The River, the City, and the Yellow Line:  
Reimagining Associative Landscapes in Post-War Northwestern Ontario  
Sean Atkins

The discourse of rivers and roads as fluid and interchanging serves as an appropriate framing metaphor for the questions of multiple perceptions of environment and landscape change. The occupation of Anicinabe Park, Kenora, Ontario signaled a new era of more contentious, even violent, relations between the Canadian state and Native groups. The aim of this article, however, is neither to analyze the occupation of the Park nor the particulars of the sea change in Native-white relations in Canada since the 1970s, but rather to provide some context to these changed relations in northwestern Ontario. It argues that the explanation for the events at Kenora is to be found not only in governmental policies and the Native response, but also in the interstices of place and displacement—not just of reserves and peoples, but also landscapes. This article will demonstrate that landscapes become contested when one meaning is imposed on another, and that resistance to this imposition is inevitable. Postwar northwestern Ontario, in particular the Kenora district and the English-Wabigoon River system, is largely a narrative of the reciprocal effects of physical environment and social conflict, a contested landscape of trees, rivers, and roads.

Le discours concernant les rivières et les routes qui sont fluides et changeantes sert de métaphore appropriée pour cerner les questions de perceptions multiples des changements dans l'environnement et les paysages. L'occupation du parc Anicinabe, à Kenora, en Ontario a signalé une nouvelle ère de relations plus litigieuses, voire violentes entre l'état canadien et les groupes autochtones. L'objectif de cet article, cependant, n'est pas d'analyser l'occupation du parc ou les détails de cette transformation importante dans les relations entre Autochtones et blancs au Canada depuis les années 1970, mais plutôt de mettre un peu en situation ces relations qui ont changé dans le nord-ouest de l'Ontario. L'article fait valoir que l'explication des événements à Kenora réside non seulement dans les politiques gouvernementales et la réaction des Autochtones, mais aussi dans les interstices de l'emplacement et du déplacement – non seulement de réserves et de gens, mais aussi de paysages. Cet article démontrera que les paysages sont contestés quand un sens est imposé à un autre,
et que la résistance à cette imposition est inévitable. Le nord-ouest de l’Ontario d’après guerre, en particulier la région de Kenora et le réseau fluvial English-Wabigoon, est surtout un récit des effets réciproques de l’environnement physique et du conflit social, un paysage contesté d’arbres, de rivières et de routes.

A week after an inconclusive end to a tense, thirty-nine-day occupation of Anicinabe Park, near Kenora, Ontario, by the Ojibway Warrior Society in September 1974, one resident added his/her thoughts to the rhetoric that the incident had generated. Authored by “a reformed bleeding heart,” the letter to the Kenora Daily Miner and News was addressed to “all citizens who wrote to your paper, backing the Indian occupation at Anicinabe Park, and chastising the people of Kenora for being unable to appreciate having their park stolen from them at gunpoint.” Criticizing the duplicity of those who cried for “poor Indian people’s rights” while the occupiers destroyed private property, shot at the police, and broke the law, yet walked away unscathed, the author also drew attention to the uncontrollable and precariously threatening wildfires menacing the region and city that summer: “While many of our young people were risking life and limb fighting forest fires, your down trodden Indian people were flagrantly disobeying a necessary fire restriction and even had the insane nerve to shoot aircraft used in fighting these costly fires.”

The summer of 1974 was, indeed, exceedingly hot. At one point during the confrontation, over sixty forest fires raged out of control, which was particularly troubling for a community that relied greatly on the forestry and (seasonal) tourist industries. An interested observer might recognize a troubling but fitting allegorical message arising out of a powder keg in the municipal park and ashes in the bush. After all, fire was central to the narrative of local Native and settler cultural-ecological landscapes.

Transcending the episodic narrative of fire, however, the discourse of rivers and roads as fluid and interchanging was, and continues to be, an appropriate framing metaphor for the multiple perceptions of environmental and landscape change. J. Edward Chamberlin asks, “Can one land ever really be home to more than one people? To native and

---

newcomer, for instance. ... I think so, but not until we have reimagined Them and Us.\textsuperscript{4} The occupation of Anicinabe Park signaled a new era of more contentious, even violent, relations between the Canadian state and Native groups, an era in which Them and Us had yet to be reimagined. The point of this article, however, is to analyze neither the occupation of the park nor the particulars of the sea change in Native-white relations in Canada since the 1970s, but rather to provide some context for these changed relations in northwestern Ontario. It argues that the explanation for the events at Kenora is to be found not only in governmental policies and the Native response to them, but also in the interstices of place and displacement, not only of reserves and peoples, but also landscapes. This article will show that landscapes become contested when one meaning is imposed on another, and that resistance to this imposition is inevitable.

