MY AUTOETHONOGRAPHY OF TREE PLANTING IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

By

Khalela Leilani Bell

A thesis submitted to the School of Kinesiology & Health Studies
in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(May, 2015)

Copyright ©Khalela Leilani Bell, 2015
Abstract

The following research is an autoethnography based on the author’s three seasons of tree planting in northern Ontario. Tree planting in northern Ontario is a popular summer occupation for University students from southern Ontario. The contemporary demographic of tree planters is now dominantly university students which is unusual because tree planters were originally comprised of prisoners and marginalized individuals. After reviewing the history and development of the labour force, the research offers analysis of popularized perceptions of the occupation and of lived experience of the occupation. Popularized perceptions of tree planting are largely influenced by notions of Rugged Individualism. Rugged individualism emphasizes individual strength and resilience and is largely influenced by notions of Canadian nationalism and neoliberalism. These ideologies largely figure into not only perceptions of tree planting but also within the work environment itself. Tree planting offers an opportunity for students to take on a physical and mental challenge, make substantial summer earnings for the school year, and identify with a ‘tree planter’ image. Through autoethnography, these opportunities are discussed in relation to perceptions of the occupation. The research illuminates the positive aspects of tree planting such as sense of community as well as the negative impacts of neoliberalism within the work culture.
Acknowledgements

The patience and encouragement of my supervisor, Elaine Power, was integral to the completion of my research. The depth and strength of her kindness is inspiring, and greatly impacted my experience and development as a graduate student. Her wealth of knowledge inspired my thinking and helped me to focus my analysis. I will always appreciate the gift of our conversations and her support. In addition to her supervision, my family and friends were a great support throughout the process of completing this project.

My father’s joie de vivre and relentless pursuit of learning has greatly formed my own interest in learning about and exploring the world. I am so appreciative of his support during the writing process and for motivating me to finish my research. My sister provided incredible support throughout the process and always listens in a way that makes me feel understood. My family gives me so much and I feel very lucky to have them.

I also thank my crew boss’s and fellow planters for their support and love. Working with them was a great opportunity and I genuinely enjoyed getting to know them. The encouragement of my friends played a huge role in keeping me going and they always kept me laughing. I am excited to see what becomes of us all and really believe great things lie ahead.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... iii
List of Figures ......................................................................................................................................... vi
List of Abbreviations ............................................................................................................................ vii
Glossary ................................................................................................................................................... viii
Prologue ................................................................................................................................................ ix
Chapter 1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2 Development of the Silviculture Industry ........................................................................... 5
  1.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 5
  1.2 European Settlement ..................................................................................................................... 5
  1.3 Post-War Boom ............................................................................................................................ 8
  1.4 1962-1979: Reforestation under Government Control ............................................................... 9
  1.5 1979: Reorganization of Silviculture .......................................................................................... 11
  1.6 Contemporary Organization ....................................................................................................... 12
Chapter 3 Contemporary Tree planting Culture ................................................................................. 23
  2.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 23
  2.2 Popularized Perceptions of Tree planting .................................................................................... 24
    2.2.1 ‘Rite of passage’ .................................................................................................................. 30
    2.2.2 Tree planting and ‘Canadians’ ......................................................................................... 33
    2.2.3 Rugged Individualism ...................................................................................................... 36
    2.2.4 Gender and Tree planting ............................................................................................... 40
    2.2.5 Gender and the Body ....................................................................................................... 46
    2.2.6 Gender and Neoliberalism ............................................................................................. 49
Chapter 4 Autoethnography as Methodology ..................................................................................... 52
  3.1 Research and Privilege ................................................................................................................. 53
  3.2 Categorizing Autoethnography .................................................................................................. 55
  3.3 Risk of Self-Indulgence .............................................................................................................. 57
  3.4 Self-Defining Identity ................................................................................................................. 58
  3.5 Methods ...................................................................................................................................... 61
  3.6 Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 62
Chapter 5 Data and Analysis ................................................................................................................ 63
  Rookie Season – 2012 ....................................................................................................................... 63
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second Season – 2013</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Season - 2014</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Women</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tree planting and the body</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6 Conclusion</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1 Photo Courtesy of Hélène Cyr .......................................................... 10
Figure 2 Photo Courtesy of Hélène Cyr .......................................................... 15
Figure 3 Photo Courtesy of Hélène Cyr .......................................................... 16
Figure 4 Photo Courtesy of Hélène Cyr .......................................................... 17
Figure 5 Photo Courtesy of Lorraine Gilbert ............................................... 26
Figure 6 Photo Courtesy of Gordon Laird ..................................................... 41
Figure 7 Photo Courtesy of Tahirih Rowshan-Lips ...................................... 92
# List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CTA</td>
<td>Crown Timber Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMA</td>
<td>Forest Management Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMNA</td>
<td>Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piece</td>
<td>An area of land designated for a planter to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block</td>
<td>The logged area of land allocated for replanting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furrow</td>
<td>A logged area of land that has been plowed and left with trenches for ease of planting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prologue

My 7 liters of water already refilled from the night before, I grab my day bag and head to the van. 6:50 am- The first hour of the day always feels too short. The rest of the crew eventually piles in after locating and double checking that nothing and no one and has been forgotten, and off we go. I love my “commute” to work. We speed down the logging road, tunes blaring. I love this. I love watching the never ending blur of trees on either side. I don’t know why I love it, but I don’t see how anyone with a soul couldn’t. Endless space, no traffic, it’s like going on a road trip with your friends. This could be freedom if it weren’t for the destination. We reach the block and get dropped off, one by one.

I throw my water and backpack filled with my lunch, bug spray, and just in case rain jacket on the ground, next to the stack of boxes filled with tree seedlings. I unclip my planting bags from around my waist and kneel down to rip open a bag of seedlings. The palm sized pods guiding the way, I make a swirl of green stems on the inside of my left bag. I fit in another bag of trees on the other side then quickly, avoiding the pause of anticipation, heave and clip my bags back around my waist. I grab my shovel, walk forward into my piece and decide on a logical place to plant the first seedling. I wedge open a suitable spot and my left hand begins the process of lightening the weight of trees on my left side. A stomp of my right foot completes the process and I move forward, the upright green stem behind me signaling the very beginning of the process of making toilet paper. Hours later, I catch myself mid-over analysis of that timeshesaidthatbecausehedidthathesaidshesaid and wonder how my train of thought has led me to this absolute waste of brain cells. I look up and plan my planting route back to
the tree cache. I consider sandwich versus apple the whole way back. My neighbor for
the day is loading her bags with more trees and we brighten up, happy to see another
face. “Good day?” she asks.

“Meh”, I reply, “you?”

“Meh, front of the piece is all rock but lots of sphagnum in the back.” Sphagnum
is a spongy moss that looks like skittles and is perfect for easy planting. This bodes well
for later in my day, as we are planting towards each other and suggests that my land
could get better. It doesn’t. At 6, we drive home, exhausted and damn hungry. Back at
camp, we drop our things at our tents and a few of us change, most don’t. The wait in the
long dinner line makes the food taste even better. Over dinner, we laugh about our day
because it is over, and doesn’t matter anymore. A couple hours later, the night is peaceful
in that middle of nowhere kind of a way. I dream of a field of sphagnum and hope it’s a
sign of good luck for the next morning.
Chapter 1 Introduction

The year I began writing my master’s thesis about my experiences of tree planting in Northern Ontario, all incoming undergraduate students at Queen’s were provided with a copy of *Eating Dirt*, an award-winning memoir of tree planting written by Charlotte Gill. Daniel Woolf, the Principal of the University, welcomed students in his opening letter in the Queen’s edition of the book (Woolf, 2012) and explained that the book was chosen for the inaugural Queen’s Reads program because of its:

- multi-layered themes and broad appeal— and it has a great title! Set in the Canadian landscape, it is both a story of the distinctive culture of tree-planting and how a diverse group of people must overcome challenges to achieve a common goal, and an account of the inherent wonder, economic value and ecological transformation of one of our great natural resources, the Canadian forest (Woolf, 2012).

This introduction exemplifies common features of the romanticized discourse of contemporary tree planting culture in Canada, including rugged individualism, nationalism and colonialism. As Woolf suggests, tree planters are a part of a “distinctive” culture, “rugged individualists” who are able to endure the challenges of working in an isolated and harsh outdoor environment. Woolf invokes a sense of nationalism, “one of our great natural resources, the Canadian forest”, a common aspect of tree planting imagery. The ambiguous “our” in “our great natural resources”, however, shows a sense of blind nationalism, as influenced by Canadian colonial rhetoric, without recognition of the violent history of land acquisition. This discourse evokes the sense of a “heroic status
of the frontier subject” which effectively “establishes an idealized portrayal of hard labor that reduces tree planting to an experience, rather than work” (Ekers and Farnan, 111). Within this context, the occupation is romanticized and reproduced as a desirable cultural experience, especially for middle-to-upper class, white university students, the very audience that Woolf addressed.

Gill emphasizes the positive sense of community that the occupation offers, however, she is more interested in providing a realistic account of her experience, as opposed to promoting a saccharine version of the occupation as a heroic conquest of the natural environment. She acknowledges the paradox of her position, stating that “everyone in the world somehow thinks of tree planting as a very benign human activity” and the ways in which this presents ethical challenges because “tree planting doesn’t do what the companies that employ us say it does” (Gill, 201). A majority of trees planted are a species monoculture, which means that the land is not restored to anything near its original state of natural diversity, an illusion reproduced by romanticized tree planting discourse. Tree plantations are planted for the purpose of future harvest as opposed to forest regeneration. However, despite false portrayals of the occupation as a service to the environment, tree planting can offer a positive sense of community for its members.

