(Re)producing wilderness tourism discourses in Algonquin Provincial Park

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Abstract
Particular types of nature-based tourism programs, including multi-day children’s overnight/residential summer camp canoe tripping programs in North America, often (re)produce (neo)colonial constructions of nature and the “wilderness.” The purpose of this paper is to expose how wilderness is constructed and circulated in the context of a particular summer camp’s canoe trips in Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, Canada. Within this paper, we identify how specific legacies of colonialism are maintained and redeployed through the practices and representations of summer camp canoe trippers. Specifically, analyses show how canoe trippers (re)produce and (re)enact the wilderness as seemingly empty, untouched, and pristine spaces. Drawing on a Foucauldian-styled discourse analysis, this research exposes recurrent power relations that normalize, re-inscribe, and enable unjust wilderness discourses on Canadian summer camp canoe trips.

Keywords
Algonquin Provincial Park, critical discourses analysis, summer camp, postcolonialism, wilderness discourse

Introduction
In many contemporary tourism contexts, the wilderness is often represented as perceived space untouched by civilization and modernization (Saarinen, 2016). This prevailing wilderness discourse has led to much academic inquiry (see Braun, 2002; Cronon, 1996; Grimwood et al., 2015; Mullins, 2009), including studies that show how the ongoing
constructions of modern wilderness spaces are tethered to racist, gendered, and class-based foundations (Erickson, 2015; Newbery, 2013). These wilderness discourses rely on what Braun (2002) refers to as the “reterritorialization” of space (p. 142), in which landscapes are discursively erased of all existing social, political, economic, and cultural histories and is rebranded as a pristine, empty, and undiscovered space (Cooke, 2018).

Residential summer camps for children are among the organizations that rely upon and invest in these constructions of the wilderness. Since the earliest days of summer camps in Ontario, Canada, camping organizations have marketed themselves as offering exciting experiences for youth beyond the realms of modern everyday life (Wall, 2009). Canoe tripping programs have been an important vehicle used by camps to introduce children and youth to “backcountry” environments that are coded as untouched, natural, and beyond the realm of modern, civil, and progressive social organization. Canoe trips—which are widely recognized and celebrated within the fabric of Canadian identity and nation-making—involve traveling through a series of lakes and waterways, portage trails, and designated camping areas or crown land. Trips range from as little as a few days to multi-week expeditions. Children’s summer camp canoe trips often involve two or three adult guides leading a group of six to ten campers on excursions through parks, protected areas, or river systems. Many camps in the southern and central parts of Ontario use Algonquin Provincial Park as the destination for such programming.

Established in 1893 by The Government of Ontario, Algonquin Provincial Park is the oldest provincial park in Canada (Remmel, 2009). The enclosed size of the park is 7653 square kilometers and is home to more than 2400 lakes and over 1200 km of streams and rivers (Reynolds, 2010). The park caters to a wide range of visitors: from those opting for rugged, multi-day backcountry experiences to those searching for luxury at a fine-dining restaurant or lodge (Eagles & Bandoh, 2009). Algonquin Provincial Park attracts more than a million visitors each year, the majority of whom are motivated by desires to connect with, explore, and experience the “natural” landscapes (Algonquin Park Residents Association, n.d).

Algonquin Provincial Park is situated on ancestral and traditional territory of the Algonquin Nation. The Algonquin Nation is a diverse group of First Nation peoples who share a similar culture, identity, language, and governance foundations (Lawrence, 2012). Their ancestral lands span the Ottawa River watershed and their heritage can be traced back to 3000–10,000 years from the present-day (Lawrence, 2012). Before Samuel de Champlain’s 1603 arrival to what he deemed “New France,” the Algonquin Peoples maintained dynamic governance, cultural, economic, social, and political systems. These were devalued by European Settlers and their systems and narratives of progress, which ultimately cast Algonquin peoples as “primitive” and in need of Settler benevolence and advancement (Lawrence, 2012, p. 113). Settlers perceived the demise of Algonquin peoples as inevitable and therefore felt little remorse in claiming Algonquin lands and resources as their own (Grimwood et al., 2019b).

This paper presents research relating to contemporary canoe trips in Algonquin Provincial Park operated as part of a particular residential summer camp’s programming. The summer camp is a non-profit religious-oriented residential operation located just southwest Algonquin Park borders in Haliburton, Ontario. In serving its primarily Greater Toronto Area (GTA) clientele, the camp experience involves a range of land
activities (sports, high ropes, archery, drama, music, dance, arts, and crafts) and water activities (canoeing, sailing, windsurfing, water skiing) while housing up to 500 campers and 200 staff at a time. The camp’s canoe tripping program typically involves groups of nine campers and staff, who travel a designated route through Algonquin Provincial Park over 4-days and three-nights. For many of the campers, this canoe trip represents their first multi-day, backcountry nature experience.