Post-war northwestern Ontario, in particular the Kenora district and the English-Wabigoon River system, is largely a narrative of the reciprocal effects of physical environment and social conflict, a contested landscape of trees, rivers, and roads.\textsuperscript{5}

One way of telling this story is through an investigation of the changing cultural landscape of northwestern Ontario in the twentieth century. A Euro-Canadian perception of landscape is defined as a “social construction, a text that explains a way of seeing the world, and imagining our relationship to nature. It is something that we think, make and do as a social collective.”\textsuperscript{6} These collectives, however, are hardly immutable along regional, gender, ethnic, and class lines. Consequently, cultural landscapes are also

the physical expression of the complex and dynamic sets of relationships, processes and linkages between societies and environments. A society’s environmental perception, values, institutions, technologies and political interests will result in particular planning and management goals and objectives for


\textsuperscript{5} Wabigoon is Anishinaabe for “white feather,” which is possibly in reference to the wild white lilies that grow along the shoreline. The Northern Ontario Toponymy Site, \texttt{<http://geography.laurentian.ca/jrp/nots/w.htm>} (accessed 20 March 2006).

a specific landscape. Indigenous resource management systems often result in different cultural landscapes than those of managerial ecology.7

As Claire Campbell argues, the meaning of nature depends largely on its relationship with the local culture.8 To engage in an intellectual history that places the physical and social environment in a regional and experiential context, one must be guided by an understanding that cultural assumptions affect physical settings and vice versa. Consequently, as Campbell points out, the study of cultural landscape is fluid, interdisciplinary, and theoretically complex.9

Indigenous cultural landscapes challenge the ethnocentric limitations of previous landscape studies when scholars come to understand the influence of ontological perception and cultural assumption on the nonhuman world, resulting in what the scholar Peter Nabokov labels “the merging of physical and spiritual habitats”:

Especially revered were the locations where [American Indian] creators, or spirit beings, had formed their cosmos: the planets, the earth’s topography and plants and fellow creatures. Indians often names places to commemorate where the earliest mythic figures had played out their greatest adventures. In story and song they memorialized the landscapes which supernatural heroes or trickster spirits had transformed into their present shapes, or special places where they left traces behind them.10

In his study of Indigenous cultural landscapes, Nabokov counters the “mistaken idea” that before the arrival of Europeans, the religious attitudes of Indians toward the natural environment were frozen in time. Furthermore, “Indian attitudes toward the environment were [not] simple and similar … and American Indian sacred places did not necessarily please the eye.” His study is an attempt to “counterbalance writings on American Indians and ecology that are driven by romantic ideas about ‘harmony with nature’ or are attuned to the service of environmental ad-

9 Ibid.
vocacy.”\textsuperscript{11} The social and political implications are no less clear. Winona LaDuke posits that:

While Judeo-Christian sacred sites such as “the Holy Land” are recognized, the existence of other holy lands has been denied. There is a place on the shore of Lake Superior, or Gichi Gummi, where the Giant laid down to sleep. … And there is a mountain upon which the Anishinaabeg rested during their migration and from where they looked back to find their prophesized destination. The concept of the “holy land” cannot be exclusive in a multi-cultural and multi-spiritual society, yet it indeed it has been treated as such.\textsuperscript{12}

LaDuke adds, “We have a problem of two separate spiritual paradigms and one dominant culture-make that a dominant culture with an immense appetite for natural resources.”\textsuperscript{13} This is certainly true when applied in broad, political strokes at a certain spatial level. Approaching the historical issue of cultural contact and natural resource use as an “either/or” ontological question, where the “dominant culture” masks as the state, speaks directly to the question of land claims.

Cultural landscape studies that consider Indigenous and settler societies, however, are most effective as local histories. They draw upon regional experience and sources, which also anchor specific concepts to a specific place and reality.\textsuperscript{14} In any event, interpretations of these concepts are multiple, seldom immutable, and can be both accommodating and ambivalent. For example, most Euro-Canadian scholars who have written local histories about northwestern Ontario have both reflected and modified the “limited identities” of regional history.\textsuperscript{15} Regional case studies have been successful at illustrating the intersection of social relations and modes of production within an environmental framing approach. David T. McNab set out to illustrate how “the broad scope and ineffectiveness of federal

\footnotesize{11} Ibid., xiii–xiv.
\footnotesize{12} Winona LaDuke, \textit{Recovering the Sacred} (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 14.
\footnotesize{13} Ibid.
\footnotesize{14} Ibid., 8.
Indian policy affected the experience of one first nation [Sturgeon Lake]; and, second to show the significance of the loss of part of the commons in Ontario.”16 A bioregional and material culture approach to the history of the Anishinaabe sturgeon fishery system on Rainy River from 1830 to the mid-twentieth century demonstrates how the transformation from fur trade era “sturgeon country” to “near extinction” by the end of the First World War had a “serious and lasting impact on the welfare of the Ojibway peoples.”17 These studies have been most effective when framed by a specific spatial-temporal order that places state-settler/Indigenous relations in a resource-dependency discourse of landscape. What has been absent from the literature, however, is an understanding of these relations when “Them and Us” are on the same literal ground.

Only recently (in 2005) has Parks Canada addressed the importance of Aboriginal cultural landscapes by developing “a commemorative approach to Aboriginal history in Canada in ways that are meaningful to Aboriginal people while at the same time upholding the rigour of its own evaluative process.”18 In response to this initiative, historian Susan Buggey argues for “an understanding of Aboriginal world views and notions of place,” in addition to “situat[ing] these views in relation to the field of cultural landscapes and to national historic site designations related to the history of Aboriginal people.”19 She notes that the new cultural landscape approach offers “a significant way of looking at place that focuses not on monument but on the relationship between human activity and the natural environment.”20

For Buggey, an Aboriginal cultural landscape

is a place valued by an Aboriginal group (or groups) because of their long and complex relationship with that land. It expresses their unity with the natural and spiritual environment. It embodies their traditional knowledge of spirits, places, land uses, and

19 Ibid., <http://www.pc.gc.ca/docs/r/pca-acl/index_e.asp>.
ecology. Material remains of the association may be prominent, but will often be minimal or absent.\textsuperscript{21}

This definition also recognizes the complex ecological and social considerations at play:

It is to be recognized that other people than the associated group (or groups) may also have used these landscapes and may attach values to them. The experience in the Americas has particularly shown that the rapidity of waves of immigration and the diversity of cultures they have introduced have significantly shaped the cultural landscapes. The result has been not so much a layering of cultures and uses as a concurrence of cultures and uses, all of which are recognized to have validity.\textsuperscript{22}

These “concurrences of culture” are the spaces that have yet to be explored, but the methodological tools are available for recognizing the “layering of cultures” that is materially grounded. Buggey and Campbell each identify \textit{associative} cultural landscapes as essential to their respective (multiple) Indigenous and settler society studies.\textsuperscript{23} For both, associative landscapes are weighed heavily towards the natural environment rather than by their material culture, which Buggey points out “may be minimal or entirely absent.”\textsuperscript{24} The mechanism by which one quantifies and assesses not just what comprises the material, but its purpose, function, and propriety value as a source of conflict is unclear.

Excavating these concurrences and layering of cultures begins with local periodicals like the \textit{Kenora Daily Miner and News}, which can offer substantially different coverage of events and communities than the larger newspapers of the distant urban centres. Regional First Nations newspapers, like \textit{The Light Bulb} (1967–1969)\textsuperscript{25} and \textit{Kenomidiwin News}

\textsuperscript{23} Campbell, \textit{Shaped by the West Wind}, 14. “Vernacular landscapes are usually working landscapes that evolve organically over time, often in rural areas. Designed landscapes are ordered arrangements such as the formal gardens created for example, aristocratic Baroque estates. Ethnographic or associative landscapes possess cultural or heritage value for a particular group. Any place, though can exist as more than one type simultaneously” (14).
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{The Light Bulb} was a joint community-Company of Young Canadians (CYC) publication. For more on the CYC, see Ian Hamilton, \textit{The Children’s Crusade: The Story of the Company of Young Canadians} (Toronto: P. Martin Associates, 1970).
Atkins, “The River, the City, and the Yellow Line” (1968–1972), not only reflect a concern for Native issues, but are an integral part of the discourse of the region. Source material from community-run resources like the Dryden and District Museum and Lake of the Woods Museum are important for their presentation of historical memory and can themselves be contested landscapes. Finally, local tourist publications like pamphlets and brochures are intriguing counterpoints to the more politically oriented (and polemical) leaflets and manifestos.

The associative landscapes at play in northwestern Ontario include forests, waterways, and roads. Forest management is an integral part of the province’s cultural construction of landscape, and certainly a factor in the history of provincial industry and politics. Most of northwestern Ontario is located in the boreal forest zone. With an area of 49.8 million hectares, the boreal forest is Ontario’s largest forest region. It features various forest types consisting of coniferous and deciduous trees, including white and black spruce, tamarack, balsam fir, jack pine, white birch, and poplar. The coniferous gives way to the deciduous of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence forest region along an east-west axis where Kenora and nearby Dryden are located. The forestry industry is the major economic engine driving northwestern Ontario's economy. The forests are not, however, the only associative landscapes of northwestern Ontario.

Northwestern Ontario is also a region endowed with innumerable waterways and islands that continue to play a central part in the Indigenous way of life and the local tourist fishing industry. The Wabigoon


27 Dryden and District Museum is part of an online virtual museum community. See <www.virtualmuseum.ca> (accessed 18 March 2006).


River flows north from Dryden, where it meets Ball Lake and the English River as it continues its 615 kilometre journey past the Anishinaabe communities of Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishnabek (Grassy Narrows First Nation) and, further downstream, Whitedog, to the Winnipeg River. Kenora is located on the north shore of Lake of the Woods, which the Anishinaabe referred to as Wauzhushk Onigum, or “portage to the country of the muskrat.”

During the fur trade, the cultural landscape of local management systems was characterized by a “crafting of the landscape to intensify the development of natural resources crucial to the fur trade. This process included flooding and soil deposition as well as fires.” After Confederation and the transfer of land from the Hudson’s Bay Company to the Canadian state, however, the associative landscape began to change concurrent to the transformation of vernacular and designed landscapes.

Tariff protection and eastern trade with the West was an important part of John A. Macdonald’s National Policy. The Lake of the Woods region became the gateway for grain heading east and lumber headed west. After Confederation, the government of Canada wanted land for a right of way to build, first, a road, and eventually a railroad to British Columbia. However, the Ojibwa had not yet ceded the area. In 1873, the Northwest Angle treaty, also known as Treaty 3, was negotiated between representatives of the federal government and certain chiefs and headmen of the “Salteaux Tribe.” Government reports of these negotiations reveal some recognition of the way of life of the Anishinaabe, and show that the method by which the Indian reserves were to be selected was provided for and in accordance with the spirit and intent of the Treaty 3 negotiations.


32 The Anishinaabe are more generally known as Ojibway, though most First Nations from the region identify themselves as the former. For purposes of clarity, Anishinaabe is used in this paper, with the exception of the Ojibway Warrior Society.


35 McNab, “Principally Rocks and Burnt Lands,” 160.

36 Ibid. McNab argues that although the government of Ontario did not participate in negotiations nor was it a signatory to the treaty because the lands were outside provincial boundaries at the time, “it was Ontario that effectively held the land and the natural resources.”

