

## Adrift in Our National Consciousness: Meditations on Canadian Ecological Identity

By Greg Lowan

Canadian satirist Will Ferguson (2007) suggests that

Canada is a land pinned between the memories of habitant and voyageur. We have grown crops and built cities, bypassed rapids, unrolled asphalt and smothered our fears under comforters and quilts. We are habitants, and the spirit of the voyageur now lingers only in the home movies of our nation . . . Like a song from the far woods. (p. 94)

Might Ferguson, though somewhat glib, be correct? Has mainstream Canadian society happily adapted to modernity along with the rest of the Western world, while desperately grasping for increasingly distant images of Nature<sup>1</sup> as touchstones for an increasingly urban existence? Might we be much more disconnected from the natural world as a nation than we would like to admit?

I must confess to romantic visions of my own of adventurous voyageur ancestors setting out each spring from the comfort of their habitant farms on the southern shores of the St. Lawrence River to spend the spring, summer and fall plying the waters of the Great Lakes and the rivers of the Northwest. Perhaps these dreams have manifested themselves in my own passion for recreational canoe travel. Is that all that I am doing when I set out on a three-day, one-week or even one-month canoe trip? Recreating? Or is there a deeper meaning to these intermittent adventures?

Like Peter Cole (2002, p. 450), I believe that “my canoe is a place of cultural understanding;” when paddling, I often reflect on the Indigenous roots of the canoe. I think back to my Mi’kmaq ancestors, skilled canoe builders who deftly created sea- and river-worthy boats from birchbark, cedar and spruce roots; this gives me a profound sense of connection to the Land and my own cultural history. There are also moments when I experience the “flow”

that Czikszentmihalyi (1990) describes—a feeling of oneness with the Land when you feel yourself “lost in the moment” and “time slows down.” And sometimes I simply enjoy paddling as a physical and/or social activity that I can do with my friends, family and students.

Misao Dean (2006) discusses the canoe as a celebrated icon of Canadian culture in her critique of the Centennial celebrations of 1967; as part of the Centennial, the Canadian government organized the longest canoe race ever held. Teams of paddlers from every province and territory retraced the historic route of the voyageurs from Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, to Montreal, Quebec (Dean; Guilloux, 2007). However, Dean suggests that the Centennial canoe race was, in fact, an embodied misrepresentation of Canadian history; she notes that, while most voyageurs during the fur trade were French Canadian, Aboriginal or, later, Metis, the large majority of Centennial paddlers were English-speaking Euro-Canadians. Dean also relates that the few Aboriginal participants in the Centennial race were often poorly treated. She suggests that the Centennial canoe race was an instance of dominant Anglo-Canadian society appropriating a cultural icon that is not really their own.

Like Daniel Francis (2005), I believe that the canoe has become a universal symbol of Canada and that all Canadians have the right to claim it as their own. However, as Dean (2006) suggests, as outdoor and environmental educators, it is vitally important that we acknowledge and teach our students about the Aboriginal roots of the canoe; to ignore this crucial socio-historical truth amounts to cultural misappropriation.

As one participant of Japanese and Danish ancestry commented in my recent doctoral study into the ecological identities, philosophies and practices of intercultural outdoor and environmental educators in



Canada: “So many Canadians . . . celebrate the canoe as [a] wonder of Canada . . . But it is interesting because the ones who are doing the canoeing [often don’t have] any clue [why the canoe is important] . . . I think that our identity . . . has . . . been disconnected [from that history].”

Why do the canoe and other symbols of our nation’s connection to Nature such as the Rocky Mountains, the North and the Great Lakes (Francis, 2005) so strongly capture the imagination of the average Canadian? Are we clinging to the past, whether real or imagined, or perhaps seeking solace from the present?

### **The Promise of Escape**

Roy MacGregor (2002) suggests that a large aspect of Canadian identity is based upon the notion of escape; he proposes that throughout history Canada has been seen as a place of escape for refugees or immigrants fleeing poverty or violence in their homelands as well as a haven for romantic

wanderers or idealists seeking isolation. MacGregor also presents the notion that the practice of escape is preserved in cottage country throughout Canada and the annual pilgrimages that so many Canadians make to their favourite fishing, hunting, canoeing or skiing destinations to “get away from it all.” The escape mentality uncritically presented by MacGregor (2002) portrays Nature as an isolated refuge from the “real world,” similar to the interpretation of the Western concept of “wilderness” as a place of solace or retreat from the “real world” (Merchant, 2004).