In this paper, we draw attention to how this camp’s canoe trips contribute to the production of a particular tourism landscape (i.e. Algonquin Provincial Park) and, more specifically, to how these reproduce perceptions, meanings, and practices of wilderness. Our overarching purpose is to expose how wilderness is constructed and circulated in the context of summer camp canoe trips. Our analyses seek to address two research questions: how do summer camp canoe trippers (re)produce Algonquin Provincial Park as a wilderness tourism destination? And how is settler-colonial power, privilege, and knowledge circulated and normalized within the wilderness tourism discourses of summer camp canoe trips? We engage a postcolonial mobile framework, which includes a Foucauldian-styled discourse analysis, to not only understand how the wilderness discourse is recurrently circulated, normalized, and structured, but also to contribute to the political project of exposing its limits. Specifically, this paper aims to contribute to understandings of how the discourse of wilderness gets wrapped up in colonial logics and legacies of erasing, displacing, and dispossessing Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories. Prior to explaining our methodology, we situate our study within related literature on summer camps, discourses, outdoor recreation, and tourism.

**Literature review**

The literature surrounding residential summer camp is interdisciplinary and has been approached through multiple lenses: youth capacity building (Garst et al., 2011; Povilaitis and Tamminen, 2017), skill development (Duerden et al., 2014; Wilson & Sibthorp, 2018), and as a facilitator of outdoor recreation (Collado et al., 2013; Dann and Schroeder, 2015; Watson, 2006). However, as Rantala and Varley (2019) have argued, camping in North American and European societies invokes a particular and “desired feeling” that includes “access to isolated, natural sites and quieter more self-sufficient leisure” (p. 298).

The links between camping, nature, and tourism suggest that camping practices are constructed experiences that enable carefully crafted feelings, emotions, and outcomes (Rantala and Varley, 2019). Put differently, outdoor recreational tourism experiences, such as summer camps, can reinforce particular social norms and discursive truths. Discourses are a “series of representations, practices, performances, [images, imaginings, and ideas] whose meanings give the world its particular shape(s)” (Gregory, 2001: 86). Discourses can assert collective assumptions and ways of thinking as factual and objective ways of reading the world, enabling particular assumptions and ideas as seemingly factual and legitimate renditions of truth (Schwandt, 2007).

Norton (1996) wrote, discourses “[are some of] the most important elements shaping popular consciousness of places, cultures, and nature” (p. 356). They have the power to shape how spaces are conceptualized and communicated, regardless of the accuracy particular understandings maintain. “Different ideas,” Saarinen (2016) explained, “of the
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wild have an influence on and are guided by different priorities, meanings, understandings, uses and values of the wildernesses” (p. 418). To deconstruct the discourses in which particular conceptions of wilderness rest simultaneously highlights the power and privilege imbalances that exist among epistemic communities (Castree, 2013).

In a North American context, wilderness tourism experiences are, as Grimwood et al. (2015) have argued about Canada’s north, constructed in relation to recurrent social, political, and cultural relations. Grimwood et al. (2015) adopt a postcolonial theoretical orientation to suggest colonial powers operate in and through ongoing systems of oppression that continue to privilege certain ways of thinking, knowing, and being over others. Residential summer camps are, similarly, complicit. In Baker’s (2020) novel about North American summer camps, for instance, the nature-based travel programs associated with camps are shown to depend upon and mobilize broader dominant social discourses. Indeed, Baker explains how summer camp leisure and tourism experiences are situated atop “wider [social] debates about identity, postmodernity, and globalization” (Baker, 2020: ii). Put differently, there are “real-world . . .socially-dominant ideologies” that inherently marginalize particular populations and have normalized and are circulated within the world of tourism (Grimwood et al., 2015: 23).

Research has consistently shown how many modes and experiences of tourism exploit and depend upon colonial structures, languages, representations, and images to construct a marketable and exciting tourism experience to entice their clientele (Tucker, 2019). For example, Vidon (2016) explored how power and agency continuously shape and redefine Adirondack Park in the United States. Vidon (2016) argues that discursive renderings of particular park spaces are wrapped up in power struggles that sustain particular ideological truths and ways of knowing the landscapes. Further, Newbery (2012) exposes the neocolonial relations involved in canoe tripping practices in Canadian outdoor education contexts and concludes that canoe tripping through wilderness spaces discursively relies on inherently political power relations. Moreover, Newbery (2012) explains the inseparability between the wilderness, displacement of Indigenous Peoples, and canoe trips. The present study is positioned among previous works but localizes the discussion to a summer camp canoe trip. It turns to the camp canoe trippers as authoritative agents who intentionally create and recreate particular experiences (Vidon, 2016). Moreover, it looks towards the camp canoe tripper and the unique role the play in creating, circulating, and legitimizing particular discursive power relations.