37 Ibid., 161.
That same year, Simon Dawson surveyed and began building the Dawson Trail from Lake of the Woods to Winnipeg, and Sir Sanford Fleming traveled west, surveying the line for a railway. By 1886, eight sawmills were in operation around the new settlement of Rat Portage. The Kee-watin Lumber Company was the first, followed by Western Lumber, Rat Portage Lumber, and Dick & Banning. The Canadian Pacific Railway had, by that time, reached Rat Portage, and a dam had been constructed at the outlet of the Lake of the Woods to expedite the movement of log booms. By this time, the first Fire Act had been passed.

Fire was anathema to the single largest resource extraction industry in northwestern Ontario and threatened settlements, but it also had some unintended effects. Although almost no incidents of fires started by local Natives are documented, in 1900 the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests asked the Hudson’s Bay Company to distribute copies of fire proclamations along the main canoe routes. The mix of dry seasons, settlement, logging, and the railway led to increased numbers of fires. This increase in fires, in turn, spurred the growth of blueberry bushes. By the 1940s, the Kenora Daily Miner and News was reporting the emergence of a vigourous commercial blueberry enterprise, a sustainable business that included both local settlers and Anishinaabe from surrounding reserves. With the advent of improved fire-fighting technology, however, the blueberry business began to fail by the 1950s because the rapidly regenerative plants had always benefited from the removal of competing undergrowth after a conflagration.

Davidson-Hunt points out that one of the central problems of managerial ecology is that management of a single commodity comes at the expense of the biological diversity of landscapes. The simplified cultural landscapes of managerial ecology have not provided Indigenous com-

39 “It was not until 1905 that the community changed its name to Kenora. Dissatisfaction with the name of Rat Portage had been expressed by the residents of the town over the years, but apparently it took a final push from industry to initiate the change. The Maple Leaf Flour Company reportedly refused to build here because they didn’t want the word ‘rat’ on their flour bags. So the new name was formed by combining the first two letters of KEewatin, a sister town; NOorman, an adjacent village; and RAT Portage.” Lake of the Woods Museum, <http://www.lakeofthewoodsmuseum.ca/pages/history.html> (accessed 18 March 2006).
42 Ibid., 33–34. Several oral accounts of the blueberry picking season discuss the fires. Davidson-Hunt argues that the end of the blueberry industry was due in large part to the dramatic improvements in post-war fire fighting technology.
munities with the resources necessary to secure meaningful livelihoods. Between 1945 and 1963, the provincial government, with its constitutionally enshrined rights over land and resources, began to take a much more active role in the management of fur, fish, and game. The first changes came in the system of registered traplines:

Through the application of certain “management principles,” the fur could be “exploited” to yield a maximum return consistent with resource conservation. Whereas the government viewed trapping as a privilege, in contrast the Native people viewed the trapline as a place to live, to raise children, to teach trapping skills, to obtain food, and furs. Trapping was not just a commercial activity, but a way of life; trapping was the central core of culture.  

In 1947–48, the provincial government imposed reporting requirements on the fish catch and tightened up the system of licenses for specific lakes. Although these regulations did not have the same impact on the Grassy Narrows people—commercial fishing began much later there than it did on other the reserves—the introduction of land rice permits and “wild rice license areas” was another example of direct intervention on a resource considered to be “theirs” by custom. Nevertheless, those families who stayed on the old reserve for most of the period from the end of the war until relocation continued a lifestyle that was, more or less, untouched by federal government interference. This general continuity prior to relocation in the 1960s was underscored by ritual.

Chamberlin argues that “in all our conflicts, we need to find a ceremony that will sanctify the land for everyone who lives on it.”

---

43 Ibid., 23. A study of the Port Arthur or Fort William (present day Thunder Bay) area prior to 1914 found that “in the context of the threat to their traditional economic system the Ojibwa were compelled by circumstances to expand their wage earnings in order to support their hunting and fishing activities.” This expansion, however, was “limited to casual and seasonal work in close proximity to native reservations.” Steven High, “Responding to White Encroachment: The Robinson-Superior Ojibwa and the Capitalist Labour Economy,” *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Paper and Records* 22 (1994): 33, cited in Steven High, “Native Wage Labour and Independent Production during the ‘Era of Irrelevance’,” *Labour* 37 (Spring 1996): 243–264.


46 Ibid., 16.

47 Chamberlin, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?*, 227.
transformation of ritual and ceremony associated with Treaty Day served to demonstrate that both the local Indigenous people and the state implicitly recognized this. A resident of Grassy Narrows recalled,

As soon as [the Indian agent, doctor and Mountie] got to the shore where the old treaty hall was, they would be welcomed by volleys of rifle fire in the air. You could hear shots all around the lake. The first night, there was a pow-wow and a feast, a time of drumming and dancing. The Grassy Narrows people had a tent ready for the visitors so that they could stay for a few days. They did stay, and they talked with the people. Now, of course, they just pay treaty money and leave right away. There are no more ceremonies around Treaty.  

The importance of ritual as discourse was part of the landscape and a recognition of the “spirit and intent” of the treaty. When the custom was modified, the associative landscape also changed.

The major change in the associative landscape of the Grassy Narrows people was the relocation of their reserve in 1963. To comprehend the significance of this event, it is necessary to set it within the physical environment of northwestern Ontario and to consider the implications of the temporal and spatial fluidity between reservation, trap line, river, and city. These movements meant different things to different people, so any change in this ontological and epistemological worldview was bound to have effects within the region as a whole.  

The parallel and interwoven stories of the Grassy Narrows reserve and the municipality of Kenora are one such example.