I believe that this kind of attitude is problematic because it represents an ecological identity that, while reverent, views Nature as a recreational resource, useful for a short period of time to recharge before returning to the rigours of city life. While the escape mentality may not be immediately harmful on the surface, I believe that it is symptomatic of a disconnected Nature-as-resource mentality that is ironically often used by urban preservationists to critique the actions and attitudes of rural

conservationists or resource extractors (Berry, 2009; Thomashow, 1996). While the immediate effects of resource extraction are much more obvious, is there really that much difference in the original mentality? In both cases, the greater-than-human world is ultimately viewed as a commodity available for human use and manipulation, as long as it suits us. Having lived in both large metropolitan centres as well as isolated rural and semi-rural areas, it is my experience that rural farmers, hunters, loggers, miners and fishermen are often much more keenly aware of and deeply connected to the Land around them than the urban environmentalists who so often criticize and dismiss them with scorn. As American farmer and ecosopher Wendell Berry (2009, p. 78) astutely observes, “They have trouble seeing that the bad farming and forestry practices that they oppose . . . are done on their behalf, and with their consent implied in the economic proxies they have given as consumers.”

Several participants in my doctoral study discussed the inherent and often contradictory plurality of ecological identities in Canada. For example, one Euro-Canadian participant commented:

*It might be a stretch to say that we have one national Canadian ecological identity . . . I think there are . . . those people that envision their . . . ecological connections or contributions to be quite urban and . . . sometimes also intertwined with . . . social issues . . . I think there are other groups . . . who don't necessarily pay attention to social issues and who are more . . . “Back to Nature” . . . I think there's people whose ecological identity . . . is really fueled by a physicality—they're seeking adventure and sport . . . And I think there are, you know, people who are quite spiritually connected to Nature and . . . people who are ancestrally connected to particular localized places . . . Then I also think there's people who don't think about it all . . . who are so far removed that it makes them nervous to see a spider or . . . [who] spend their whole life living in their air conditioned house . . . car [and] office.*

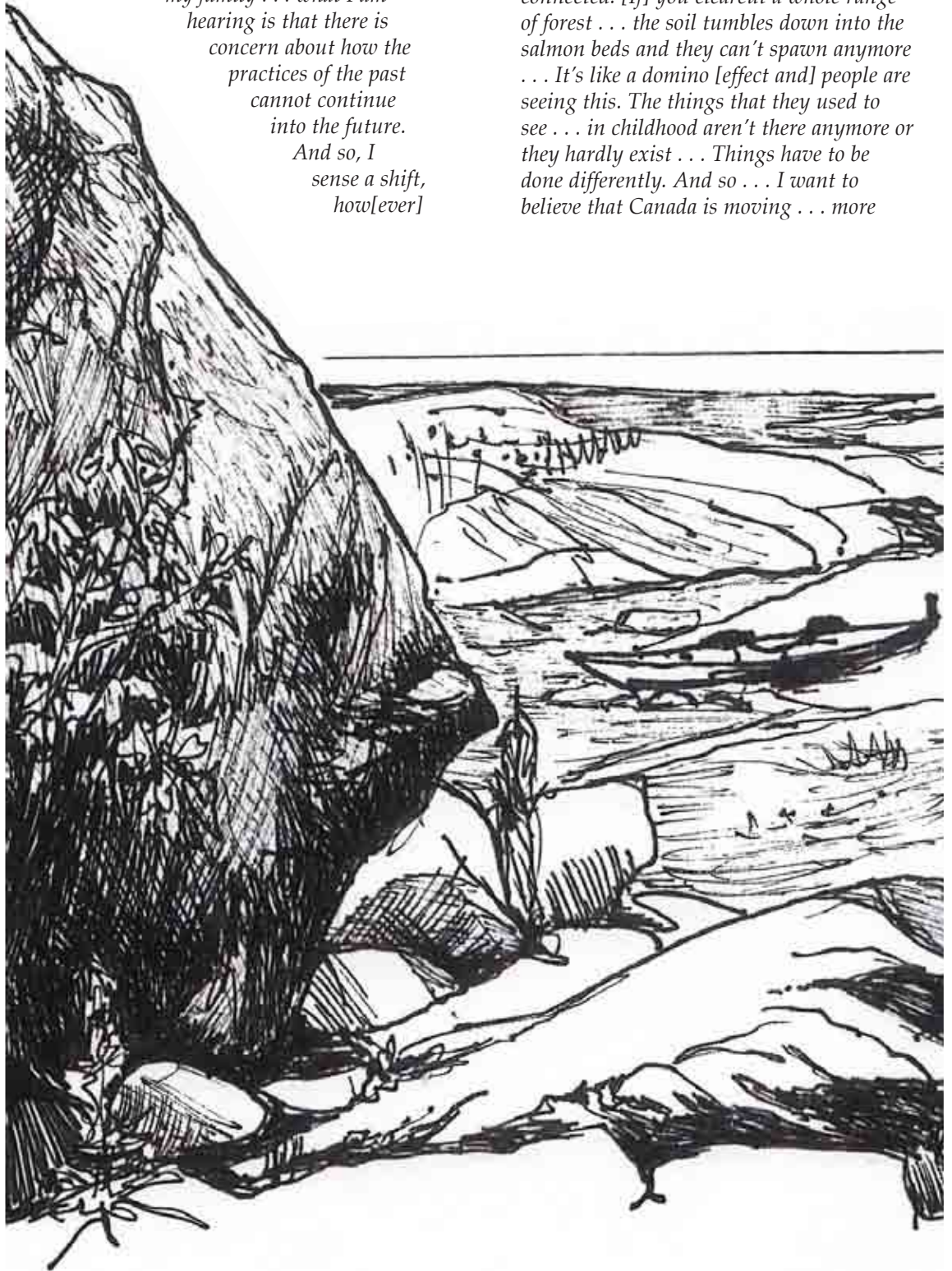
As the comment above exemplifies, when considering ecological identity in Canada, the picture is often unclear. For example, contrary to popular perception of the province of Alberta as the home of unabated oil and resource extraction, a recent survey into the environmental attitudes of Albertans reported that a majority of people in the province actually hold positive feelings towards the “environment,” but most feel disempowered or at a loss to act or speak out (Thompson, 2009). Statistics Canada (2008) also reported that “the environment” was the top concern for Canadians in 2007. My hope is that these studies are examples of a slow shift in our society that is increasingly positively disposed towards environmental issues.