Vannini and Vannini (2016, 2019, 2020), among others, have begun to make sense of the phenomenological and relational entanglements embedded with place-based ideas of wildness, moving the academic conversation beyond that of Euro-western epistemologies. The arguments maintain that the wild is a constantly (re)negotiated and socially situated entity, meaning that the wild is a space where humans and non-humans collide to form and reform one another (Vannini and Vannini, 2019). The argument moves beyond dichotomous Eurocentric conceptualizations of the wilderness and looks toward multiple relational epistemologies that make and remake wildness (Lorimer, 2015; Vannini and Vannini, 2019). Despite such important shifts in how wild(er)ness is theorized, enacted, and relationally configured, we maintain that there are valuable insights still to be gained from social constructionist informed investigations. In particular, attending to discourse remains a useful way to destabilize regimes of truth that
rely on and reinscribe unjust social formations through patterns of speech, text, and performance (Wylie, 2006). Moreover, the analytics of discourse offer tools designed to show how particular epistemic communities, like camp counselors, continue to give shape and meaning to particular tourism landscapes. We follow in the likes of Grimwood et al. (2019b) in responding to Hollinshead’s (1992) call for scholars to ongoingly expose oppressive tourism discourses and how they silence alternative ways of “knowing” tourism landscapes. To further make sense of how these negative and ongoing legacies penetrate summer camp canoe trips and wilderness tourism discourses, we adopt a postcolonial theoretical lens.

Postcolonial inquiries challenge normalized hegemonic accounts of truth and expose the unjust power and political relations that sustain, enable, circulate, and normalize them. While postcolonial scholarship has been diversely defined and deployed, we engage it in this paper as a theoretically informed approach to inquiry designed to illuminate and critique the “cultural, economic, and political conditions that exist in the aftermath of colonialism” (Braun, 2002: 21). A crucial departure point for our use and interpretation of postcolonial theory is that the term “post” in postcolonialism does not signify that colonialism has a finite temporal period that has passed, but rather is used intentionally to “draw attention to the colonial and neocolonial relations in the [localized] present” (Braun, 2002: 21). Following the likes of Jazeel (2012) and Braun (2002), we use postcolonial theory to critique the effects of colonialism and how they have shaped, and are shaping, present-day settler-colonial power relations. We use postcolonial theory to further understand the relations of power that normalize the hegemonic systems that perpetuate the genocidal loss of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

Materials and methods

Our study engaged a postcolonial mobile methodological framework to analyze how discourses of wilderness circulate within the meanings and practices of a particular group of summer camp canoe trip leaders. This framework used a postcolonial lens to make sense of particular displays of power and privilege that canoe trippers manifest as they move through Algonquin Provincial Park. The methodological orientation aimed to illuminate how the trippers (re)produced discourses of the wilderness, and how these are tethered to reproducing and sustaining colonial structures and systems.

Data collection occurred during two of the summer camp’s canoe trip experiences in the summer of 2018. Aligning with tenets and approaches associated with the mobilities research paradigm, the principal researcher acted simultaneously as a researcher and participant during the excursions (Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006). This crucial and challenging process, as Mullins (2014) reflects, provides a profound perspective for any researcher to critique and better understand particular phenomena. The complexities of the discursive effects of truths the trippers embodied were made legible by the settings and landscapes the canoe trips journeyed through. This methodological approach allowed us to gather thick descriptions and nuanced understandings of how the canoe trippers embodied and (re)produced particular wilderness discourses in situ (Mullins, 2014). To employ a mobile methodological approach demands that researchers adopt a critically reflexive positionality within the contexts of field site that is on-the-move (Grimwood,
This situated, immersive approach to research is especially relevant for this study as the place meanings of canoe landscapes are shaped and enacted as canoeists move through them (Mullins, 2009).

Our methods of data collection centered on a group of six canoe trip leaders (or trippers). These individuals were purposefully selected because of their involvement with the canoe tripping program. Further, they were selected for their experiences in canoe tripping and their positions as authoritative figures on the trips. They were the only trippers at the summer camp and available to participate in the study. All of the trippers identified as white, middle- to upper-class Canadians of European descent, and were born and raised in the Greater Toronto Area. To help protect their identities, each tripper was given a pseudonym (Table 1). Data were generated through participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and an adaptation of Mullins (2014) commonplace journaling activity. Our use of these methods aligned with the postcolonial mobilities paradigm for their reflexivity and on-the-go nature. Further, they provided space for the trippers to reveal and reflect on their emotions, thoughts, and experiences through a variety of sensory, spoken, and performed responses throughout the canoe trips.

We used participant observations to focus on how the trippers negotiated various sensory experiences they encountered and how they responded to expected and unexpected events on the trips. Through participant observations, we were exposed to the ways in which the trippers embodied and performed particular discourses as they canoed through Algonquin Provincial Park. These observations were written in a field journal and later extended into field notes. The field notes were used in our data analysis processes.

The principal researcher also facilitated a series of semi-structured, active interviews during the canoe trips (Table 2). These interviews were conversational and depended on the “mutual sharing and disclosure of information” between the researcher and participant (Johnson and Parry, 2015: 56). They loosely followed an interview guide that asked participants to detail their meanings, perspectives, and understandings of wilderness and being a canoe tripper. The semi-structured interviews provided some direction to the conversation while still allowing it to flow in any direction decided by the researcher or participant.