In 1963, the Grassy Narrows reserve was moved to nearby Clay Lake, five kilometres from the Wabigoon River. The relocation decision was made in the context of a federal government policy ostensibly to alleviate the problem of poverty:

Among many of Canada’s Indians, all the classical signs and symptoms of poverty are to be found: underemployment and unemployment, large families, poor health, substandard housing, low levels of education, idleness, an attitude of despair and

defeat. To many Indians in northern settlements, these conditions are the only way of life that exists. They have known no other. They accept poverty as they accept the weather.  

The hegemonic cultural construction of state-sponsored “community development” took several forms on different reserves, as evidenced by housing programs, new schools on-site, electricity, make-work projects, and, perhaps most importantly, paved road access to Kenora. The entire approach was based on an ideology that equated development with modernization, and included a belief that “the Indian problem” lay within the Native communities themselves. In the case of Grassy Narrows, relocation was symbolic violence masked as modernization. The Jones Road that connected the reserve with Kenora eventually became the medium of exchange and conflict between urban and rural cultures and landscapes.

A close analysis of government correspondence and local testimonials demonstrates a complex, and at times unclear, picture with respect to the inclusion (or exclusion) of local people in the decision-making process, as well as the rationale behind the move. The relocation of the reserve, however, transformed the people’s relationship with the landscape (both the river and the city) and undermined their closely knit social units of kinship and community. The first issue concerned the location of houses. The official position of the Department of Indian and Northern Development was

that housing on Indian reserves be on a community planned

51 The establishment of on-reserve schools disrupted the seasonal migration and trapping cycle because families were now forced to stay in the community to take care of their children.
52 The Jones Road was approximately 90 kilometres in length from the new site to Kenora. It was slightly shorter in distance from the Whitedog reserve further downstream to Kenora.
54 “Symbolic violence,” according to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, is “the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate. This legitimacy obscures the power relations which permit that imposition to be successful. This is achieved through a process of misrecognition: ‘the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder. The mainstay of the exercise of symbolic violence is ‘pedagogic action,’ including institutionalized education” [emphasis added]. See Richard Jenkins, Pierre Bourdieu (London: Routledge, 1992), 104–105; and Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture (London: Sage, 1977), xi–xiii.
Figure 1. Sketch of Relationship of Kenora to Grassy Narrows, (showing Jones Road).

Map courtesy of Gerhard Ens.
basis so that all services such as stores, school, etc., will form part of the housing community. Many times in the past, house have been constructed for the convenience of the individual and when we try to provide roads, water and sewage systems it is a most difficult problem.\textsuperscript{56}

In their headlong rush towards “modernization,” however, the government’s plan made it impossible to maintain clan alignments, which were the traditional basis for Anishinaabe social and economic relations:

On the old reserve, we weren’t all bunched up and mixed together like we are today. Every family had their own territory and their own trapping ground. The families would come together only in the spring and in the summer. Each family would then plant potatoes in their own garden and catch fish which was important for food in the summertime. Each family could get to the water without crossing everybody else’s land; not like today, where only some families are on the water.

On the old reserves the families were apart from each other. We lived besides the Fobisters, about a half-mile apart; in between us were the Lands. … John Loon and his family lived on that island, up the English River. … The Assins were more on the Wabigoon side of the river.\textsuperscript{57}

Others lamented the physical and spiritual separation from the English-Wabigoon River system:

The people … they just hated to move to the new reserve. They wanted to be near fresh, flowing water, near the river. Garden Lake, where the government put the new reserve, was just a small lake. It was not The [sic] river. It was not a living thing. Even after they moved to the new reserve, some people just kept going back to their houses on the old reserve. They just couldn’t stand it on the new reserve.\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{57} Interview with John Beaver, 10 March 1979, quoted in Shkylnik, “Government Indian Policy and its Impact on Community Life,” 38.

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with Norman Schantz (undated), quoted in Shkylnik, “Government Indian Policy and its Impact on Community Life,” 40.
Another resident stated bluntly that it was “just like you get out of a cage when you go from here to the old reserve.”\(^{59}\) For the Anishinaabe, the Wabigoon was integral to spirituality and the relocation a threat to their ontological world.

The industrialization of this region in the twentieth century—through lumbering, and later pulp and paper mills—further transformed Anishinaabe relations with the natural world. By the 1970s, when Anicinabe Park was occupied, matters had reached a crisis point. At the Ontario Royal Commission for the Northern Environment (1977), the Grand Council for Treaty 3 submitted a brief report on the history and current relationship between the Crown, Council, and the land. The message was direct:

> Mr. Commissioner, we face a serious problem. The last frontier of the boreal forest in Ontario, the only stand of virgin timber in the province, is in imminent danger of destruction. It is not a matter of sentimental conservation, but a problem of permanent ecological damage. For our communities, it is also a personal and human problem. Once again, the stranger in my father’s legend is back among us. And remember, this time we are all in the same circle. We live or die together.\(^{60}\)

The federal and provincial government’s attempts to construct the cultural landscape in northwestern Ontario had been an unmitigated failure. This failure was no more evident than in the mercury poisoning of the Wabigoon-English River system. The widespread destruction of three hundred miles of river ecosystem between 1962 and 1970, though a singular industrial catastrophe, was an expression of the political economic model of resource extraction, provincial jurisdiction, and the profit-making model that reinforced the metropolis-hinterland relationship.