Within the tree planting community, women tree planters are depicted equally with their male counterparts, in terms of strength and endurance, which for me, seemed a rare phenomenon. In the social environments that I am familiar with, physical strength is more often associated with men, and strong women are considered an exception. The portrayed sense of gender equality, and the specificity of the tree planter identity, appealed to my research interests. However, I did not feel comfortable with using the
experiences of other tree planters to collect data for my analysis. I felt that it would be intrusive and I did not want to infringe upon a community that I was not a part of. I decided to go tree planting so that I could provide an analysis based on my own experience. Through autoethnography, I gathered field notes written over three seasons of tree planting. In doing so, I explore how the occupation both reinforces and disrupts popular perceptions of the labour.

In Chapter One, I provide a history of the silviculture industry. Michael Ekers’ recent research on tree planting in British Columbia offers findings revealing that a majority of tree planters in the 1950s were white working class women, as silviculture work was feminized at the time (Ekers 2014). Brendan Sweeney’s work traces the development of the workforce in Ontario, from prisoners, Aboriginals, and men hired from the “beverage rooms” of Northern Ontario in the 1950s to the present dominance of university students in the occupation (Sweeney 2009). I also provide an overview of research interested in the contemporary demographic of the workforce in Northern Ontario. John Bodner (Bodner 1997), Michael Farnan, and Ekers (Ekers and Farnan 2010) begin dialogue concerning depictions of tree planting as a nation building project whilst Callan Main’s work (Main 2010) focuses on gender and the body within tree planting. These analyses interrogate underlying discourse which inform depictions of the labour as a ‘Canadian rite of passage’ (Sweeney 2005), as well as the effect of neoliberalism on the work culture.

In Chapter Two, I describe the value of autoethnography as an approach to gathering data for research as well as its challenges. As both subject of analysis and researcher, the research can enable opportunity for self-definition and acknowledging
privilege. In order to avoid self-indulgence, autoethnographers work to make a clear connection from personal experience to social context. In Chapter Three, I provide my selected field notes and reflections as the data for my analysis. I conducted my research without previous experience in the industry, which allowed me to observe the initial process of entering the workforce. I interrogate tree planting labour as a perceived ‘good for you’ experience, which is a result of the privilege of the present demographic of white, middle-to-upper class university students. I contrast the invisibility of the original workforce to the celebrated, romanticized depictions, such as that of Principal Woolf, of tree planters in the contemporary moment. My experience in tree planting is complex, and my analysis elucidates the liberations and limitations that the experience can present. I show the ways in which tree planting can offer a sense of community and individual empowerment whilst also considering the negative influence of competition and the ways this competitive social environment can mask exploitation of workers.
Chapter 2 Development of the Silviculture Industry

1.1 Introduction

In the following chapter, I provide a brief relevant history of northern Ontario in order to contextualize the contemporary culture of tree planting. I first describe European settlement, then discuss the rise of the logging industry, followed by the trajectory of reforestation efforts. The privatization of silviculture contractors marks the shift in the demographic of the tree planting workforce. I provide a brief portrait of contemporary tree planting in order to contrast historical perceptions of the occupation. In providing this history, the current perceptions of tree planting are contextualized in relation to broader political and social forces.

1.2 European Settlement

Prior to European settlement, trees covered 90% of Ontario’s land base. The forestry coverage of the province is now down to 30% due to logging, clearing, and fire (May, 131). I spent three tree planting seasons in the boreal forest in Northeastern Ontario near Kapuskasing on what was previously Cree territory (Rogers, 276). The Cree lived a nomadic lifestyle, guided by the hunting of moose and caribou in the winter and fish in the summer (Aboriginal Ontario, 280). In the 1670s and 1680s, the English Hudson Bay Company set up posts in northern Ontario and traded fur with the Cree. This was advantageous for the Cree as they gained access to better quality goods. French traders also built posts shortly after in Northern Ontario in order to compete with the English (Aboriginal Ontario, 282). The fur trade altered Cree way of life as they began to devote a majority of their time to trapping animals for fur and travelling to posts for trade. As a result, the veering away of subsistence living on hunting and fishing created a
reliance on European traders during food shortages in the winter (Aboriginal Ontario, 307). In 1821, the Hudson Bay Company and the French North West company amalgamated which allowed the Hudson Bay Company to gain a monopoly over the fur trade in northern Ontario (Aboriginal Ontario, 307).

Government representatives also became a strong presence in northern Ontario (Aboriginal Ontario, 334). The Cree and Ojibway signed Treaty 9, which ceded all land rights to the crown, including timber rights (Aboriginal Ontario, 128). Government officials presented this contract to First Nations leaders without any prior consultation and the terms of the treaty were not transparent. The contract was written in English and the oral translation offered questionable. Timber rights were later transferred from the Crown to the provincial government (Gardener, 3). In 1860, the Crown Timber Act set up the use of timber licenses on Crown land in exchange for fees paid to the government. This was mutually beneficial for both the lumber industry and government because “governments received revenues which they could spend on measures popular with the electorate, and lumber producers were able to avoid the costs of land ownership” (Drushka, 30). For the most part, provincial governments gave timber licenses and concessions with few regulations (Armson, 2002), with the goal of encouraging development in Northern Ontario, while ignoring environmental concerns (Bodner, 28). Due to demand for newsprint in the U.S, the pulp and paper industry boomed, leading to significant deforestation, furthered by mechanization of the forest industry (Roach, 56). The introduction of the steam-powered engine and building of railways to northern Ontario enabled access to more remote areas which was timely due to the significant decline of timber in southern Ontario (Drushka, 33).
In 1868, a royal commission was launched to investigate the destruction of the forests but no immediate actions were taken by the government to prevent further decline. Canada’s Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald noted in the early 1870s that “we are recklessly destroying the timber of Canada, and there is scarcely a possibility of replacing it” (May, 133). Despite an awareness of the state of Ontario’s forests, the government was reliant on stumpage fees collected for trees harvested, which meant economic considerations were prioritized over environmental concerns.

In the late 1920s, the Ontario government appointed C.D. Howe, the dean of the University of Toronto’s forestry faculty, to head a forestry advisory board. Howe felt optimistic about the committee’s ability to influence the adoption of more sustainable forestry policies in Ontario. However, despite his good intentions, his department at U of Toronto relied on government funding, and creating tension on the topic was deemed to be unwise because funding could be reduced as a consequence (Kuhlberg, 2). As a result of lack of government policy, irresponsible logging operations led to poor forestry regeneration (Sweeney, 18).

Initially, logging companies relied solely on natural regeneration, which was largely unsuccessful as the rate of regrowth was too slow for companies to log the area a second time. At the end of World War I, The Abitibi Power and Paper Company made an attempt at reforestation by growing four million seedlings in a nursery next to their mill. Unfortunately, most of these seedlings died and only 455,000 were planted. Reliance on natural regeneration continued until the end of World War II (Sweeney, 51).
1.3 Post-War Boom

Following World War II, Ontario’s pulp and paper capacity increased by almost 50% as a result of renewed North American demand (Roach, 56). Increased pulp and paper manufacturing led to developments in “forest tenure, an increase in forest management, and the reorganization of work in the woods” (Sweeney, 51). The Canada Forestry Act in 1949 made forest products companies accountable for reforestation by requiring that they submit forest management plans. In what is referred to as sustained-yield forestry, this approach required that the forestry industry have a renewable and continual supply of wood. The Canada Forestry Act also led to provincial cost-sharing, whereby the Federal government made agreements with provinces in forestry related practices such as “reforestation, silvicultural research, infrastructural development, and forestry inventory calculation” (Sweeney, 52). As a result, the number of tree seedling nurseries in northern Ontario tripled in the 1950s. Unfortunately, poor seedling quality and lack of thinning practices, to prevent competing species from growing over seedlings, meant that many trees did not survive. In addition to these issues, creating a labour supply to plant the trees also proved challenging, because there was high employment due to industrial growth (Statistics Canada 2014; Sweeney, 52). To resolve this issue, attempts were made to mechanize the work. However, the machines used were designed for land in the United States and Scandinavia and did not work in the often rocky and swampy terrain of Ontario’s northern forests (Sweeney, 53). As a result of the failure of mechanization, and high employment rates in the 1950s, early tree planters were recruited from “the beverage rooms” of northern towns in the north (Sweeney, 54). These workers were unreliable and would often work for only a short period of time. The 1950s shaped
the need for a more organized tree planting industry (Sweeney, 56). The system of reforestation in Ontario is thus the result of a complex history of various attempts by the government and forest products companies to organize the operation of re-planting trees on logged areas of land at minimal cost (Bodner, 32).

1.4 1962-1979: Reforestation under Government Control

In 1962, a revision to the Crown Timber Act gave responsibility for forest regeneration to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR), while forest products companies maintained accountability for management and planning. This division proved successful and forty million trees were planted in 1964 (Auld, 1980). This success was a result of improved seedling quality and the use of scarification. Scarification is a process of using machines to clear away the debris left after logging. Scarification made tree planting far easier in terms of the physical process of re-planting itself, as well as for supervision of tree-planters and evaluation of results (Sweeney, 57). Scarification and better seedling quality lengthened the planting season and improved the structure of the job, thus increasing the stability of the labour force.

The quality, stability and cost of the tree planting labour force remained ongoing issues. The nature of the work required seasonal workers who were willing to endure grueling physical labour. The New Zealand government had faced similar challenges and had abandoned using prison labour after thirty years of failure. In a discussion with the Ontario government in 1928, the head of the University of Toronto Forestry Department, Dean Howe, explained that “minimizing costs also required paying special attention to the types of workers engaged in the project” (Kuhlberg, 6). Howe emphasized that “‘If we are going…to raise trees cheaply and economically on a large scale (…) the quality of
the labour involved should be very seriously considered’” (Kuhlberg, 6). Despite acknowledging New Zealand’s failure, Howe ultimately concluded with a questioning of whether or not “there would be an opportunity to get such surplus labour (…) with ‘jail birds’?” (Kuhlberg, 6).

The OMNR used prison labour regularly during labour shortages but by the end of 1960s, heavily recruited “local women, post-secondary students, and First Nations peoples” (Sweeney, 57). Tree planting was stigmatized by this use of ‘non-standard’ workers and was referred to as “Indian-and-widow-work” (Bodner, 38). The striking lack of information about these workers is due to the grouping of tree planters with “forestry services” workers in Statistics Canada reports; confidentiality agreements prevent individual job descriptions within this group (Main, 15). Unlike contemporary university students, these workers did not appear to write their memoirs. However, Michael Ekers recently conducted research on working class women in the reforestation industry in British Columbia (Ekers, 2014).