Towards the ends of the canoe trips, the trippers were asked to read a pre-selected newspaper article, “The Shady Past of Parks Canada: Forced out, Indigenous people are forging a comeback” (Hamilton, 2017), that challenged Eurocentric wilderness discourses. Using
the article as a starting point, the trippers were asked to reflect on settler-Indigenous relationships in the context of parks and protected areas in Canada and to begin questioning what they knew and assumed about Algonquin Provincial Park. The trippers used the article, and made frequent verbal reference to their journals, to scrutinize their epistemic foundations of Algonquin Provincial Park. During these interviews, trippers began to label some of the unseen, unspoken, and unheard colonial legacies in Algonquin Provincial Park, including ongoing legacies of cultural domination and dispossession. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

The in situ nature of conducting the interviews proved to be a methodological challenge. The interviews could only occur when the trippers fulfilled their duties to the campers and the canoe trip. As a result, the interviews occurred when the campers were sleeping, the trippers were cooking, or the trip came across unexpected downtime. Several interviews lasted well over half an hour, while a couple were under ten minutes in length. In addition, two of the participants, Ethan and Alex, were interviewed together due to logistical constraints of the canoe trip. Among other responsibilities, Ethan and Alex were both lifeguards on the canoe trips. They were tasked with watching the campers whenever they were on or near the water, which, given the nature of a canoe trip, happened more often than not. The trippers held primary duties to the canoe trip, and not to the research. This meant that the interviews had to occur whenever and wherever it was possible rather than being prescriptive to a predetermined time length or interview frequency.

The third method of data collection we used was an adapted version of Mullin’s (2014) commonplace journaling activity. Our use of this method asked participants to actively journal their perceptions of the human-nature relationship while canoe tripping. Each tripper was given a journal and was asked to document their thoughts, emotions, feelings, and experiences as they pertained to the journey and the landscapes they passed. The journals exposed how the trippers internally construct particular Euro-western epistemic considerations of Algonquin Provincial Park and backcountry canoe trips. After the canoe trips, the journal entries were scanned and added to our field notes. They were similarly analyzed to the fieldnotes.

| Participant       | Date            | Interview length (minutes) | Location                        |
|-------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Rebecca           | July 19, 2018   | 36:59                      | Lake Galeairy                   |
| Rebecca           | July 19, 2018   | 9:40                       | Lake Galeairy                   |
| Rebecca           | July 19, 2018   | 4:03                       | Rock Lake                       |
| Rebecca           | July 19, 2018   | 28:11                      | Rock Lake                       |
| Rebecca           | July 20, 2018   | 17:24                      | Rock Lake                       |
| Dylan             | July 30, 2018   | 32:31                      | Highway 30–Highway 60           |
| Ethan and Alex    | July 31, 2018   | 50:11                      | Lake Louisa                     |
| Will              | July 31, 2018   | 49:52                      | Lake Louisa                     |
| Will              | August 1, 2018  | 30:03                      | Lake Louisa                     |
| Dylan             | August 1, 2018  | 23:10                      | Lake Louisa                     |
| Adam              | August 1, 2018  | 44:05                      | Lake Louisa                     |
Our methods of data collection exposed nuanced, contradictory, and complex ways in which the trippers embodied and produced discourses of the wilderness. Aligning with the in situ nature of the mobilities paradigm, these methods of data collection allowed us to consider how time and space influence the tripper’s practices on canoe trips. Further, similar to what Mullins (2014) experienced with his commonplace journey methodology, these methods allowed us to engage with notions of practice and place in discursive effects of truth for creative and critical interpretive research purposes.

To make sense of the data, we used Kendall and Wickham’s (1999) approach to Foucauldian-styled Discourse Analysis (FDA). Foucauldian discourse analyses focus on scrutinizing how social structures, powers, and relationships discipline what is known (Kendall and Wickham, 1999). Further, they explore how these effects of truth circulate within and govern the practices of particular social groups (Wylie, 2006). Our use of a Foucauldian discourse analysis, informed by our postcolonial theoretical orientation, aimed to expose how colonial power imbalances are normalized, circulated, and sustained through the canoe trippers’ understandings and practices of wilderness.

Kendall and Wickham (1999) developed a five-step process to help scholars make sense of particular discourses through a Foucauldian lens. Their approach begins by attending to the multitude of discourses present within a data set. By doing so, recurrent patterns of social thought that have been normalized in particular ways of thinking are exposed. Kendall and Wickham’s (1999) second step involves considering the broader social contexts and institutions in which the discourses are produced. In our case, we identified social and historical foundations that have historically enabled and strengthened the wilderness discourse. The third and fourth steps seek the productive limits to the discourses. In identifying the statements that align with discourses (step three), the statements that contrast the discourses (step four) come to light. Accordingly, our analysis scrutinized present-day social settings that have constructed, normalized, and circulated discursive statements about wilderness as legitimate constructions of truth within the social contexts of canoe tripping. In other words, we sought to identify the limits to the discursive structures by finding the statements that the trippers frequently reproduced and the statements that the trippers, consciously and unconsciously, silenced and navigated around. The final step in Kendall and Wickham’s process entails identifying the link between the material and discursive worlds, showing the inseparability between the physical world and its discursive productions. Translating this to our analysis, we looked at the ways in which discursive thoughts were materialized and circulated among the trippers. In other words, we examined the tripper’s practices and perspectives to see how they strengthened particular discursive truths.