However, despite our cherished national image as a naturally beautiful and environmentally pristine nation, Canada's current government was recently awarded the “Colossal Fossil” award at the Copenhagen Climate Change conference for being the least environmentally progressive nation in the world (Cryderman, 2009). What happened to all of those Canadians who ranked the environment as their top concern in 2007 (Statistics Canada, 2008)? Have their priorities shifted due to the recent worldwide economic downturn? Or perhaps, our federal government simply does not represent the interests and values of a majority of Canadians. The recent federal election where the Conservative party was elected to a majority government with only 40 percent of the popular vote (Elections Canada, 2011) would suggest that this is indeed the case. But what do all of these statistics really mean?

Perhaps a political and/or economic crisis is exactly what is needed to collectively reassess and re-imagine our society. Perhaps, like post-modern voyagers, we have ventured deep into the wilderness of industrialization and modernity, only to realize that we don't have the tools, skills and wisdom to survive. As one Solo participant from the West Coast commented in my doctoral study,

*[Based on] 30 years of  
conversations with loggers in  
my family . . . what I am  
hearing is that there is  
concern about how the  
practices of the past  
cannot continue  
into the future.  
And so, I  
sense a shift,  
how[ever]*

*subtle . . . just within my family . . . sphere  
. . . . There is concern that things are  
connected. [If] you clearcut a whole range  
of forest . . . the soil tumbles down into the  
salmon beds and they can't spawn anymore  
. . . It's like a domino [effect and] people are  
seeing this. The things that they used to  
see . . . in childhood aren't there anymore or  
they hardly exist . . . Things have to be  
done differently. And so . . . I want to  
believe that Canada is moving . . . more*



. . . into a concern for . . . environment  
 . . . Everything comes around in cycles, [so]  
 I may be just old enough to hopefully see  
 the next big positive push for a nation-wide  
 change in our environment policy to the  
 better. Where we're looking at growing  
 . . . instead of monopolizing . . . That's just  
 one River Woman's hope . . . We've got to  
 get all Canadians in [the same] canoe!

As contemporary outdoor and environmental educators, we are faced with the challenge and opportunity to facilitate this societal shift towards a deeper collective eco-cultural consciousness. Let us reconsider the legacies of the voyageurs, habitants and Indigenous peoples—inspiring and creating authentic connections for our students and ourselves with Nature and history through backcountry journeys and canoe trips as well as fostering a sense of daily connection through long-term initiatives such as community gardens and farmers' markets. After all, Nature does not begin or end at the city limits; we are part of it and it surrounds us wherever we go.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Culturally significant terms such as Nature, Land, Indigenous, Aboriginal and Western are intentionally capitalized in this article to demonstrate and emphasize respect.

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