Figure 1 From Handmade Forests: The Treeplanter’s Experience, a collection of photography and writings on tree planting. Photo Courtesy of the author, Hélène Cyr.
Similar to Ontario, the British Columbia Forestry Service hired prisoners, Natives, men from unemployment lists, and men off the street in the 1950s. These workers were inefficient, as one of his informants states, because “a lot of them would never make it, either mentally or physically: they couldn’t do it” (Ekers, 348). Additionally, there was a common perception that unemployed men were unfit and First Nations people were untrustworthy (Ekers, 348). Securing a male labour force proved difficult as “the gendering of varied types of forestry work led to extractive forestry work being socially valued (in both material and ideological terms) over silvicultural work” (Ekers, 349). This is intriguing as tree planting is often assumed to be a historically masculine occupation. Beginning in the mid-1960s, working-class women were hired to tree plant for minimum wage, which was a dollar per hour at the time. Ekers’ found that this trend began when one regional manager began hiring women and this demographic subsequently comprised approximately 90% of government tree planting work in the late 1960s (Ekers, 349). The occurred largely because of their economic constraints and limited work opportunities. However, as in Ontario, the demographic of the workforce shifted in correlation with the industry’s shift to private contracting in the 1970s (Ekers, 353).

1.5 1979: Reorganization of Silviculture

The privatization of silviculture work dramatically altered the demographic and perceptions of the occupation (Bodner, 39). In the 1970s, husband and wife team Joyce Murray and Dirk Brinkman started a silviculture contracting company in British Columbia that effectively revolutionized tree planting across the country, shaping it into its current form. Murray and Brinkman’s involvement in silviculture began in their early
twenties during the 1970s. Brinkman managed day-to-day operations around the province and Murray directed overall operations from Vancouver, while also taking care of their child (Pringle 1988). Dirk Brinkman designed new shovels and bags, hired and worked with friends and family who lived together in a camp on site, and introduced a piecework wage system. Murray planted over 500,000 trees and Brinkman has been described as “lean and bearded, dedicated and hard-working, innovative and highly-skilled, (…) every inch a tree planter” (Forestalk Magazine, 28).

By successfully bidding on and completing contracts, Murray and Brinkman were able to expand their company into Ontario. Brinkman Inc. did a majority of their recruiting at universities as they found this demographic to be a good fit for the work. Students were interested in the culture of the occupation, were willing to live in rudimentary bush camps, and were physically and mentally able to withstand the work (Bodner, 67). This targeted hiring practice was common among most tree planting contractors in Ontario in the 1980s (Sweeney, 60). It was during this shift from planters hired by the OMNR to private contracting that payment systems changed from an hourly wage system to piece-work. As Sweeney notes, this “marked one of the most significant changes to the nature of work in Ontario’s tree planting industry” (Sweeney, 63). It was appropriate for the work, because piece-work encourages competition, which increases production. By the late 1990s, students comprised over ninety percent of the labour force (Sweeney 2009).

1.6 Contemporary Organization

Murray and her counterparts were a part of a broader “back to the land” movement. Planters of Murray and Brinkman’s generation were largely young urbanites
who liked seasonal work because it allowed them to make a large sum of money in a short period of time, which they used for personal pursuits, such as travel. Brinkman’s company found that students were a good fit for the work because of the seasonal demand and subculture they created. The current demographic of tree planters has remained remarkably similar since the late eighties in Northern Ontario, as Sweeney describes:

contractors found post-secondary student tree planter’s to be the most mentally and physically fit, and reveled in their priorities of maximizing earnings in a short-period of time and concomitant willingness to work extended hours (…) students engaged differently with the occupational culture of tree planting, and many enjoyed or were certainly willing to tolerate the experience of communal and rudimentary living in bush camps” (Sweeney, 77).

Student tree planters altered the occupational culture of tree planting because of their economic and social privileges. Students are able to manage the cost of investing in necessary equipment, have access to gym facilities to physically prepare for the job and the time to do so, and are willing to endure the labour as a viable alternative to lower paying summer jobs in southern Ontario. This demographic is also a suitable fit for the sense of competition that piece-work can inspire due to the high number of students with previous athletic experience. Tree planting offers not only significant financial opportunity, but also respect from peers, through planting a high number of trees. The social construction of this respect will be revisited in the following chapter.
Tree planters are divided into crews which are managed by veteran planters who were previously successful planters but have chosen to move on to a management position. Crew bosses are responsible for hiring their crew, done mainly through word of mouth, which is a large part of the reason why students continue to have a heavy presence in the workforce.
The distinctive aspects of the job create a similar portrait across stories shared amongst tree planters. These aspects include the mental and physical strain of the labour, such as contending with the bugs, and the social life formed by living with coworkers in close quarters for months at a time. One of the most truly maddening aspects of the job is coping with black flies, in addition to mosquitos and horseflies. Black flies operate in swarms and enjoy attacking wherever possible, whether it be behind the ears or just above the eyelashes, and can cause eyes to swell to impressive degrees. It is common for planters to spray their hard hat and find it blanketed with dead black flies within hours. Blackflies leave their mark with an itchy red bump and planters will often experience a reminder of adolescent acne across their face or patches along their neck. They are Mother Nature’s not-so-gentle reminder that in the end, she is in charge.

Figure 2 Handmade Forests: The Treeplanter's Experience
Her gifts also include: sun, requiring planters to drink a minimum 7 liters daily in order to avoid getting ‘sun fucked’\(^1\); scattered thunderstorms, which can last anywhere from ten minutes to days; and a breeze that can offer a brief reprieve from swarming blackflies or winds heavy enough to knock over ‘Chicos’\(^2\).

Figure 3 *Handmade Forests: The Treeplanter’s Experience*

‘Planter hands’ are a souvenir of the occupation which results from planting the seedlings. Some planters use gloves, many have a customized duct tape regime, and a brave few prefer to simply ‘feel the earth’. Despite daily hand washing, hands will carry ‘perma-dirt’ in the creases and around the nails. Skin grows tougher after blisters form into callouses and it is not unusual for nails to fall off or reduce to nubs.

\(^1\) Extreme dehydration which can lead to vomiting or fainting  
\(^2\) Dead trees that are still standing but weak enough to be knocked over by heavy winds
Socializing after work is encouraged so as to improve the work environment and break the monotony of the regimented production schedule. The remote location of tree planting camps make romance a more common aspect of the job than most occupations. As opposed to ‘adherence to professionalism’ in the workplace, tree planting camps encourage increased social support and quality of life. Unlike many work environments in the bush, tree planters are allowed to consume alcohol and will not experience judgment for doing so.

Figure 4 – *Handmade Forests: The Treeplanter’s Experience*

A tree planting camp is led by a management team comprised of a supervisor, cook(s), tree deliver(s), and crew bosses (Sweeney, 51). A supervisor organizes logistical operations of the camp and works directly with the client for whom the silviculture company is in a contract. Prior to the season, crew bosses are responsible for hiring their crew, providing their planters with necessary information concerning the upcoming
season, and organizing the logistics of their arrival. During the season, crew bosses are responsible for driving their crew to the block, assigning each planter their piece, monitoring and motivating their planters throughout the day, and keeping track of the amount of land and number of trees their crew plants each day (Sweeney, 73). A tree planting cook, often with the support of an assistant cook, is responsible for budgeting and purchasing food and cooking for what can be anywhere from thirty to one hundred planters. Breakfast is served at 6am, along with food for planters to pack for lunch, and dinner is served anywhere from 6 to 7pm. Tree deliverers transport tree seedling from the to strategic locations on the planting block so that each planter has their own ‘cache’ next to their assigned piece. The management team works together to organize planters in terms of camp operation and maintenance as well as camp moves, which occur when a planting ‘block’ has been finished and the next block is a substantial distance farther.

Operating a tree planting camp is no small task. The management team works long hours and must often grapple with challenges, such as vehicle or equipment malfunctioning, in addition to the many daily tasks required to maintain a functioning camp. Contract completion is time sensitive and losing production time can be costly (Sweeney, 93).

Planters leave camp at 7am in order to drive to the block, which can take anywhere from twenty minutes to two hours, and begin planting after their crew boss allocates them their piece. Planter’s re-fill their bags at their seedling cache, where they also eat and drink water, and can take a break for as little or as long as they’d like. Most often, planters plant alone, but can also choose to ‘buddy plant’ with a partner for

---

3 A stack of tree seedlings.
4 A logged area of land.
5 The portion of the block which a planter is responsible for completing.
motivation and company. Although mostly a matter of preference, tree planting alone is more common due to the complexity of strategizing how to plant a piece. The length of the work day varies, depending on the production schedule and logistics, but nine hour days are common. The piece-wage payment system enables planters to adopt their own approach to planting so long as quality requirements are met. Specs⁶ vary from contract to contract, which includes a required distance and depth for each seedling. This can be a cause of frustration, because seedlings that are not planted correctly must be re-planted, costing a planter time and therefore money. Tree planters pay camps costs, which are around twenty dollars a day, to pay for gas and food. For unsuccessful first year planters who quit within the first few weeks, these camp costs can leave them with little to no earnings, or even owing the company money.