Waitt’s (2005) chapter on critical discourse analysis provided us with additional direction for our investigation. Recognizing the ambiguity around Foucault’s articulation of discourse analysis, Waitt recommends that analysts focus on identifying how particular powers, privileges, and knowledges have been circulated and normalized within discursive complexes. In practice, this entailed us orienting to the “political, material, social, and moral effects and outcomes” carried by particular discourses (Waitt, 2005: 188). Waitt’s (2005) guidance helped to ground our exploration with critical considerations (Table 3) as we scrutinized the discourses trippers relied on as they lead canoe trips, and
became further exposed to the multi-layered structures that enable Indigenous erasure, dispossession, and displacement within so-called wilderness places like Algonquin Park.

Based on the instructive guideposts of Kendall and Wickham (1999) and Waitt (2005), as well as the research objectives we aimed to address, we chose to organize the analysis and discussion of this paper into two parts. The first part focuses on illuminating the prevailing discourses the canoe trippers expressed while leading canoe trips through Algonquin Provincial Park. The second part considers broader social circumstances and texts that help render legitimate the discursive truths the trippers operate within.

**Meanings and practices of wilderness**

Wilderness discourses shape how the trippers act, communicate, and assign meaning to the experiences of canoe tripping through Algonquin Provincial Park. In this section, we show the wilderness discourses summer camp canoe trippers rely upon while leading canoe trips.

On the first paddle of the first canoe trip, Rebecca asked her campers to look around the lake and take note of “what we see, smell, and hear” (Field Notes, July 17, 2018). “It’s just us in the complete wilderness,” she quietly responded to herself a few seconds later (Field Notes, July 17, 2018). She then yelled off into the landscape, only to have her voice echo in what Alex later labelled a “pure” natural space (Alex, July 31, 2018). She wanted her campers, right from the beginning of the experience, to see themselves in an empty world, absent from any modern developments. Ethan explained,
The untouched nature, the beautiful lakes, the colours, and the surroundings that you see is something that you never, can never see in the city. It includes the stars at night, the clear water by day, and the fish and the everything. . . there’s the smell, you can smell the pine trees, and the water, and sometimes the mud, but like, it’s just so untampered with. You know you hear the wildlife; you hear quiet for once in your life. . .[it’s] so raw and so real. . . (July 31, 2018)

In other words, the wilderness is “out in the woods, where you’re alone. . .away from society” (Will, July 31, 2018), or as Ethan puts it, a place where one “steps away from everything” (July 31, 2018). The trippers construct the wilderness as a place beyond modern luxuries, markets, cultures, and ways of life. By ensuring there should be nothing, “except for the natural environment” (Alex, July 31, 2018), the trippers are protecting their “constant getaway [from ever being] developed” or modernized (Rebecca, July 19, 2018). Rebecca adds,

It’s important to have a place that’s never changing. . .and just really awesome. Algonquin, to me, is just having this constant awesome place, probably for the rest of our lives. But it also means having [a] sanctuary from all of whatever is going on at home [and in the world]. You get to go on these four-day getaways from everything else that is going on in your life. . . That’s what’s really special about Algonquin, you just kind of get a break from everything going on. (July 19, 2018)

However, in a modern provincial park that sees millions of visitors annually (Algonquin Park Newspaper, 2018), ensuring the park remains seemingly free of, as Rebecca puts it, “everything going on at home,” is not always possible. The canoe trips passed by littered camping sites filled with empty wine boxes, granola bar wrappers, and cigarette butts (Field Notes, July 19). The garbage on the ground was a material reminder that the park spaces are not that far removed from the effects of modernity (Field Notes, July 30, 2018). Instantly, Rebecca announced to the group, “we don’t want to see that other people were here before. . .it’s not nice to see other people are in our wilderness” (Field Notes, July 19). When the trippers encountered litter—or other signs that disrupted their notions of wilderness (e.g. the Cache Lake Historic Site Walk that shows visitors where the first hotels in Algonquin Provincial Park were built)—they were quick to label it as “an obvious flaw” (Dylan, July 30, 2018). By labeling signs of the modern world within the park as a blemish on the structure of the park, they maintain it as a space of empty, pristine, and untouched wilderness.

