralist and tolerant (Mackey 1999; Bannerji). Throughout these changes, images of Canada as a Northern wilderness remain constant in nationalist mythology, one of the few dependable symbols of national identity. Such symbols are deeply "gendered" and "raced" and help define inclusion, exclusion, and belonging in the nation.

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Icy white nationalism

One of the earliest assertions of Canadian national identity around the time of Confederation was articulated by the Canada First Movement, an organization grounded in the belief that Canada was a "Britain of the North," a "northern kingdom" whose unique and distinctive character derived from its northern location, its ferociously cold winters, and its heritage of "northern races" (Berger 1966: 4). This racialized "Canadianness" was used to assert similarity between Canada and Britain and other northern and "civilized" nations, to differentiate northern and southern peoples "races," and to distinguish Canada from the United States. It also drew on specific forms of racial and gender ideology that had developed on a global scale, including environmental relativism, a discourse that linked environment and character (Banton).

In his 1869 speech, "We Are the Northmen of the New World," Robert Grant Haliburton, an associate of the Canada First Movement, asserted that the distinct characteristic of Canada was that it was and should be "a Northern country inhabited by the descendants of the Northern races" (qtd. in Berger 1966: 6). Following the dualist framework, if the northern race was superior, the South was other: inferior, weaker, and—predictably — essentially *female.* While the adjective "northern" symbolized the *masculine* virtues of "energy, strength, self-reliance, health and purity," southern was equated with "decay and *effeminacy,* even libertinism and disease [my emphasis]" (Berger 1970: 129). The northern more masculine. races were, in this view, also naturally more oriented towards freedom and liberty, and the "southern races with tyranny" (Berger 1966: 15). It was declared, therefore, that Canada was destined to become a preeminent power because of its superior racial characteristics (Berger 1966: 7), characteristics that are also deeply gender coded.

What is most interesting is that the Canada First Movement constructed the United States—a nation now often considered the quintessential modern western nation—as the degenerate, decaying, female south. It was believed that, unlike the United States, Canada's northern climate would keep it "uncontaminated" by weaker southern races. Parkin suggested that the northern climate was "a fundamental political and social advantage," because a "persistent process of natural selection" based on climate would ensure that it would avoid the "Negro problem" that was a "troublesome nightmare" in the United States. Canada's climate would ensure that it would be a nation of the "sturdy races of the North" (qtd. in Berger 1966: 131, 8-9). The Canada First Movement did not consider The United States an Anglo-Saxon country. They thought the southern climate made the northern races of the U.S. deteriorate, but also that it attracted "multitudes of the weaker [darker, more uncivilized and effeminate] races from Southern Europe," and provided a home to "the large Negro element" (Berger 1966: 14). Canada was considered naturally superior because it had not diluted its northern blood.

A key issue here in the nationalism of the Canada First Movement is that images of race, gender, and nature form a set of intersecting symbolic resources used flexibly to differentiate and define the boundaries of the imagined nation. In the case of the Canada First Movement, they were used explicitly to attempt to maintain British hegemony and white racial homogeneity, the basis of Canada's supposed superiority.

Northern wilderness and settler national identity

In the nationalist wilderness paintings of the Group of Seven and the later writings of Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, notions of nature, gender, and race are also key. Lawren Harris, a member of the Group of Seven, wrote that a nation "identifies itself with its land." The Group, he said, were aware that "no virile people could remain subservient to, and dependent upon the creations in art of other peoples." To us, he wrote, "there was also the strange brooding sense of another nature fostering a new race and a new age (qtd. in Berger 1966: 21). Similar to the Canada First Movement, the Group saw climate and geography as necessary to express an essential and distinct Canadian identity. Canada as a *virile* nation—also a characteristic of northernness for the Canada First Movement—could not be "subservient" and "dependent" on the art of "other peoples." The term "virile" as an ideal term for a nation—in opposition to "subservient and dependent"—indicates the belief that a nation, to be a proper nation, must have

the male-gendered characteristic of virility, and not the stereotypical female characteristics of dependency and subservience.