The river was poisoned by Dryden Pulp & Paper and the chemical plants that were part of an international conglomerate, the Anglo-Canadian Pulp and Paper Company, which, in turn, was a branch of the powerful Reed Group of companies headquartered in Britain. Although the Reed organization had several interests, its chief operations were related to wood by-products.\(^{61}\) Their operation on the Wabigoon River was

---

\(^{59}\) Interview with Maggie Land, 26 November 1978, quoted in Shkylnik, “Government Indian Policy and its Impact on Community Life,” 40.

\(^{60}\) Grand Council Treaty #3, We are all in the Ojibway Circle: My Genocide is Your Genocide—Report to the Royal Commission on the Northern Environment (Kenora: Grand Council Treaty No. 3: November 3, 1977), 21–22. For more on the legend of “the stranger,” see We are all in the Ojibway Circle, 10–11.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 61.
situated on a plateau overlooking the once-wild Wabigoon River, its tall stacks and billowy white clouds dropp[ing] residue indiscriminately on homes, cars, people, everything downwind. The outfall pipe from the pulp and paper mill was clearly visible alongside the heavily traveled highway. It spewed forth its effluent. The river frothed and vapor rose in the air.\textsuperscript{62}

In March 1962, the Dryden chlor-alkali plant, which used mercury to bleach its paper products, began releasing the chemical into the river, where it mixed with other pollutants to form the toxic methyl mercury. An estimated twenty pounds a day was dumped into the water.\textsuperscript{63} As early as 1956, the devastating effects of mercury poisoning on fish-eating maritime communities had been observed in Minamata, Japan.\textsuperscript{64} However, it was not until May 1970, after more than twenty thousand pounds of mercury had been dumped into the Wabigoon River, that the government finally banned commercial fishing in the Wabagoon-English River system and “politely request[ed]” that the company stop dumping mercury.\textsuperscript{65} In August, George Kerr, Ontario’s minister of energy and resources, admitted that Clay Lake, the closest lake to the Dryden plant and new home for most of the people of Grassy Narrows, had the province’s highest levels of mercury readings. Nevertheless, he promised that “we have eliminated the source. … [W]e are satisfied that there isn’t any mercury loss now.” Later, he stated that “we’re hoping by next summer the problem will be over.”\textsuperscript{66} For the next five years, the government vacillated between suppression of government reports and periodic but muted admissions.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 56. “Both the Dryden Chemical and Pulp & Paper plants employed roughly a thousand persons, practically one person from every family in town. Another 500 or 600 worked in the woodlands. The mill provided 40% of the town’s tax base” (61).


\textsuperscript{64} By 1968, over hundred had died and several thousand had permanent disabilities. For more on Minamata disease and the importance of Japanese researchers and advocates for the people of Grassy Narrows, see Harding, “Mercury Poisoning”; George Hutchison and Dick Wallace, \textit{Grassy Narrows} (Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977), 114–132.

\textsuperscript{65} Harding, “Mercury Poisoning,” 14.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{67} In 1972, an Ontario government report entitled “The Public Health Significance of Methyl Mercury” stated that 1 ppm (parts per million) of mercury in fish constituted a health hazard. The mercury level of those fish sampled in the Wabagoon River was as high as thirty times the safe level. This report was not released until November 1974, after it was quoted on the CBC radio program, \textit{As It Happens}. See CBC Archives, “Mercury Rising: The Poisoning of Grassy Narrows,” <http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-70-1178-6459/disasters_tragedies/grassy_narrows_mercury_pollution/clip2> (accessed 19 March 2006). For a complete history of mercury poisoning in
Social and cultural ties that had already been altered by the reserve’s relocation broke down as the inhabitants of the Grassy Narrows community and the Whitedog reserve were first prevented from maintaining any semblance of a sustainable wage labour economy after the elimination of commercial fishing, and then lost the seasonal guiding and related work after fishing lodges like Ball Lake Lodge were closed down.68 It is in the context of the political economy of the pulp and paper industry and near-complete breakdown of the cultural landscape of the Wabigoon and English River systems that the concurrent events in Kenora should also be understood.

In her study of the Grassy Narrows reserve, Natalia Shkylnik argues that mercury poisoning certainly played a part in the “etiology of human breakdown,” but it was not the only factor. When combined with resettlement, however, “as a people whose past experiences have bruised them and made them less able to withstand new crises, the community as a whole was unusually vulnerable to the onslaught on their River of Life.”69 The mercury poisoning became “the last nail in the coffin,” a “spike … driven into the physical ecology of their community life as well as into their system of beliefs, the mystical underpinning of their relationship to the land.”70

The associative landscape that connected the reserve relocation with the destruction of the river-based economy was the Jones Road, which connected Grassy Narrows to Kenora and the Anishinaabe to settler society. All modes of transportation and the physical contexts within which they are situated—from valleys and passes to rivers, lakes, trails, and roads—are inflected by the physical environment, but are also multidirectional and culturally constructed. The James Road thus opened a new dialogue and relationship with the residents of Kenora. The transition from trapline to streetscape passed from the conceptual to actuality.