Relying on the aforementioned discursive statements that place the empty, pristine, and untouched park beyond civilization, the trippers take the campers to “explore” and “discover” spaces where they maintain “no one has [ever] been” (Field Notes, July 31, 2019). “I always thought,” Dylan explained, “that the forest. . .[and] lakes. . .[are] too big and way too full of nature [to have had] human influence” (August 1, 2018). The trippers collectively maintained that the space is free from human influence and intervention, a similar rhetoric to the undiscovered, unexplored, and empty empire that European settlers used as they made their way through Canada hundreds of years earlier. Rebecca explains,
I have [campers] asking if Algonquin Park is just a lake. I [don’t think they realize] the enormity of [the park], [until] after I try to explain to them that the section that we’re in is a small portion. . .and there [so much] more to discover. Because of the way that camp canoe trips are set up, we only get [to see] a small portion of Algonquin. There’s a crazy amount more they can discover if they’re interested. (Rebecca, July 19, 2018)

When the trippers were asked what it means to be a canoe trippers, they replied that their job is to “take kids on. . .an adventure” (Adam, August 1, 2018), to help them “discover” the park (Rebecca, July 19, 2018), and the explore “the things they didn’t even know nature could do” (Will, July 31, 2018). Whether that means taking the campers on “crazy adventurous” experiences or running more passive programs that “let [the participants] figure out on their own. . .where they are” (Rebecca, July 19, 2018), the trippers rely on particular programs that reinforce discourses of discovery and exploration in Algonquin Provincial Park.

There are several physical sites in Algonquin Provincial Park that directly reference Indigenous presences in Canada and Algonquin Provincial Park. At the east gate of the park, there is a totem pole whose purpose is to recognize and pay homage Indigenous struggles and injustices within the park. Although the “totem pole is not a traditional way of expressing Algonquin culture. . . [the] totem pole [is a] way of sharing Algonquin culture with the future generations while honouring the ancestors [and] the hardships they had to face” (Algonquins of Ontario, 2013). Similarly, on the shores of Rock Lake, there are labeled Vision Pits and Pictographs, where “during puberty, the young Algonquins would lie in one of the thirty-one vision pits west of Rock Lake without eating until they had a vision” (Jeffs Map, 2014). These historically and culturally loaded Algonquin sites are statements of the Algonquin Nations presence on the landscapes, all of which counter the narratives of a pristine and empty landscape the trippers (re)produce (Field Notes, August 1, 2018). When encountered on the canoe trips, the trippers either silenced or ignored discourses that suggested ways of knowing the park that exist outside their own discursive truths. When talking about the Vision Pits on Rock Lake, Dylan mentioned, “I’ve passed by that Aboriginal Vision Pit on Rock Lake probably a dozen times, and it’s written right there on the map. . . and I [just] paddle past it” (August 1, 2018). As Will explained, to “talk about the history of the park [in regard to] the Indigenous Peoples. . .is not really what I do as a canoe tripper. . .” (Will, August 1, 2018). Such encounters with aspects of the park that challenge particular discursive truths the trippers maintained were met with disapproval and silence.

The canoe trip leaders invest in and circulate a particular construction of wilderness as they lead campers on journeys through Algonquin Provincial Park. Wilderness is described, assigned meaning, performed, and encountered by trippers as a landscape that is seemingly empty, unchanging, and natural—a space for discovery and adventure that lies beyond the realm of modern civilization. By subscribing to this discourse of wilderness, trippers perceive themselves as rightful visitors, if not “owners” or “stewards” of the land, and as highly capable guides that facilitate learning, exploration, and nature-based connections of summer camp youth. The following section works to trouble, or open up, these normalized settler-constructed wilderness discursive structures.
Circulating the wilderness

In this section, we explore how the aforementioned stories, meanings, and ideas of the wilderness are socially normalized and sustained. Specifically, we interpret how wilderness discourses circulate among various “texts” to discipline, or socialize, the summer camp canoe trippers. We will show how the trippers are socialized—via their past trippers and park managers—to reproduce a notion of “wilderness” that is rooted in settler-colonial legacies. In addition to further illustrating the social nature of wilderness, we seek to expose how settler-colonial power relations reverberate through this particular group of trippers and become further inscribed onto the Algonquin Provincial Park landscape.

Past trippers

When the trippers were asked where they learned their roles and responsibilities of being a canoe tripper, they each accredit their canoe trippers that guided them through the park years earlier. Adam explains, “I was taught in an era from other trippers, and a lot of things are passed down” (August 1, 2018). Rebecca explains the cycle with a personal example,

I used to pick up the lily pads, like pick them out of the water as we were canoeing. And then my trippers would get mad and explained why we don’t do that, and not that’s something engrained in my own ethical background—not picking up the lily pads because I want to keep everything the way it was before I was there. And hopefully, now that goes into my campers when I told them not to pick at the lily pads. . . (July 19, 2018)

Rebecca’s experiences are not unique. Will explained, “on my first canoe trip, [my trippers] gave a whole speech about leaving no trace on a canoe trip, which basically began the rule of obviously you can’t leave out, or any sign, that you were there” (July 31, 2018).

Rebecca’s and Will’s examples show the influence of past trippers in socializing their campers into particular socially accepted ways of thinking and acting and the ongoing nature of this socialization process. Both Rebecca and Will’s trippers taught them to maintain the space as an untouched and pristine wilderness by negatively responding to actions that physically altered the landscape and praising those that discursively maintained it beyond human influence. However, the true strength of the discourse is shown when Rebecca says that the principle of a pristine and empty space has “engrained into [her] own ethical background” and that she hopes her campers will experience the same (July 19, 2018). In other words, the discourse has instilled in Rebecca as a commonsense norm and practice, which she hopes her campers will eventually embody as well.