What was once prison labour, the demanding work structure and physical challenges of tree planting make the occupation seem highly undesirable. However, many students are drawn to these challenges for not only the financial compensation, but also the social structure. Brendan Sweeney employs Etienne Wenger’s ‘communities of practice’ theory to analyze the social organization of tree planting. Wenger’s community of practice theory is useful for understanding how the culture of tree planting camps as a whole operate, develop, and continue. Wenger argues that organizations are partly structured by social learning systems because members often utilize social engagement in order to participate and gain relevant knowledge of the organization they are a part of. He employs the term “community of practice” (Wenger, 229) to describe this process and notes that in a social learning system, “competence is historically and socially defined”

---

⁶ The spacing between trees can be anywhere from four and a half to six feet and the seedling pod must be completely submerged in mineral soil. Checkers are hired to ensure that trees are adequately planted.
(Wenger, 226). In tree planting, learning is very much a social process. Crew bosses are primarily responsible for teaching rookie planters how to tree plant but veteran planters also play a major role in providing further guidance and support. Rookie planters are usually given a two week social grace period to grapple with the steep tree plant learning curve. After this learning period, however, a tree planter’s success is perceived as a result of their own attitude and competence. Tree planters gauge their competence by a socially created perception of how many trees planted in a day is acceptable.

Planters create and transform their community of practice as they “pass on the knowledge, norms, values, and language to the next generation” which is in large part the foundation of a successful tree planting camp (Sweeney, 97). The continuation of culture within a tree planting camp is dependent on its members. The limitations and possibilities of cultural space within a tree planting camp, therefore, depends on the attitude and sensitivities of its management personnel and planters. Sweeney notes the factors which can cause a community of practice to weaken, including “the loss of a key leader” or when “core members who are not promoted to formalized leadership roles (…) become frustrated or disillusioned” (Sweeney, 102). This can have serious ramifications for a tree planting camp as most planters base their decision to return planting, and which camp to return to, on their social ties (Sweeney, 116). These social ties are largely informed by management and the social foundation of a crew is heavily reliant on its crew boss.

A crew boss is responsible for motivating crew members on a daily basis and promoting a sense of belonging. In line with the importance of social learning, or community of practice, in tree planting, crew bosses are more akin to mentors than simply managers, as mentoring is a method in which to “ensure successful socialization”
(Taylor, 48). Laurie Taylor describes the sharing of common interests, facilitating growth, willingness to self-disclose, and affirming abilities as important factors in success as a mentor. Main found in her interviews that women mentors played an important role in supporting women entering tree planting. She describes that many of her respondents cited their initial reason for going tree planting as knowing women who had tree planted previously. Within the workplace environment, she found that female tree planters valued a mentor in terms of relating to the challenge of working within a masculine environment. Several of Main’s interviewees describe the positive influence of more experienced female tree planters whom they admired. Female mentors, for both planters and management, are an important factor in coping in a masculine work environment. Having a mentor who can share their “knowledge, experience, and struggles” is both supportive and motivational. Callan cites her own experience in noting that female tree planters appreciate having a female crew boss due to this gender related mentoring aspect. She began tree planting due to encouragement from an older woman who was already in the industry. Through this woman’s support, Main notes that she gained knowledge that she does not feel that she would have received had she worked for a male crew boss. Main specifically notes that “reciprocal respect, predictability, commitment, understanding, and empathy” shaped the relationship. This knowledge and support enabled Main to later become a crew boss (Main, 114). These types of supportive relationships, regardless of gender, are a major component in continuing a tree plant camp’s community of practice. In terms of women specifically, these relationships are a major factor for the growth of women in the industry and current equal gender ratio. Main states that “Over and over again, women interviewed voiced the importance of
seeing women in tree planting and more specifically in management positions” (Main, 120). As one of her respondents describes:

I didn’t even picture myself in that role because all of my supervisors before me were burly dudes. So I was like ok that is what a tree planting supervisor looks like. But what really helped me was seeing Jen. She had been one of my supervisors. So she was a huge part in giving me the opportunity. She was the one that told me I could do it. Just seeing her being able to do it gave me confidence (Main, 120).

Main discusses the experience of a female supervisor who “felt that being the only woman in upper management left her out of the ‘old boys club’ of forestry” (Main, 118). This affects not only the sense of equity in the work environment, but also the desire for women to further advance in the industry.

Although tree planting camps have individual social characteristics, the occupation as a whole shares many similarities due to the work structure and involved challenges. Popular media coverage has created, and further perpetuated by the advent of personal media, an image of tree planters and the occupation. Now a distinct subculture, Michael Ekers and Michael Farnan, former tree planters and researchers on the topic, note that “the ideology that tree planting is an experience is central to the organization of labor in the industry” (Ekers and Farnan, 111). In the following chapter, I discuss popular depictions of tree planting and the underlying ideologies that inform these depictions.
Chapter 3  Contemporary Tree planting

Culture

1.7 Introduction

Popular media and silviculture companies frame tree planting as a ‘Canadian’ rite of passage activity through depictions of the occupation as an opportunity for personal growth. A rite of passage involves a journey to a liminal space, a process of initiation within this liminal space, and a journey home whereby the initiate returns anew (Arnold van Gennep 1960). Participating in tree planting involves a similar process due to the remote location and both physical and mental demands of the work (Bodner 1997; Sweeney 2005; Sweeney 2009). Tree planting is purported as a particularly ‘Canadian’ rite of passage because of shared similarities with ‘Canadiana’ imagery. These images often including European settlers, particularly early loggers, making their way through the wilderness. These settlers exemplify ‘Rugged Individualism’ – tough, resourceful workers who create legend by surviving the rigors of outdoor environments through their physical feats. Popular imagery of tree planters exemplify a type of contemporary Rugged Individualism. The following chapter provides an overview of popular perceptions of tree planting and its contemporary culture.
1.8 Popularized Perceptions of Tree planting

In the contemporary workforce, there are not only university students but also career planters, especially in British Columbia. It is not uncommon for a student planter in Ontario to become the latter, as is the case with Charlotte Gill. She planted for seventeen years and wrote the nonfiction novel *Eating Dirt* based on her experiences. She received several awards and gained much media attention for her book. In an interview with the *The Globe and Mail* in May 2012, Gill notes, “I’m the most unlikely tree planter in the world. I mean, I’m a total princess” (Globe and Mail). She contrasts her femininity and places it as incongruent to her tree planting lifestyle. In her novel, *Eating Dirt*, she describes her previous housemate, Aimee, who introduced her to tree planting:

Aimee was our alpha female. She had big, curly hair. She clomped around in leather boots with wooden heels. She wore scarves that fell to her knees and miniskirts from sutured scraps of leather. I never saw her in athletic shoes of any kind. She introduced me to a lot of printed words. Al Purdy. Gwendolyn MacEwen. Tom Robbins. The Beats. People who ate drugs and lived like hobos and fell wildly in love and lit up the skies with their voyages through the cosmos. Aimee was a tree planter” (Gill, 47).

Gill’s imagery of Aimee offers an example of common depictions of tree planters. Existing within a unique subculture inspired by 70s counterculture, tree planters are viewed as rugged, somewhat bohemian, and independent. More recently, athletes are equally as common to this subculture as are those who might be described as bohemian. Tree planting necessitates the ability to adapt to an outdoors, manual labour focused,
muddy, and communal lifestyle. A major aspect of narratives of the culture involves a sense of community. Charlotte Gill speaks to this and describes common characteristics of its members. Of Gill’s initial impressions of tree planters through living with Aimee, she notes:

They came with backpacks stuffed tight, suitcases with braided rope for handles, beat-up vans that you could hear coming a block away, mufflers wired to chassis with coat hangers. They came for a day and stayed for a week. They carried brandy and brie. They smelled like smoke and sweat and sandalwood soap, the spice of the wild, wide open world in their hair. They all dressed differently. They wore different smiles. But they were the same somehow under the skin and behind the eyes. They had a conspiratorial way of glancing at each other, like they were getting away with something. They liked to get drunk and laugh…When they talked about work, I could barely understand them. They had a way of making English sound grubby and strange. Tree planters seemed to have some curious thing in common- a furious way of being (Gill, 49).

Gill notes that tree planters share a certain something “under the skin and behind the eyes” in a sort of “furious way of being”. These similarities are in alignment with many portrayals of its members, seemingly composed of “students, foreigners, doctors, musicians, travellers, dreamers, outcasts, weirdos, the insane, the pure” (Cyr, 3). These are stereotypes, however, stereotypes that support romanticized ideas about the occupation. Many silviculture companies reference the social life and demographic in its hiring materials:

*Our tree planters are the most interesting group of people you are likely to meet (students, world travellers, artists, athletes).* (Outland Reforestation 2015)

*Brilliant Camp life - Our camps are organized, fun and social* (Brinkman & Associates Reforestation Ltd. 2015)

*As athletes, artists, musicians, academics, parents, students, and travelers, we all come together each year to work hard, learn, share*
and play in some of the most beautiful places in the province (Dynamic Reforestation 2015).

Figure 5 From Shaping the New Forest, a collection of photographs of tree planting in British Columbia from 1988-1994. Photo Courtesy of Lorraine Gilbert, who describes “The pioneers of this new “green frontier” are the environmentalists, tree-planters, eco-cowboys and cowgirls- the rugged individualists of the post-industrial age, people looking for a clean and/or sane place to live, with and without SUVs. The work in this portfolio is not about geographical exploration or conquest, but rather about the effects of it. It adopts the traditional aesthetic values associated with these attitudes, heroism and grandeur, as a skewed starting point for the ideological exploration of a newer, greener tomorrow.”
The culture of tree planting is popularized as providing an opportunity for developing positive relationships and experiences. In addition to a positive social environment, another common similarity across company websites is framing the labour as equally rewarding as it is grueling:

If you are looking for an extremely challenging job that can be very rewarding - consider planting (…) If you succeed at tree planting you can succeed at anything (Outland Reforestation)

It is extremely rewarding on many levels (Treeline Reforestation)

Planting Trees brings incredible value to our lives. As tree-planters we will continue to feel this throughout everything we do into the future. The experience of tree planting continues to grow and change us long after the last tree is planted (Summit Reforestation).