---

68 Hutchison and Wallace, Grassy Narrows, 48–55.
69 Shkylnik, A Poison Stronger than Love, 237.
70 Ibid. In 1980, photojournalist Hiro Miyamatsu, who had been living at Grassy Narrows for three years, presented his photos at a Toronto showing. Some who saw the photos expressed shock and anger. Around the same time, a stage production entitled “Whitedog/Cat’s Dance” was performed at the city’s harbour front. (The title was in reference to the “dance” that fish-fed cats on the reserve displayed shortly before death.) See Helen Worthington, “Camera his Weapon on Poisoned Reserve,” Toronto Star, 1 March 1980, B4.
Kenora was certainly no stranger to strife, for one of the first public Native demonstrations in Canada occurred there in 1965.\textsuperscript{71} Regional newspapers had been exploring the tensions in the region and how to alleviate them.\textsuperscript{72} The Widjitiwin cooperative had been established in 1960 in nearby McIntosh to aid treaty and non-treaty Indians and the poor. The settlement included a school, new homes, a co-op store, a recreation hall, and a carpentry shop.\textsuperscript{73} In 1973, the Concerned Citizens Committee, with members from the Kenora District Social Planning Council, Grand Council Treaty #3, and researchers from the University of Manitoba, released a comprehensive report on the intolerable number of sudden deaths in the Kenora area. Entitled \textit{While People Sleep}, the study warned that “the federal and provincial governments can no longer ignore the situation in Kenora.”\textsuperscript{74} An appendix to the report on the state of housing, written by the Grand Council Treaty #3, stated unequivocally that “we also feel that Kenora is our home and we have a right to live comfortably in this town.”\textsuperscript{75} Just one month before the occupation, the Canadian Council on Rural Development heard from local leaders and resource people (including a member from Grand Council) and reported that

the sense of powerlessness felt by residents of the region was repeatedly evident throughout the meeting. Residents feel that the vast majority of decisions affecting their lives are made elsewhere and without consultation. Economic decisions are felt to emanate from the south, with criteria for development being based upon what is good for the south and not for the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{71} On 28–29 November 1965, the Kenora Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development office was occupied by the Ojibway Warrior’s Society without any violence.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{The Light Bulb} (Port Arthur, Ontario) 1, Nos. 1–2 (December 1967–April 1968) was geared towards Native youth in the region. Also see “Indians Learning Forest Management,” \textit{Fort William Times Journal}, 28 June 1968; “Indian White Committee Plan November Conference at Kenora,” \textit{Kenora Daily Miner and News}, 29 October 1965; and “Local Chamber to Request Indian Situation Study Here,” \textit{Kenora Daily Miner and News}, 5 June 1965. At other times, however, there was a sense of denial—see “Kenora Views Race Relations as Topic to Keep Mum About,” \textit{Winnipeg Free Press}, 21 June 1973.
\textsuperscript{73} Widjitiwin, \textit{A Helping Hand to the Poor in Their Self-training}, Canadian Association for the Support of Native People (Vertical File #68293).
\textsuperscript{74} Grand Council Treaty No. 3, \textit{While People Sleep: Sudden Deaths in Kenora Area} (Kenora, 1973).
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 30. There were 189 sudden deaths between 1970 and 30 June 1973. Cause of death included accidents, confirmed and suspected suicides, and neglect. Alcohol was involved in 74% of all deaths. Thirty-one deaths occurred in Kenora, and twelve in Grassy Narrows. See Grand Council Treaty No. 3, \textit{While People Sleep}, 7–9.
\end{flushleft}
north. … The participants often indicated the need to make “the South Think North.”

When the three-day Ojibway National Conference began on 20 July 1974, considerable frustration and tension had been building up for the better part of a decade.

Most historical literature has contextualized the Ojibway Warrior Society’s occupation of Anicinabe Park in terms of land and resource rights, as well as equal access to local services. While there is no denying the genuine feelings of alienation and discrimination felt by the participants, a close reading of the local Native and non-Native material reveals a community and region already attempting to come to terms with its hinterland identity. In Paper Tomahawks: From Red Tape to Red Power (1976), James Burke, associate editor of the Manitoba Indian News, described Kenora as

---

76 Canadian Council on Rural Development Report on Kenora with Local Leaders from Northwestern Ontario (Ottawa, 1974). The final section on Native people pointed out that “Token Natives” and “Red Bureaucrats” were sometimes less responsive to Native demands than non-Native demands (18).


78 In Canada’s First Nations: A History of Founding People’s from Earliest Times (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), Olive Dickason points out that “the park had been purchased by the Department of Indian Affairs as a camping area for the Anishinabek and was sold without compensation for the Natives for development as a tourist area” (370). Harvey McCue identifies the mercury poisoning as one of the causes of the occupation. Edward S. Rogers and Donald B. Smith, Aboriginal Ontario (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994), 411. Almost every major Canadian newspaper covered the events. For an insightful and comprehensive “on the ground” report of the Anicinabe occupation, see John Gallagher and Cy Gonick, “The Occupation of Anicinabe Park, Canadian Dimension 10, no. 5 (October 1974): 21–40; and Heather Robertson, “Shootout at Anicinabe Park: Another Skirmish in a Long War,” Maclean’s (December 1974), 108. Daily editions of The Kenora Daily Miner and News from 20 July 1974 and later provided relatively factual reporting that nonetheless revealed certain opinions. “Letters to the editor,” on the other hand, are more revealing. The images for those weeks are, for the most part, restricted to the leaders of both the Ojibway Warrior Society and town council, sporadic photos of young armed Natives—there are few photos of the OPP or those men, women, and children in the park who were not armed—and the amount of pollution and waste in the park. For more on local media perceptions, see Mark Anderson & Carmen Robertson, “The “Bended Elbow” News, Kenora 1974: How a Small-Town Newspaper Promoted Colonization,” American Indian Quarterly 31, No. 3 (Summer 2007): 410–440. Also see John Borrows, “Crown and Aboriginal Occupations of Land: A History & Comparison: A Background Paper Prepared for the Ipperwash Inquiry, October, 2005” (unpublished paper).
an awkward amalgam of the new and the old; of gothic edifices and contemporary plastic architecture, and more importantly, of old prejudices and new aspirations. The prejudices are the proud possessions of almost all segments of the town and surrounding area, white and native. These people have grown up with them, feel comfortable with them, and use them as so many security blankets—devices which invest their lives with the same kind of neat orderliness that is exemplified by the white picket-fenced bungalows lining the town’s middle-class residential streets.79