When the trippers explain that they “take after” their own trippers and “follow” in their lead/direction, they reproduce a wilderness discourses that was presented to them (Alex, July 31, 2018). Adam explains,

these kids look up to you, no matter what age they are they still look up to you for guidance and mentorship and they will follow what you do and they will live by the rules and morals and values that you instill upon themselves or that you tell them about. (August 1, 2018)
In related research, Sharpe (2005) discussed the important role that outdoor wilderness guides play in the socialization process of clients. Sharp argues that outdoor wilderness and adventure guides, much like summer camp counselors, are responsible for giving their participant cues as to how they should be conceptualizing and performing within wilderness spaces. While these cues certainly offer some instructive directions for staying safe and supporting the integrity of ecological systems that are visited, they are also embedded within larger cultural narratives and discursive formations (Grimwood et al., 2018). Camp counselors are agents of socialization who enroll their campers into particularly constructed regimes of truth (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981; Grimwood et al., 2018). Campers, or canoe trip participants (in the case of this research), learn particular ways of thinking and truths of the world around them by attending to the actions of their counselors and leaders. When those campers become leaders, they then (re)produce the very discourses that were exposed to them years earlier.

**Park management texts**

Algonquin Provincial Park’s managing authority similarly circulates wilderness discourses through promotional materials and the official park map. Baker (2002) argued that Algonquin Park is a multi-dimensional space encoded with social, political, cultural, and economic histories that reproduce social class relations within its boundaries. The park uses and offers particular actors specific maps, encoded with different readings and renderings of the space, all of which sustain different truths of the landscapes. For example, loggers, recreationists, and Indigenous communities will all use different maps that orient them to the landscape, and its uses, differently.

The map produced and sold by the park to recreational visitors (Figure 1) shows the canoe routes, camping sites, and portage lines that connect with Rock Lake in the southern handle of the park. However, it fails to show and recognize the traditional Algonquin Vision Pits and Pictographs on the lake’s shore (Lawrence, 2012) and the hundreds of kilometers of permanent logging roads (Baker, 2002). Whereas Anglo-names of lakes and riverways, symbols to designate campsites, portage trails, hiking trails, dams, and some recreational roadways can all be seen. The map meant for recreational canoers represents a space that has been designed for users to consume a particular experience that relies on the absence of civilization, including the absences of historical and contemporary Indigenous Peoples and economic industries. As a result, the landscape is (re)presented as an ahistorical pristine wilderness space designed for backcountry adventures, as opposed to a space packed with socio-political, historical, economic, and racial inequities.

The trippers, however, use “Jeff’s Map,” a map published in 2011 by a recreational park user to help others navigate backcountry landscapes and sold online (Jeff’s Map, 2014). The map is widely embraced by recreationists for its clarity, accuracy, attention to detail (Jeff’s Map, 2014). Unlike the official Canoe Routes Map sold by Ontario Parks, Jeff’s Map provides estimated canoe travel times, distances, and recommendations on different sites to stop at marvel at. Despite not always stopping at the sites endorsed by Jeff’s Map, the trippers rely on the map to help them get through the park at a reasonable, safe pace.
Rock Lake, on Jeff’s Map (Figure 2), labels the Algonquin Vision Pits and Pictographs on the western shore of the lake, and the historic train tracks and remains of lumber baron J.R. Booth’s estate on the east. Dylan mentioned that he doesn’t often acknowledge the Vision Pitts and Pictographs despite regularly passing them on his canoe trips (August 1, 2018). When asked why, Dylan explained, “I don’t have anything to contribute to a conversation [about these sites], nor am I capable of leading that [type] of conversation” (August 1, 2018).

The trippers are willfully ignorant towards these spaces, moving past them without formally recognizing or introducing them to their campers. Even as the trippers passed by the clearly labeled traditional Algonquin and lumber/resource development sites, they neglected to engage in conversations with their campers that would expose them to different and historical uses of the space. As a result, the trippers were contributing to the ongoing cycle in which the campers are exposed to a particular set of Euro-western stories, narratives, feelings, and emotions that align with, and strengthen, the wilderness discourses they subscribe to.
The maps are critical pieces to the wilderness discourse. The maps keep recreational tourism groups to specific routes, away from logging and economic development sites and traditional Algonquin cultural spaces. Further, the Algonquin Provincial Park website explains that hunting is only permitted in certain areas of the park on registered traplines in selected areas—outside many of the recreational, tourism, or wilderness spaces (Algonquin Provincial Park, 2020). As a result, the park landscapes can be seemingly kept as a pristine space beyond the borders of civilization for its recreational visitors.