The physical demands of the work are described as ultimately rewarding, through the effects of long-term personal growth. *Do it with Joy*, a documentary following one of Joyce Murray and Dirk Brinkman’s early tree planting camps in the 1970s, features an interviewee describing, “Every time I meet someone that’s really messed up in their head, I often think, well, what that person needs is to go tree planting. That’d be a really nice gift for them” (*Do It With Joy*). This further exemplifies the way that the occupation is popularized as a ‘good for you’ experience. Intensive physical labour is directly associated with mental benefits and the ability to endure this hardship is equated with gaining strength of character. In addition to company hiring literature, tree planters themselves are also proponents of these perceptions. A tree planter exemplifies this ‘strength of character’ rhetoric in an article discussing the various lessons tree planting
offers which are transferrable to everyday life. A majority of these lessons are related to maintaining a positive attitude despite surrounding conditions:

Rainy Day Blues: You’ve seen worse. Through rain, hail, and even snow, every tree planter will have one day in his or her career that sets the bar as the most uncomfortable day ever. Once that bar is set, it makes all the rain days thereafter easier to bear. (…) Everyday life application: You’ve made it through the toughest times in your life, you’ll make it through this one whatever it is. At least this tough time isn’t as bad as that one was. And if it’s worse, well, you’ve got a new bar and the rest won’t be so bad (MacIsaac).

She describes the way the grueling physical conditions widen a planter’s spectrum of discomfort, which offers a mental support through situational comparison. This argument exemplifies the positive spin and attitude that workers are expected to adopt. Mental strength is considered an important determinant of success, as one tree planter describes, “I think the thing that really makes the difference is the mentality (…) and how much you believe in what you can do” (Summit reforestation).

Although there is value in a positive attitude, maintaining a positive focus can perpetuate denial of systemic issues and allow these issues to go unaddressed. One such example regards socially mandatory unpaid labour:

There’s a lot that’s not in the official job description, but it’s part of the job. You usually don’t get paid to move camp, unload the reefer, unload garbage, and other such tasks, but they are part of the job. These are things you have to do to make money in the bigger picture. Everyday application: It’s easy to fall into the mindset of ‘that’s not my job.’ But making the business you’re in run more smoothly is generally part of your responsibility as an employee even if certain tasks aren’t in your official job description. Some may
disagree on that point, but that’s what I’ve learned makes for the best work environment (MacIsaac).

Tree planters performing the aforementioned tasks are not necessarily similar to employees that take on extra tasks to support their business. Moving camp and camp maintenance are foreseen and tree planters will likely be reprimanded should they not complete these tasks. Planters are expected to perform this unpaid labour to cut costs, rather than the employer creating a system that compensates employees for their work. In adopting an attitude that “makes for the best work environment”, tree planters continue the cycle of performing unpaid labour, instead of creating structural change by refusing unpaid labour.

Tree planters offer wide-ranging views of the occupation, dependent, of course, on their personal experiences. These can range from embellished romanticism, which often adhere to themes of personal growth, to outright cynicism. The following exemplifies the latter:

Don’t be fooled by tree planting. Don’t let it get its twiggy little grip on you and suck you into a never-ending cycle of planting and fucking around until there’s nothing left of you except a hunched over, scarred up, sun-weathered sack of bones (…) There’s a reason tree planting started out as prison labor (…) it fucking sucks. (…) Tree planting does this sneaky thing of blowing chunks, while having this uncanny ability of storing very quickly in your long-term memory. In the fuzzy, nostalgic part of your brain (Pikelin).

Tree planters often find that the daily challenges of the job are obscured in their memory by positive aspects, such as the social life and potential pay. The trajectory of a tree planter’s attitude over several seasons often begins with that of a “Naive Rookie” and develops towards that of a “Salty Vet” (Steenberg). Tree planting is an unreliable long
term occupation because of its demand on the body and risk of injury. The novelty of the occupation can wear off, along with patience for the working conditions and systemic inefficiencies. The contract bidding system forces silviculture companies to compete, and therefore sometimes underbid, to gain contracts. As a result, they are forced to cut costs which may include lowering the price paid per tree or continue the use of poorly functioning vehicles. Planters are affected by the contract bidding system, not only by a direct decrease in wages, but also through systemic inefficiencies such as planting time lost when a vehicle breaks down.

1.8.1 ‘Rite of passage’

Arnold Van Gennep, an early ethnographer, popularized ‘rite of passage’ as a subject of study and structured the process as consisting of three stages, first a separation from a familiar environment, followed by a liminal stage where change occurs through overcoming a challenge, and then incorporation back into the home environment (Van Gennep 1960; Bodner, 170). Van Gennep’s structure is useful for understanding the similarities between tree planting and a ‘rite of passage’ process. John Bodner, a tree planter and researcher on the occupation, provides an analysis of tree planting as a ‘rite of passage’, useful for acknowledging important differences. These differences highlight the way popular perceptions of tree planting romanticize the labour as a personal growth process for a privileged demographic.

University students who complete a season of tree planting gain pride in their physical strength and endurance. Tree planting provides recognition akin to that of high performance athletes. Popularized perceptions of tree planting perpetuate this social value
and broader recognition. The desire to prove personal work ethic is influenced largely by neoliberalism, a discussion which will later be revisited.

Tree planting creates a sense of liminality akin to Van Gennep’s ‘liminal’ stage because of its location and the structure of the labour. Arriving at a tree planting camp requires lengthy travel, usually ten to twenty hours by car. For most planters, tree planting camps are a drastic change in lifestyle compared to the urban environment they might be accustomed to. Beyond location and physical conditions, planters’ sense of time are based on a production schedule, anywhere from four to six ‘production days’, followed by one or two days off. This schedule does not relate to days of the week or dates on a calendar. As a result, planters often lose a sense of ‘traditional’ time organization furthering their sense of seeming liminality. At the end of the season, tree planters return to their home environment which necessitates an adjustment back to their previous lifestyle. The physical and mental changes that tree planting can create also furthers the sense of engaging in process similar to a rite of passage.

John Bodner discusses tree planting as a ‘rite of passage’ – with a particular focus on the second stage, liminality. He describes the “the liminal nature of the camp” as a “betwixt and between” space (Bodner, 23). The simplified lifestyle allows for a desirable opportunity for personal transformation, a chance to “clear the shit off your soul” (Bodner, 174), akin to a modern day salvation process. Bodner recognizes this as one of the attractions for planters to engage in this type of work. A silviculture company, Summit Reforestation, based in British Columbia states on its website: “Treeplanting affects the very essence of who we are and who we become. It alters our lives. This Initiation is so profound that those who have gone through it are held in community...
through fiercely intense experiences” (Summit Reforestation). In alignment with broader popularized imagery, this company frames the job as not just manual labour, but rather an “Initiation” providing a life changing experience. This shared experience creates the foundation for a sense of community which can be very positive and offers many planters a sense of belonging. This community, “the people of the tribe” to whom Gill dedicates her book, further supports perceptions of tree planting as akin to a rite of passage. By taking part in tree planting, workers are initiated into the tree planting tribe.

John Bodner questions whether tree planters are taking part in a rite of passage, making them truly liminal, or “merely participants in a quasi-liminal exercise and therefore only metaphorically liminal” (Bodner, 182). I was skeptical at first of the significance of his analysis, but upon further engagement, was pleased to discover that Bodner leads his readers to a discussion with important political implications in terms of the privilege of contemporary planters. Tree planting camps are satellite spaces whose economics and social ideologies are controlled by urban forces from southern Ontario. Tree planters are therefore only metaphorically liminal, as their liminality is imagined, as the space they enter has been specifically created for them. The perception of tree planting as a place of renewal romanticizes the fact that it is a site of resource extraction.

Bodner emphasizes that analysis of tree planting as a ‘rite of passage’ activity is important because the framing of the Canadian ‘bush’ as a liminal space has been used as an argument for colonial expansion by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rouesseau (Bodner, 172). Concepts of Canadiana and perceptions of Canadian culture are informed by the landscape of the country which assumes the wilderness as a “space outside of normal social relations and control; and each area is a transformational space”
Tree planters individually are mostly hard working and their personal gains from the experience are valid and certainly commendable. The popularized *depictions* of tree planting, however, risk perpetuating ‘Canadiana’ imagery and colonial perceptions of forests and rural areas in Canada.

### 1.8.2 Tree planting and ‘Canadiana’

Canadiana is omnipresent in depictions of tree planting, furthering perceptions of the labour as “a rite of passage and an opportunity to work with a tightly-knit community in an iconic Canadian industry” (Sweeney, 62). As one article describes:

> On the list of all things quintessentially Canadian, the lumberjack ranks high. The image, real or imagined, is a part of the country’s folklore: there he stands, clad in a red and black checked jacket, one foot raised to rest on a tree stump (…) In more recent memory, however, a different figure of the forest has emerged. Tree planters – in terms of strength and endurance – may be the new lumberjacks (James-Abra, 1).

Representing tree planters as “the next generation lumberjack” is common and a significant component of the contemporary culture of the occupation. In Canada, there is often distinct linkage between nationalism and nature (Ekers and Farnon, 98). In his *New Canadian Naturalist* project, Michael Farnan notes the strong linkages between the Canadian landscape and national identity. He notes that this impacts perceptions of tree planters and adds a specifically nationalized contour to the occupation as a rite of passage (Farnan, 2). The foundation of this nature-based nationalism is drawn from colonial
ideologies which assume the wilderness as an empty space devoid of history prior to European settlement. Ekers and Farnon describe how these ideologies operate and involve “a history of representing wilderness as something separate from society: devoid of cultural content, whether that content is made of First Nations people or processes of industrialization” (Ekers and Farnan, 100). They go on to describe that representations of wilderness in this context are inextricably linked to nationalism and play a strong role in white settler ‘Canadian’ imagery.