In the earlier nationalism of the Canada First Movement, northernness was a way of linking Canada and Britain and other northern races, to create difference from the U.S. and other southern places and races. The northern discourse of the Group of Seven, at a later stage of national self-consciousness and differentiation, symbolically differentiates Canada from both the U.S. and Britain by mobilizing a symbolism of unpeopled and rugged wilderness. It is a northernness that is not American, and a harsh wildness that is not European.

Historically, in colonial discourse, Native people are often constructed as closer to nature. Indeed, the construction of Natives as more pure and natural and therefore less "civilized," was one important contribution to the creation of a "civilized" western identity. Nature was at first idealized and projected upon by early visitors to North America, as were Native people. Part of this idealization was the construction of stereotypes of Native people, and the splitting of those stereotypical images into the "noble" and the "ignoble" savage (Hall). If we think about the dualistic dynamic of the noble and ignoble savage—or about how women have been historically constructed as virgins or whores, or blacks and people of colour as problems or victims (Gilroy)—we see a similar construction of nature in Canadian nationalist discourse. In the work of the Group of Seven, Northrop Frye, and Margaret Atwood, the settler viewpoint of nature—not as noble but rather as "ignoble savage"—plays a key role in defining Canadian identity.

The paintings of the Group of Seven, for example, were distinct from the European tradition from which they emerged. In the colonial period, European interpretations of the natural world of North America were "projections of European ideas, values, and tastes" (Osborne 163). Early on, this tradition was characterised by an encyclopaedic fascination and a spirit of empiricism. By the mid-nineteenth century representations were being moulded into the categories of English landscape painting. In the classical pastoral tradition, picturesque landscapes accentuate framed and controlled nature, harmony between human beings and nature, and between people of all classes. The picturesque was associated with "prosperous, improved landscapes," landscapes which "invite the viewer to occupy it or travel through it" (Coates 21-23). The picturesque aesthetic offered relief from the impenetrable and savage forests, and by creating a vision of civilised and "improved" nature, it made the new terrain accessible to colonialists (Coates 323). It, invited them in, made them comfortable, and erased conflict. This was nature as noble, and manageable, savage.

Wilderness areas, on the other hand, as painted by the Group of Seven, were impenetrable, uncontrollable, and "ignoble." The landscape paintings of the Group of Seven do not sustain and construct colonial national identity by *inviting* colonizing humans to penetrate nature, as the picturesque tradition does. Instead, their paintings reject the European aesthetic in favour of a construction of a nationalist aesthetic based on the sense of an obliterating and uncontrollable wilderness. In "Death by Landscape" Margaret Atwood describes the work of the Group of Seven.

> And these paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there aren't any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense, with a gentle hill, a curving river, a cottage, a mountain in the background, a golden evening sky. Instead there's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock. No matter how far back in you go, there will be more. And the trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour. (1991: 121)

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In Atwood's description, nature and wilderness are certainly not inviting or comfortable to humans. This wilderness—the quintessential Canadian landscape—is overpowering; it is a place in which one can become lost, even die. It is also a place in which the presence of Aboriginal people has been erased, making the paintings an assertion of a nationalist form of *terra nullius*.

The rejection of a European aesthetic does not mean, however, that it was not a colonizing aesthetic. The obliteration of human presence—specifically the presence of Aboriginal people—and the foregrounding of nature as savage and dangerous reflects the view of European settlers, only in a different way than the Picturesque or the Sublime. They represent the sense of settlers alone in the bush—unable to control it—to even imagine it. Landscape painting has been described as the "dreamwork" of imperialism" (Mitchell 10). The paintings of the Group of Seven embody the dreamwork of settler nationalism in Canada. Their wilderness aesthetic articulates some of the contradictory themes in Western concepts of self and other in a language of emergent nationhood.

Surviving the bush

Atwood's *Survival* and Frye's *The Bush Garden* are

central to the canon of Canadian literature taught in schools and universities. In both works, as in the aesthetic of the Group of Seven, the settler viewpoint of nature—not as "noble" but as *"ignoble* savage"(Hall)—plays a key role in defining Canadianness.