However, despite being labeled as an “inhumane practice” by Rebecca (July 19, 2018), “hunting [and gathering] is a form of religion and a source of spiritual enrichment and [ethical] guidance” for many Indigenous peoples (Manore & Miner, 2011: 256). For the Algonquin Peoples, practicing their traditional methods of subsistence, the processes that physically, culturally, and socially sustained them, directly counters the dominant circulated discourse. In their attempt to ensure visitors “keep Algonquin’s wildlife. . . wild,” the official Algonquin Park Newspaper explains, “charges can be laid” for any action that impacts the wellbeing of non-human species (Algonquin Park Newspaper, 2018). What is not clearly conveyed in this Park publication, or by the canoe trippers, are the deeply moral, culturally relevant, and heavily regulated processes of hunting and gathering that Algonquin Peoples undergo when practicing their traditional cultures (Lawrence, 2012).

Hunting and trapping are only “permitted within designated areas. . . and only during specified time periods,” free from recreational influence (Algonquin Provincial Park Management Plan, 2002: 23). Hunting and trapping practices, similar to that of logging, are silenced from recreational park users as canoeists are forced to stay on designated routes, camp in designated spaces, and portage on designated trails. Neither of the recreational maps discussed in this paper guide visitors into spaces where hunting and trapping are legally permitted activities. As a result, traditional subsistence practices are seemingly removed from the recreational landscape. This is another example of the
ways in which settler-actors rely on self-fulfilling discourses to render their uses of the wilderness legitimate while silencing and labeling other uses and conceptions as wrong and immoral.

Conclusion

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada published 94 Calls to Action to redress the ongoing legacies of colonization and settler-colonialism in Canadian societies (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The 47th Call to Action challenges the Doctrine of Discovery and the principle of terra nullius. The Doctrine of Discovery was used to justify European colonization on vacant landscapes free of the religiously Christian and seemingly sophisticated man (Miller et al., 2010). The terra nullius principle, similarly, self-justifies European colonization and holds that Indigenous Peoples are inferior to Europeans and therefore cannot own and cultivate land (Asch, 2002). The wilderness discourses that the trippers rely on as they move through Algonquin Provincial Park (re)enable both the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius. The discourses enable the trippers to wrongfully rebrand a socio-political and cultural space as an empty, pristine, and undiscovered space in which European settler recreationists can reimagine themselves continuously (re)discovering.

When confronted with statements that show the landscapes are infused with history, culture, and economic prosperity, the trippers are quick to rely on Euro-western discourses to silence, demoralize, or pivot around them. Further, the wilderness discourses allow the trippers to recreate the settings, time and time again, in which they can rely on federally disputed and unjust principles of terra nullius and the Doctrine of Discovery to satisfy their own desired recreational experiences. As a result, the trippers need only to rely on their self-serving set of epistemic discursive truths to guide them through the park.

In this paper, we have exposed the discourse of wilderness that summer camp canoe trippers operate within and how it circulates. We have shown how the trippers have been socialized to discourses of an empty and pristine landscape that relies on silenced stories of Indigenous erasure and displacement, racial injustice, and resource extraction. We used a Foucauldian-styled discourse analysis to explore which legacies the trippers rely on, and which they expel, to enable particular effects of truth. In this paper, we have aimed to show how summer camp canoe trippers (re)produced the wilderness while leading canoe trips through Algonquin Provincial Park. Further, this work presents canoe trip leaders with a challenging, yet critical, opportunity to rethink their relationships to camping, canoeing, the wilderness, and the uneven historical and present-day relationships between Indigenous Peoples and settler-Canadians.

In this paper, we have shown the wilderness discourses the trippers use to navigate Algonquin Provincial Park contribute to falsely shaping Algonquin traditional homelands as untouched pristine wilderness tourism landscapes. However, this is not an absolute rendering of space. Discourses can be fractured (Braun, 2002). They are not all-encompassing objective notions of truth that universally dictate how to think, act, understand, and interact with the world. Rather, they are “partial and situated” (Castree and Braun, 2001: 85) constructions of truth that change and evolve as those relying on them (re)negotiate their powers, places, identities, and sovereignties (Sium et al., 2012).
It is important to remember that discourses are socially specific frames of reference that guide a particular social group’s thoughts, worldviews, and opinions. Outdoor recreational leaders, tourism providers, and contemporary settler-Canadians alike bear a responsibility to attend to unjust and sustained discursive structures that maintain present-day (neo)colonial relations (Stewart, 2008). There needs to be a collective social and structural shift toward decolonization, thereby lifting the veil of ignorance that dominant Eurocentric discourses and settler-actors rely upon. Decolonization focuses on decentering colonial discourses and power structures (Ibrahima and Mattaini, 2019) by weaving diverse historical, cultural, knowledge, and power relations together (Weaver, 1999). “Learning to tell new stories,” Grimwood et al. (2019a) explain, will start “naturalizing and normalizing, and enunciating or achieving new representations, identities, or inscriptions that may” bring new perspectives, narratives, and ways of knowing forward (p. 7). Adopting new discursive formations and a decolonial approach to canoe tripping, will undoubtedly enable a different, more socially just, take on summer camp canoe tripping.

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