In a late 1974 interview with the leader of the Ojibway Warrior’s Society, Louis Cameron (from Whitedog) stated that the Kenora community as a whole was “backward.”80 It had no economic base because the pulp and paper mill and the larger businesses “are controlled either from Toronto or the United States”:

We pointed out again the issues that have to be settled concerning the native people of Kenora and the reservations, that this outpost, this fort out in northwestern Ontario, the Town of Kenora, had to start communicating and living equally with the rightful owners of this land … This little paranoid group of people in the town of Kenora could not secure themselves in this economical fort indefinitely. The people—the masses out in the reserves—would inevitably come into town; at night, during the day. … Through the occupation, we were confronting people in Ottawa and Toronto in government.81

The Ottawa Citizen put it bluntly: “The two cultures don’t co-exist comfortably in this isolated northeastern Ontario community.”82


80 Interview with Louis Cameron in Paper Tomahawks, 384–385. Cameron’s role in this and the subsequent Native People’s Caravan (with Metis leaders Vern Harper and his wife Pauline Shirt Harper) across Canada and to the steps of Parliament Hill in time for the opening of the 30th Parliament were important. He was an effective, thoughtful speaker. He was also a target for Native and mainstream media. See “We are Not Radicals or Militants,” The Indian Voice (September 1974), 6–7; and Ojibway Warrior’s Society, Ojibway Warrior’s Society in Occupied Anicinabe Park: Kenora, Ontario August 1974 (Toronto: Better Read Graphics, 1974).

81 Burke, Paper Tomahawks, 385.

82 “Two Cultures: No co-existence,” Ottawa Citizen, 6 August 1974. Cameron stated, “We’ve had no blueberries to sell, the tourist trade had dropped off, and with the high water levels we couldn’t
The local response to the occupation was not muted. Perhaps the most controversial literature in the wake of the occupation came from a local resident. Eleanor M. Jacobson’s *Bended Elbow* was a polemical and racist pamphlet eventually denounced by the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Commentators are correct in pointing out the intolerant writing and photos in the book, but have generally overlooked its second part—a “Facts about Kenora” section that reads like any local tourist guide. What is apparent in the images of the region’s recreational rock, water, and forest opportunities is a complete lack of First Nations presence in the landscape (not to mention fire). Jacobson reconstructed the landscape and removed any human element that did not fit with her own perception of her community.

The imposition of a managerial environmental system, the hegemony of “modernization,” and the politics of multiple associative landscapes in the hinterland pitted the people of northwestern Ontario against each other within a contested cultural geography. The memories of Grassy Narrows and Kenora are alive in more recent blockades—another centuries-old expression of associative landscape—of Abitibi Pulp and Paper Company’s operations. As the ongoing dispute in Caledonia displays, plant the wild rice crop, another source of revenue. So we have little money to put towards equipment for trapping or to buy food.”


84 Eleanor Jacobson, *Bended Elbow*. (Kenora: Central Publications, 1974). Jacobson claimed that she sold 9,000 copies. See *Toronto Star*, 21 May 1975, B1. A second volume, *Bended Elbow, Part II* (Kenora: Central Publishers, 1975) contained several letters, including a note of support from a “concerned Indian” and a letter from Dick Wilson, the embattled and less than incorruptible president of the Oglala Sioux at Pine Ridge, ND. Jacobson argued that the Ojibway Warrior Society was a front for the American Indian Movement (AIM) “communists.” She also denied that the first volume was hate literature, and asked, “Is mercury poisoning a big farce?” (73–80). It is quite possible that Jacobson was the “reformed bleeding heart” author cited in note 1.


cultural landscape conflict cannot be resolved solely through the institutions of legislature and court orders. What transpires “on the ground” is both the point of contention and pathway to ultimate resolution.

In order to re-imagine “Them and Us,” it is imperative to re-conceptualize simultaneously spatial and temporal configurations. Identifying a community as “isolated” masks a form of symbolic violence. The Jones Road placed Indigenous and settler Canadians on the same literal ground. The story of relocation, resource use stress, and political conflict in northwestern Ontario are well-trodden paths in the story of Indigenous/settler-state relations. Likewise, the distinctions between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian ontologies with respect to cultural landscape are finally coming to light. However, one need not approach post-treaty environmental history in the context of what appears to be binding binary dualisms framed by economic politics. Associative cultural landscapes offer a novel and relevant approach to understanding and appreciating the multiple meanings that arise when cultures come in contact and dialogue ensues. Rivers and roads not only intersect at times—they also run parallel and in more than one direction.

References

Primary Sources
A. Periodicals
Canadian Dimension
Fort William Times Journal
Halifax Daily News
The Indian Voice
Kenora Daily Miner and News
Labour Challenge
Maclean’s Magazine
Native Perspective
The Newsletter of Project Peacemakers
New Socialist
Ottawa Citizen
Sojourners
Toronto Star

B. Reports and Reviews


*Widjitiwin, A Helping Hand to the Poor in Their Self-training*, Canadian Association for the Support of Native People (Vertical File #68293).


Secondary Sources


Electronic Sources