Canadians serves to support white settler nationalism, which is problematic as “ideologies of nation always contain disavowals of social histories that are rendered inessential in predominant national narratives” (Ekers and Farnan, 100). European settlers acquired land in Canada through misleading negotiations with Aboriginal communities as well as through violence. Framing settlers as noble developers of the Canadian wilderness ignores this history and peoples. Farnan interrogates “the idea of an ‘authentic’ Canada” and questions the “continuing colonial framing of an empty landscape waiting to be filled” (Farnan, 7). In terms of tree planting, he critiques the use of “‘rites of passage’ activities as a platform for the middle class utopic vision of discovery and renewal” as they serve as “souvenirs about the things one did to become strong… conform[ing] to a globally mediated and, I should add, privileged aesthetic sensibility” (Farnan, 12). The culture and ideology of contemporary tree planting serves as a nationalistic rite of passage for a privileged demographic- white, upper middle class university students. Ekers and Farnan analyze the artwork of three tree planters and the reception of their exhibits. The artist’s work include heavy emphasis on nationalist and environmental themes:
Photographs, films, and dioramas of tree planters are indicative of how “nature” and “wilderness” figure largely in the continual remaking of a particular brand of White middle-class Canadian nationalism. The recent production of tree planting art highlights how linkages between nature, nation, and White middle-class subjects are never settled, but rather are constantly reiterated in new guises (Ekers and Farnan, 96).

In the case of the artwork discussed above, the imagery of planting evokes a sense of nationalism due to the location of the work. The authors note the prominence of white middle class privilege in the workforce and the linking of this identity to nationalist tropes. In discussing the sense of community within a tree planting camp, Sweeney notes that tree planting camps offer a “broad social mix” that:

- could hardly be described as homogenous. Artists, athletes, and academically inclined students are all forced together for the tree planting season, and under the circumstances, tend to be friendly and open (Sweeney, 128).

Student tree planters may find the experience of living in close quarters with other students who hold “opposing ideas and differing experiences” and differing “interests, academic disciplines, and backgrounds” a unique experience (Sweeney, 129). However, considering the factors that constitute homogeneity and contextualizing considerations of tree planters as a “diverse group” (Sweeney, 129; Woolf, preface to Eating Dirt) forms a broader perspective. Sweeney provides tables indicating post-secondary experience and primary area of residence of the planters in his camp under study. Only one student had
no post-secondary education and only nine out of forty four planters primarily resided in Northern Ontario or out of province. He does not address whiteness, ethnicity, income, or sexuality but does articulate the physicality of the work, indicating the able-bodied privilege necessary to engage in the work:

The communities of practice in tree planting camps, almost without exception, are composed of young adult workers whose bodies and minds can remain healthy during the rigorous tree planting season (Sweeney, 106).

Tree planting demands incredible physical and mental endurance, the former of which is most likely gained through previous athletic experience. The ability to achieve this level of athleticism requires able-bodied privilege and the ability to allocate time devoted to exercise. For many individuals, the simultaneous demand of finances and family responsibilities renders gaining this level of athleticism an unrealistic task. For many student planters, however, their families provide a safety net that makes tree planting a viable financial risk. Tree planting creates an opportunity for a perceived ‘rite of passage’ but often necessitates economic and social privilege to engage in the work. Popular depictions of tree planting exemplify the way that white settler Canadian nationalism positions socially privileged bodies as representations of the nation.

1.8.3 Rugged Individualism

The ability to live in rudimentary conditions and endure hard labour are foundations to the tree planting subculture. Tree planting attracts individuals who are independent and drawn to the idea of working in a self-motivation based outdoor environment. Unlike other forms of manual labour, a popularized subculture has emerged
and includes a large number of bohemian, liberal minded youth. As previously discussed, Canadian rite of passage rhetoric distinguishes tree planting from other forms of manual labour. Rugged individualism emerged from early European settlers and is the underlying ideology that links youth, manual labour, and ‘Canadienne’. Colonial expansion in North America created a reverence for those willing to endure physical grueling physical challenges and uncertain danger. Although largely dependent on the support of the peoples of North America, white settlers created for themselves an image of rugged individualist comprised of legendary strength and ability to survive. In the United States, this ideology was closely tied to furthering growth and allegiance to the nation-state. American President Herbert Hoover used the term in his ‘rugged individualism’ post war world war one speech, he states:

When the war closed (…) We were challenged with a peace-time choice between the American system of rugged individualism and a European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrines--doctrines of paternalism and state socialism (…) It would have meant the undermining of the individual initiative and enterprise through which our people have grown to unparalleled greatness. (Hoover).

Hoover positions rugged individualism as the foundation of the American nation, a vital aspect of the American identity. Furthermore, he positions this ideology in opposition to “paternalism and state socialism”, suggesting this form of governance as a threat to citizen’s agency and freedom, preventing the growth of the nation’s “unparalleled greatness”. Hoover’s speech is significant in clarifying the historical
context and characteristics of rugged individualism. Tropes of the rugged individualist are equally as popular in the historical framing of the Canadian frontier. In many historical accounts, the individual bravery of pioneers is conflated with being ‘Canadian’. Ronald Jobe describes the rugged individualist in the context of Canadian literature as characters who:

frequently find themselves in situations that seem insurmountable…These are ‘true grit’ individualists who survive by dealing in the moment, using inner resources…and who harness their own sheer determination and will power (Jobe, 520).

The rugged individualist creates him or herself by overcoming challenges in impossible circumstances, through “sheer determination”. The rugged individualist has become a common caricature in a wide range of culture and arts, including theatre. These caricatures are worthy of mention in order to elucidate common depictions of the ‘rugged individualist’ and their characteristics. For example, Angela Belli notes that rugged individualists:

act under the impetus of an exclusive passion which, while it affords them refuge from the incongruities of the life which surrounds them, finds no place in the popular imagination. Maintaining their insularity, they find themselves opposed to such intangibles as the spirit of the times and ‘the human condition’. They even discover themselves at odds with members of their own class and their own families. Their actions have a common cause: they are engaged in a rebellion—sometimes silent, sometimes explosive—to proclaim the sanctity of the individual as opposed to the tendencies and instincts of the masses (Belli, 157).
Belli reveals the intricacies of the rugged individualist’s character, and the specific contour, which includes a sense of rebellion and opposition to the masses. In this sense, rugged individualists are simultaneously heroic and isolated. Not wanting to engage with “the masses”, their heroism is upheld by opposition to bureaucracy and control by the state. For some planters, this control can be directly personal, such as cases where tree planting diverges from their families’ expectations and cause them to face outright disapproval.

The ideology of the rugged individualist is prevalent in tree planting culture. In Planting the Nation: Tree planting Art and the Endurance of Canadian Nationalism, Ekers and Farnan discuss the concept of the ‘Rugged Individualist’:

Rugged Individualists are romanticized figures and invocations of such subjects tend to focus on the society they are turning away from in contrast to their own social history…It is the denigration of urban life, ‘traditional’ gender identities…The heroic status of the frontier subject is enacted through what their own subjectivity opposes (Ekers and Farnan, 111).

Tree planters are often correlated with and inspired by tropes of the rugged individualist. Planters are romanticized as rugged, able to endure physical challenge, and do not care for the frivolities of contemporary mass media. As Ekers and Farnon note, the rugged individualist is distinct and exists in opposition to mainstream society. Tree planters often claim a decidedly different identity than stereotypes of ‘spoon fed’ white, upper and middle class University students. Tree planters take pride in independence, strong work ethic, physical strength and ability to endure challenge.
1.8.4 Gender and Tree planting

Tree planting is a salient site for discussion of gender, and the instability of gender related perceptions, because of the historical shifting of social perceptions of the labour. Tree planting work was feminized in the 1950s because many rural men felt that planting was beneath them due to the higher social value placed on logging activities (Ekers 2014). In British Columbia, a majority of the workforce in the 1950s was comprised of working class women. Dirk Brinkman and his company greatly influenced the change in the workforce to its current demographic, comprised of students and an equal gender ratio, through his success and growth in the industry. Despite having been previously feminized, tree planting is now a dominantly masculine environment. An interviewee in Do it with Joy describes:

the amazing part was that the girls were planting as many trees as the guys (…)
There is one case where a girl had given birth to a baby about a week before and she planted as many trees as me while nursing the kid and washing diapers” (Do it with Joy 1976).

The interviewee’s intention is to support women tree planters but he also demonstrates the largely forgotten history of working class women tree planters. Tree planting is often assumed to have always been perceived as masculine labour. Both women and men must prove themselves through planting a high number of trees to gain respect. The difference, however, is that men face far less sexual objectification and are not relegated to roles beyond simply laborers. The impact of gender within tree planting camps is complex but previous literature has found general trends in relation to gender. Bodner summarizes these trends best, stating:
At its most general, women test themselves against the tough conditions of planting in order to reconstruct their personal identities, some of which have been damaged by issues surrounding body image. Men view tree planting as part of a tradition of male work environments and attempt to display competency in this tradition (Bodner, 288).

Many tree planting camps have an equal gender ratio but dominant masculinity affects the sense of gender equity. Dominant masculinity, which refers to domination predicated on the subordination of women and marginalized sexualities, is not unique to tree planting but rather a reflection of broader systemic sexism and heteronormativity. Tree planters are influenced by rural norms of masculinity and valorize ‘masculine’ attributes of “being strong, tough and hard” (Ekers, 885). Tree planting camps controlled by dominant masculinity threatens the value of women’s work and marginalizes

Figure 6 Photo Taken in August 1989 at Meager Creek Hot Springs, Pemberton B.C Photo Courtesy of Gordon Laird, who took this photo of his wife and children.
femininity. Michael Ekers concluded that the two tree-planting camps he studied produced a sexist social hierarchy whereby masculinity was dominant (Ekers, 892).

Callan Main conducted a series of interviews with women tree planters and found that femininity was largely devalued in the work environment. She notes that the way women demonstrate their femininity in camp affects their credibility as workers. She describes:

If a woman was considered ‘girly’, many women planters would think that she was bound to be a bad tree planter until she had shown she could plant trees. If a woman were to plant a lot of trees, then what she wore or how she displayed her femininity would not be questioned (Main, 144).