Earlier picturesque landscapes as well as constructions of Canadian northernness by the Canada First Movement construct the landscape is noble; it is tamed, and mirrors the traits of the people who have colonized it. The "wilderness" aesthetic is the other side, the dark side of this stereotype of nature. This could apply to the paintings of the Group of Seven and to the more recent nationalist work of Atwood and Frye. In her book *Survival,* Atwood argues that in Canadian literature nature is perceived as a "monster," an evil betrayer. The distrust of nature emerged, she suggests, because of the disjuncture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, between expectations imported with the settlers from England about the gentle nature of nature, and the harsh realities of Canadian settlement. In the late eighteenth century the dominant mode in nature poetry, inspired by Edmund Burke, was that of the picturesque and the sublime and later, Wordsworthian Romanticism. Both constructed nature as essentially good, gentle, and kind (1972: 50).

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Literary images of nature began to change towards the middle of the century, under the influence of Darwinism. Nature remained female but became "redder in tooth and claw" (Atwood 1972: 50). For Atwood, these writings show a tension between "what you were officially supposed to feel and what you were actually encountering when you got here"—a sense of being betrayed somehow by the "divine Mother." For Atwood the theme of such a betrayal has been worked out through two central preoccupations: victims and survival. Canadian stories, according to Atwood, are likely to be tales of "hanging on" or "staying alive," of those who "made it back, from the awful experience—the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship—that killed everyone else" (1972: 35). The survivor in these stories is not a standard hero, but someone barely alive, aware of the power of nature, and the inevitability of losing the battle at some later stage. Other recurring themes are "Death by Nature" and even "Death by Bushing" (1972: 55-6). In such scenarios, victimization by nature as ignoble and monstrous female savage defines national identity.

Northrop Frye uses the image of being lost to contrast Canada and the United States. He argues in *The Bush Garden* that Canada really has "no Atlantic seaboard." Instead, the traveler from Europe "edges into it like a tiny Jonah entering an inconceivably large whale." The trip up the St. Lawrence is a matter of being surrounded by the land-mass. He writes that to "enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean; to enter Canada is a matter of being *silently swallowed by an alien continent* [emphasis mine]" (1971: 217).

Frye's description of "entering" and "being swallowed"—a tiny Jonah engulfed by a huge whale—constructs Canada as a devouring, dangerous and alien female, even a *vagina dentata* (toothed vagina). Part of this femaleness is that she is everywhere, unconquerable, and somehow not definite or definable. The U.S., on the other hand, is more "male," more definite and phallic. The Canadian landmass as alien and female generalizes a male settler's point of view. Frye's settlers are uncomfortable because *they* don't *penetrate* and control the natural/female foreign space; nature *engulfs* and swallows *them.*

In Frye's argument, the frontier—huge, alien, unconquerable and quintessentially Canadian—is different than the U.S. and again, imagined as essentially female.

> To feel "Canadian" was to feel part of a no-man's-land.... unknown... unrealized ... undigested ... Rupert Brooke speaks of the "unseizable virginity" of the Canadian landscape.... In the United States one could choose to move out to the frontier or retreat from it back to the seaboard. In the Canadas ... the frontier was all around one, a part and a condition of one's whole imaginative being.... (220)

The Group of Seven, Margaret Atwood, and Northrop Frye have mobilized this "unseizable virginity"—the engulfing and overpowering wilderness—in similar ways in their shared project of defining and constructing Canadian identity. All utilize a gendered version of wilderness to distinguish Canada from more powerful external others, such as the U.S. or Britain, in order to define Canadianness. But what is the politics of such symbolism?

Victimization and power

A constant theme in debates about Canadian identity is the notion that Canada is marginal to and victimized by various forms of colonialism, most recently American cultural imperialism. In this context, the reasoning goes, Canadian identity needs to be protected and produced. The idea that Canada is a marginal and defenseless victim depends on highly gendered images. Particularly in the feminization of nationhood, it borrows a key metaphor from one of Canada's internal "others": Quebec nationalists. Within Quebec, images of Canada and Quebec as a couple in the throes of divorce are very common. For Probyn, such images in which the victimized wife, Quebec, tells Canada to get lost, are metonyms for Quebec

telling Canada that the unhappy "marriage" of cultures in the nation is over (1996: 80-1). In these gendered and heterosexual images, Quebec's difference is embodied in the image of the wife, the woman. Marginality itself thereby becomes the basis of Quebecois identity, as it creates itself as "marginal to the majority... as female to the male" (1996: 72-3).

