

POWER FROM THE NORTH: TERRITORY, IDENTITY, AND THE CULTURE OF HYDRO-ELECTRICITY IN QUEBEC. Caroline Desbiens. 2013. Vancouver: UBC Press. xxiii + 281 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7748-2416-3. CA \$95.00.

The idea of the north has played a significant role in the shaping of Canadian identity nationally and internationally. Despite the centrality of the north in discussions in Canada, the vast majority of Canadians live in the southern territories of the country and for many, the north continues to be difficult to define and often difficult to relate to the everyday life of the majority of Canadians. As a result, the north has developed an almost mythical quality – one that is reinforced by colonial symbolism and that often continues to be imagined as *terra nullius*, an empty frontier or savage wilderness. These imaginings of the north have resulted in significant environmental damage to indigenous territories and fueled the mega-development projects like the La Grande hydro complex in Québec that have multifaceted and resounding impacts in local communities.

In *Power from the north*, geographer Caroline Desbiens explores the nexus of hydroelectricity, Québécois identity, and the cultural narratives that are used by southern Québécois to justify resource development in the northern regions of the province. The result is a wonderfully personal and critical reflection on the culture of hydroelectricity in Québec and ‘the importance of reading economic development through a cultural lens’ (page 6). Her work broadens current examinations of space and place research among Euro-Canadian researchers who may be unfamiliar with the work of French, Swiss, and Québécois academics such as Joël Bonnemaison, Claude Raffestin, and Louis-Edmond Hamelin.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which provide a fresh approach to what Desbiens refers to as the ‘culture of hydroelectricity’ (page 13) in Quebec. The first part presents a broad overview of the historical and political processes that resulted in the creation and construction of the La Grande project. Desbiens primarily focuses her discussion on the Québécois political leaders like Bourassa, Lévesque, and mobilization of culturally salient concepts in Québécois identity – nature, north, and nation. She skillfully demonstrates the significant role that the government and media played in mobilizing the symbolic elements of Québécois cultural values and the connection between hydro-development and the concurrent sovereignty movement in the province. It is also in this first part that Desbiens focuses the majority of her discussion on the experiences of the indigenous peoples of the James Bay region. She engages with the indigenous peoples’ experience quite briefly but respectfully, pointing out that the purpose of the book is to present how southern Québécois conceptualize northern development. This approach is perhaps more necessary in recent times given the lack of critical work on the ontological claims utilized by governments, corporations and politicians to justify large scale economic development in the Arctic and Subarctic. Furthermore, there is a rich body of work by anthropologists who worked closely with the Cree on their experiences with hydro development (see Salisbury 1981; Tanner 1979) and Desbiens does point out that discussing indigenous experience is beyond her expertise.

Part two of the book is composed to two chapters meant to situate the La Grande project in the literary and agrarian tradition of the Québécois. Dealing with the genre referred to as ‘les roman de la terre’ (books of the earth), this section seems slightly out of place but does provide a refreshing connection between literature and development discourse that is often lacking in contemporary discussions of Arctic development. The comparison of literary works could be shortened given the aims and purposes of Desbiens project. However, there is certainly great merit to her analysis as she aptly demonstrates how the imagery and symbolism of these classic pieces is mobilized by both government and corporation to garner support for hydro-development and to influence northern territorial expansion.

The third part of the book is the most compelling. This section is split into three chapters: *Pioneers*, *Workers* and *Spectators*. Focusing on the labourers and engineers, Desbiens explores how people from the south hired to work and construct the large hydro complex were rewriting the landscape itself and forging new connections and conceptualizations of land and territory. She brings into focus the symbolic and abstract processes that have created new ideas of the north and that are even now influencing political and economic government policies in Quebec. Desbiens marvellously pulls together her work in a powerful concluding chapter, arguing that ‘a northern geographical imagination that remains anchored in a colonial settler mentality,’ continues to be utilized by decision makers to operate as a means of fulfilling ‘a number of key social, political, and economic functions’ (page 208, 209). The result of this geographic imagined ‘north’ is the ongoing exploitation of northern non-renewable and renewable resources. Renewed exploration and development in northern Quebec as a part of the Plan Nord promises to result in new environmental and socio-cultural challenges for northern peoples. Desbiens’ concluding message is personal and evocative as she calls on the Québécois living in the southern parts of the province to challenge cultural narratives that continue to support colonial imaginings of the northern reaches of the province by learning more about the northern reaches of Quebec and the impact of large-scale resource development projects.

Power from the north is an excellent new contribution to the Nature|History|Society series from UBC Press. It connects beautifully with the other books in the series and will compliment work on the ways in which people conceptualize and transform the north through material, and particularly discursive, formations. This book will interest scholars across the fields of anthropology, geography and sociology, as well as those with a special interest in northern scholarship and space and place research. (Morgan Moffitt, Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta, Edmonton AB, T6G 2H4, Canada (moffit@ualberta.ca)).

References

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