Displaying femininity affects women’s ability to gain respect from their coworkers in the tree planting environment. Respect is based on work ethic and women must prove themselves as valuable workers before they can express their femininity, without losing credibility. In speaking with women in management positions, Main found that maintaining respect from coworkers and credibility as a competent worker often required monitoring femininity. Main discusses the response of one woman in management, Natalie, who felt that she had to de-emphasize her femininity due to the need to monitor her body as sexual object. Main analyzes Natalie’s interview response in terms of her perception of gender, describing:

Natalie suggests that it is up to the woman to maintain her respect level and not become a ‘target’ of sexual advances or harassment. Here, she is engaging with early (and continuing) gender stereotypes that women are responsible for the behaviour of others, especially ‘moral’ behaviour. To ‘camouflage’ herself was
Main notes the way in which Natalie is subscribing to assumptions that women are expected to monitor their bodies, so as to avoid unwarranted attention. In order to blend in within the tree planting environment, women are expected to appear masculine, exemplifying how masculinity is normalized and dominant. The female body is sexualized which creates a double standard for what is considered an ‘appropriate’ appearance. Women are often associated with supposedly civilizing men in camp, by acting as “respondents to their sexual desire” (Main, 139). She cites “rampant sexual innuendos” in the work culture that act as “symbolic expressions of male dominance” which “emphasize hegemonic masculinity” (Main, 139). Similarly to Main, Ekers found that sexual objectification of women was a common aspect of the work culture. He describes a discussion of hiring planters for next season whereby “future female workers were objectified as ‘hot girls’ before they even entered the job site” (Ekers, 884). One of the men involved in the discussion requested attractive female workers so as to improve his own morale.

Main describes that notions of domesticity also play a role in negotiating gender in a tree planting camp. She expresses frustrations with feeling like a mother as opposed to simply a crew boss, such as helping members of her crew locate their belongings, more so than crew bosses did who were men. Women crew bosses experience a higher expectation to provide emotional support and express sensitivity. Men who are unhelpful or insensitive are strong and tough whilst women with these traits are more likely to be labelled a ‘bitch’. Main illuminates the flaw in this dualistic culture, as women are
objectified regardless of their behaviour, relegated as either sexual objects or as “the
guardian of ‘morality’ and social conduct” (Main, 146).

The impact of dominant masculinity is also apparent in the vulnerability that men felt
when discussing these issues in Ekers’ interviews:

What I did not anticipate was the difficulty of interviewing men about issues of
sexuality and gender. Although there were exceptions, men were often either
squeamish about the topics of gender and sexuality or relatively silent on the
issues, which likely stemmed from the invisibility of gender and sexuality to those
that benefit from the operation of these relations throughout social and working
life. (Ekers, 882).

Ekers’ interviews reveal the vulnerability that men in his tree planting camps felt
in regards to discussing gender and sexuality. For men who adhere to dominant
masculinity, acknowledging the way in which this form of masculinity perpetuates
sexism and homophobia requires a sense of sensitivity, which hegemonic masculinity
often does not allow for. Fear of losing dominance also prevents this acknowledgement,
as it risks stripping away privilege and exposing the fabricated pretenses of subscribing to
dominant masculinity. Ekers most recent study of two tree planting camps in British
Columbia focuses on the prevalence of dominant masculinity, noting:

What makes tree planting unique is the deliberate attempt to create a
heteronormative and promiscuous working culture with the intention of
heightening production levels, which challenges the more classical notion that
productivity can be enhanced through limiting heterosexual activity (Ekers, 882).
Within tree planting culture, promiscuity is conflated with improved work ethic. This promiscuity is based on heteronormative assumptions of sexuality. Common terms and expressions used in planting feminize the landscape as available for male conquest. The hegemonic aspects of this masculinity has its roots in colonial rhetoric which encourages masculine domination and conquering land inhabited by Aboriginal peoples. The simultaneous subordination of women, Aboriginal peoples, and land forms the foundation for hegemonic masculinity. Ekers concludes his observations on the influence of this rhetoric on the culture of the tree planting camps under study:

> These examples are not aberrations or unique to tree planting, but rather reflect broader settler dynamics of heterosexism and homosociality that operate through the masculinized exchange and domination of women and feminized landscapes (Ekers, 891).

Hegemonic masculinity is normalized in tree planting and reflective of broader settler mentality in Canada. Homosociality in this context refers to when heterosexual men bond through the subordination of women and sexual minorities. In tree planting, this most often occurs through teasing and allocating nicknames, which can start as light humor, but socially ignorant management can allow this to grow into bullying. As interviewees in Ekers’ article describe, the effects of dominant masculinity are subtle and can risk causing individuals who are negatively affected to suffer in silence.

However, Ekers also notes that there were men in his study who were well aware and critical of the treatment of women as sexual objects (Ekers, 884). Main also offers contrasting findings, noting that some of her interviews do reflect:
the comfort many women feel in tree planting camps to be recognized as women. It shows that they do not feel disadvantaged as women and therefore do not show signs of hiding their femininity or de-gendering themselves in a tree planting camp (Main, 136).

Depending on the individual and camp environment, women tree planters may feel comfortable with or enjoy displaying femininity. Furthermore, some tree planting camps are distinctively feminist, and queer friendly, as discussed in recently compiled ‘Women and Queers Tree planting zine’. There are some planters who return planting largely for the positive space in their tree planting camp. As previously noted, the cultural space of a tree planting camp is entirely dependent on the social awareness of its management, particularly their forthrightness in acknowledging oppressive behaviour.

1.8.5 Gender and the Body

Main conducted open-ended interviews with women tree planters, guided by a series of prepared questions that did not include weight or body image. Despite this, she found that these topics came up in many of her interviews, as “almost all of the women responded that they enjoyed being active, getting ‘fit’ and slim, and being able to eat whatever they wanted (Main, 125). After contextualizing her data as reflective of middle class women, she notes that in addition to monitoring food intake, “consistent forms of body discipline such as (…) exercising, shaving, and doing one’s hair and face are for the most part daily activities in which women seem to treat their bodies as objects” (Main, 129). These cultural practices are a stark contrast to the tree planting lifestyle, which offers a kind of liberation, as showers are most often taken on a weekly basis, and bug
spray, a bandanna, and baby wipes are the extent of a daily regime. Main notes that her interviews raised an awareness of the role of her own body in tree planting. She reflects the ways in which she relates to her respondents:

I refer to it as my tree planting ‘diet’. However, this diet consists of me doing nothing extra or differently than just doing the tree planning job itself. I get to go and make money, get strong and eat whatever I want and still lose weight because of the excessive amount of calories I am burning each day. For many women in my similar demographic, the potential of losing weight while simultaneously making money can be quite alluring (Main, 130).

The ability to lose weight whilst in the process of doing work, as opposed to allotting separate time and energy for exercise, is appealing for women. Losing weight, and the freedom to eat without surveillance, is a large part of the positive aspects of tree planting labour. In her findings, improved physical appearance through not only losing weight, but gaining muscle, was an additional motivation for enduring the labour.

Main contextualizes these findings as reflective of the body as a representation of social status (Main, 66). White middle class women often feel pressure to not only control their weight, but to gain muscle. Muscularity has come to represent not only physical strength, but mental fortitude as well. Main contextualizes this phenomena:

In western cultures today, women are bombarded with images of the body ideal. Over the past two decades the cultural and societal valorization of physical exercise has also permeated notions of the body beautiful such that, for today’s (white) woman, the beautiful body is not just thin; it is firm, and well-toned
Main notes that the social symbolism of muscularity for women is a result of the media and its effect on contemporary society. In order to gain muscularity, physical exercise is necessary, which tree planting work provides. Muscularity for women “symbolizes freedom from an uncontrolled femininity” and enables them to “become more practiced in male virtues of control and self-mastery” (Main, 67). As Main describes:

Excess body weight came to be seen as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy, or lack of will (…) Muscles have chiefly symbolized and continue to symbolize the masculine power of physical strength, and physical strength as seen as necessary for manual labour (Main, 66).

Manual labour is associated with physical strength, and therefore masculinity. This provides an explanation for why tree planting has been assumed to be a historically masculine occupation (Sweeney 2009, 69). She notes that for women to succeed in this work environment, they must act as ‘conceptual men’ by adopting the style of dress and competitive attitude of the masculine culture they are surrounded by (Main, 148)

These findings speak to the way in which control of the body permeates these women’s lives outside of tree planting work. Bodner’s interviews with women also found body image to be a common topic of discussion, a noticeable difference from the men he interviewed who were “generally silent” on these issues (Bodner, 285). One of his informants, who was a confidant to many planters in camp, shared that some women
planters were or had dealt with issues including eating disorders, excessive dieting, and low self-esteem.

The tree planting season is only a few months long, which means that women tree planters cannot easily maintain their muscularity post-season. Main describes this as “a sense of contradiction” as the corporeal results of the labour “can be potentially enslaving for women because they uphold this body ideal which requires much effort to maintain” (Main, 131). Achieving a ‘planter body’ can be harmful as women are left with an unrealistic standard for their body after the season ends. Callan Main further analyzes the effect of gender on her tree planting camp under study by utilizing critiques of neoliberalism to ground her analysis. Neoliberalism elucidates ideological underpinnings of gender assumptions in tree planting as well as the competitive environment and its culture of rugged individualism.

1.8.6 Gender and Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a politic based on transferring control of the economy from the state to the private sector. Privatization rests on the belief that a free market is a better regulator of the economy, and social life, than the state (Hall 2011). Through this ideology, individuals are expected to act ‘rationally’ in order to successfully navigate this market. However, this expectation ignores structural inequality, which is why neoliberalism has “disproportionate and deleterious impacts on women, especially those marginalized by economic and social difference” (Brodie 2008). Governments that adopt this ideology, therefore, worsen the ability for marginalized individuals to successfully
negotiate their livelihood within a market-based social structure expected to regulate itself (Hubbard 2004; Parker 2008).

Neoliberalism developed earlier liberal ideas of 'gender neutrality' and an egalitarian family towards notions of the genderless international citizen, and coupled this abstract individual with privatization. Neoliberalism plays a significant role in Canadian politics, affecting government policy and the framework in which women lead their lives. Erasure of the role of gender in social relations and the critical role of women in creating an egalitarian family leads to an underlying assumption of the universal figure (Acker 2004). Neoliberal ideology is premised on the assumption of white, heterosexual men as the standard or universal figure. The effect of hyper sexualisation of women and motherhood expectations are unaccounted for, furthering underlying assumptions that women, so long as they act ‘rationally’, should be able to thrive within this economy. Ignoring restraints faced by women affects assumptions of the universal figure to behave ‘rationally’ within a free market state (Brodie 2008).