Similar images of marginality are used by Canadians outside of Quebec (the majority) to define Canada in relation to the United States. For example, in the debates about free trade in the late 1980s the nation, and the land in particular, was constructed as a natural, pure, fertile yet vulnerable woman, constantly defending herself from the more masculine and aggressive hulk of the United States—the southern neighbour who sought to rape her natural resources and colonize her culture. Such gendered metaphors are a "staple of Canadian culture" (Berland 522). The "feminized Canadian," Berland argues, has been instrumental in the circulation of "fictions, metaphors, and interventions which render Canadian culture as closer to nature, aesthetically highbrow, non-violent, uncorrupted, committed to public good but powerless before the masculine figures of external. authority" (523). Indeed, Atwood's main thesis in *Survival* is that Canada's essential identity is that of "the exploited victim" (1972: 35, 36). She suggests that Canada is a colony, and that a partial definition of a colony is 'a place from which a profit is made, but *not by the people who live there*" (1972: 36).

However, the notion of being lost in the wilderness—in an undefined and unknown territory—is extremely paradoxical when mobilized in a discourse of victimization to colonialism or imperialism. This is because the idea of being lost in the wilderness is itself a perspective of a colonizer—a settler—not the perspective of one who is colonized and victimized. The Canadian literature Atwood examines is, for the most part, written by and expresses a world-view of those who settled Canada. These are people who, although they may have felt lost and victimized by the environment or the Empire, were representatives of the colonial power that victimized Native people. Would being lost in the "unknown territory" of the wilderness be a central metaphor for Indigenous writers? When Frye uses the term "no-man's land" he must mean European settlers, for it is only to them that Canada could be an "alien continent." The versions of Canadian identity I discuss above, therefore, utilize a settler point of view (lost in the wilderness), which, not coincidentally, often erases the presence of Aboriginal people. Yet, paradoxically, white settler nationalists take up a subject position more appropriate to Native people, in order to construct Canadians as victims of colonialism and U.S. imperialism, and to create Canadian identity.

Discourses of marginalization and victimization, within this context, are often seen as nationalist resistance to the universalizing features of colonialism and imperialism. Yet even as they resist dominant forms of *external* colonialism, these discourses of nationalism may reproduce and reinforce particular gendered and radicalized assumptions in a surprisingly unreflective manner. Such erasure and appropriation of Native points of view, by members of the settler nation that benefits from the appropriation of their land, is a complex reflection of Canada's past as a settler colony built on the appropriation of native land, and it raises questions about how Canada's official identity is now dependent on such cultural politics of erasure, exclusion and appropriation. Of course we all want an identity, but whom are we using, abusing, and erasing in the process of creating one?

The ideas contained within this article are explored in detail in the author's recently published volume, The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity. *London and New York: Routledge, 1999.*

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KATHERINE LAWRENCE

My Fallen Priest —A Confession

"A debate over celibacy in the priesthood is gripping Britain following a scandal involving the resignation of a Scottish bishop ... (who) disappeared a week earlier. A women with whom (he) is said to have had a long-standing friendship disappeared at the same time."
—*Saskatoon StarPhoenix,* September 18, 1996

I love the way you braid your robed legs
around my body, whisper to me in darkness
about enemies on horseback, explosions in parish
farm yards, as fires burn at the back of your eyes.

I worry about how much longer we can run before
they hunt us down, find us together in a white bed
full of matted purple asters, sheets stained
with sweat & pollen, semen on my lips, my hair.

I am your ruination, the one who taught you
the difference between laws of the flesh & laws
of the church, the one who cups your penis in my
hands to show you the difference, the one who excites
you to forbidden heights as you pray *marry me, marry me,*
our faces buried in goose feathers to muffle laughter & fear
as soldiers ride across the roof above our heads in search
of everything we have learned about faith.

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