Tree planters conform to and are largely influenced by neoliberal ideology within their work environment. Competitive and motivation intended rhetoric in tree planting such as the common aphorism ‘there is no such thing as bad land, only bad planters’ exemplifies this rhetoric. The intention of the phrase is to suggest that a tree planter with a positive attitude will not be hindered by challenging land conditions, such as rock face and swamp. This reflects a major tenant of neoliberalism whereby individuals will reach success if they work hard enough despite the effects of their social conditions or context. Tree planting labour is often valued for its ability to improve individual’s physical strength and mental fortitude, as conceptualized through rural masculinity (Main, 65).
This risks ignoring structural effects as well as normalizing high performance athleticism. Individuals who are unable to achieve socially constructed perceptions of success, in this case plant a high number of trees, can fall prey to perceiving their labour as the result of individual failure or incompetence.

Neoliberalism in tree planting takes shape through rugged individualist rhetoric which perpetuates assumptions of the universal body and the ability to overcome challenge through willpower. Notions of empowerment in tree planting conflate success with physical fitness, which is rooted in neoliberalism:

The neoliberal reinvention of ‘welfare’ that promotes choice, personal accountability, consumerism, and self-empowerment as ethics of citizenship while at the same time masking social forces that position people into the dejected borderlands of consumer capitalism has culminated in the everyday practices of physical fitness and weight loss becoming implicit within technologies of self-governance and the personalization of health (Francombe and Silk, 225).

Neoliberalism centers the body as a site of empowerment through losing weight and gaining muscularity. Expectations of the body in tree planting are distinctly neoliberal despite the inferred opposition to consumer culture of rugged individualism common to popular imagery of the population. Failure to plant several thousand trees a day is perceived as a lack of mental strength and a shortcoming of character. In terms of the gendered aspects, popularized imagery of tree planting which celebrates the equality of women tree planters risks further re-inscribing neoliberalism as a feminist project. Images of women tree planters as empowered subject’s risks perpetuating notions of the female, athletic body as universally accessible (Heywood, 101).
Chapter 4 Autoethnography as Methodology

Autoethnography is a form of research and analysis that uses personal experience to illuminate social and cultural phenomena (Ellis, et al.). This methodology has been adopted across the social sciences, and has been used by sociologists (Ellis 1995), human geographers (Tamas 2009), journalists, high school students (Camangian 2010), anthropologists (Malinowski 1922), travelers (Theroux 1992), and feminist theorists (Anzaldua and Moraga 1984), among others. In forming my research project, I was heavily influenced by feminist scholarship whereby researchers drew upon their own experiences to contribute to analysis of topics they were interested in. Through utilizing autoethnography, I am able to connect my personal experience to the broader social context in order to ground my feminist interpretation of my environment.

In the following chapter, I discuss autoethnography and various important aspects of this research approach. In the first section, I discuss the effects of privilege in research and how this alters the researcher’s perception and can risk subordinating research subjects. I then describe the process of categorizing autoethnography and the history of autoethnographic work. Following this, I discuss the risk of self-indulgence in autoethnography and the importance of connecting personal experience to social context. Lastly, I illuminate how autoethnography gives researchers, or those engaging in autoethnographic work, space to define their own identity.
1.9 Research and Privilege

As a feminist researcher, I am eager to ensure that I take account of my privilege as a graduate student researcher, and wary of repeating past mistakes in both feminist and ethnographic research. As Ellis and Bochner state, “For the most part, those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective” (Ellis and Bochner). Imperialist perspectives affect the way in which research is conducted, interpretation of the social environment in which an individual is immersed, and what academic literature is considered ‘canonical’ or ‘mainstream’.

Research operates within a context of privilege and many Feminist researchers have worked to acknowledge the effect of this privilege on the forming of the research itself.

Donna Haraway coined the phrase ‘situated knowledges’ as a way to address issues of privilege. In “situating knowledge,” the researcher considers what has informed her view of the world - “with whose blood were my eyes crafted?” – helping to create a sense of accountability for research (Haraway, 585). The researcher can then acknowledge the ways in which the tools for seeing influence what is seen. Haraway specifies these “skilled practices”:

- How to see?
- Where to see from?
- What limits to vision?
- What to see for?
- Whom to see with?
- Who gets to have more than one point of view?
- Who gets blinded?
- Who wears blinders? (Haraway, 587).

Situating knowledge encourages acknowledging historical context and possible limitations in perception caused by the social privilege and power of the researcher. In
doing so, the researcher’s process of generating knowledge is attentive to the “impossibility of and lack of desire for master, universal narratives” (Ellis and Adams).

Research can risk creating a hierarchy of knowledge through its membership in a formal institution. The knowledge of research subjects can therefore be co-opted and used to further the social privilege of researchers.

My interest in conducting autoethnographic research grew partly out of an experience as an undergraduate student. For an assignment in a directed reading course, I chose to make a documentary comprised of interviews with three classmates. The aim of the documentary was to discuss the ways heteronormativity and whiteness affect the experience of attending Queen’s University. The interviews provided insight through specific experiences such as instances of discomfort and the trajectory of personal relationships. When I watched the final product with one of my interviewees, he was embarrassed by how ‘emotional’ he was in the interview in his discussion of a romantic relationship. In the time passed since the interview, his emotions had significantly altered so he felt disconnected from his former self on camera. We were on close enough terms that we could laugh and the lack of audience beyond those directly involved meant he had no risk of exposure. However, I was uncomfortable with the way I had used my classmates’ vulnerabilities for a project born out of and for my own academic interests. The people I interviewed had participated in this interview as a favor to me and had placed a great deal of trust in my representation of them.

In the context of my master’s thesis, I also considered conducting interviews but ultimately felt that autoethnography would be more conducive to the aims of my project and do more to further research on tree planting. Previous research on tree planting has
provided many interviews that have not yet been put into conversation with one another. I not only wanted to discuss this research as a whole, but also investigate possible silences and erasures that might have gone unaddressed to avoid exposure of personal vulnerabilities. Furthermore, in working to produce socially conscious research, I was strongly influenced by previous feminists who have discussed their own experiences in order to contribute to academic knowledge. In context of broader systemic sexism and dominant masculinity, I appreciated work whereby women respected their own experiences as worthy of subject of analysis and discussion.

1.10 Categorizing Autoethnography

A major tenant of Autoethnography, and what differentiates it from memoir, is the necessity of connection from personal experience to social context. A considerable body of feminist scholarship has connected experience with theory but has not explicitly called itself Autoethnography (This Bridge Called My Back 1983; Hurston 1935; Collins 1998; hooks 1981). Although these works have not been labelled Autoethnography per se, acknowledging this history avoids erasure of previous contributions of using personal experience as research method (Junco and Vidal-Ortiz 2011; Griffin 2012).

Like autoethnographers, black academic feminists have drawn on their personal experiences to develop feminist theory. For example, Patricia Hill Collins used her experiences of racial oppression as well as her privileged position as a well-educated academic to develop the concept of “Outsiders Within,” which describes the standpoint of black academic feminists (1986). Black feminists’ discussion of oppression in their writing develops increased awareness and contributes to academic theory. This approach uses both sociological training and personal and cultural experiences, with neither
subordinated to the other. Experience is valued as an important source of information for developing academic theory and acknowledging fissures and contradictions within analyses. In turn, this exercise can also offer new ways of understanding past experiences and new insights about previously held ways of knowing (Collins, 29). Collins’s standpoint offers a recognition of the way that black women have been subordinated in white feminist academic environments. She also achieves similar aims to what may be referred to as ‘Autoethnographic’ work. In both forms of scholarship, the interaction between experience and theory works to develop new ways of thinking and perspectives.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* is another example of how a researcher attempts to navigate her different subject positions. Her account of her return to her hometown to gather Black folklore reveals the difficulties of navigating her subjectivities, as ethnographer and member of her community. Although she is initially able to weave both voices, she ultimately experiences a collapse of her identity as ethnographer. In discussing Hurston’s work, Graciela Hernandez describes how:

Hurston rejects the authority of an insider/outsider position, and suggests that ethnographers cannot carve spaces for themselves in societies where anthropologists define people as objects or others for view through the lenses of the spy-glass (Hernandez, 360).

Hurston’s work exemplifies the difficulty in conducting ethnography, even when the ethnographer is an insider in the community under study. Irma McClaurin describes Hurston’s work as “an ideal illustration of autoethnography” (McClaurin, 66), echoing Alice Deck’s observation of the way in which Hurston offers “an intricate interplay of the introspective personal engagement expected of an autobiography and the self-effacement expected of cultural descriptions and explications associated with ethnography” (Deck). Hurston’s work, and subsequent discussion of her work, has guided my understanding of
balancing self-confidence in the value of personal experience with offering a contribution to the production of knowledge.

**1.11 Risk of Self-Indulgence**

The ultimate goal of autoethnography is to produce work that achieves more than solely personal catharsis through writing. Autoethnography necessitates that the researcher connect personal experiences to social context (Ellis 2011). Without this connection, autoethnography risks being a self-indulgent personal account. Geoffrey Walford grapples with this in his autoethnography of his induction ceremony as an Oxford proctor. After providing a narrative of the induction ceremony, he provides a discussion of the value of autoethnography and its purpose. Ultimately, he abandons the autoethnographic project of his experience as an Oxford proctor, citing risk of self-indulgence. He felt the topic lacked importance because it did not offer a contribution to existing knowledge (Walford, 415). However, he could have offered an intriguing analysis of power and privilege. He acknowledges enjoyment of his privilege but, despite his transparency, he does not attempt to critically analyze it. By offering reflexivity of his position of power, he could have contextualized his experience in a way that would have contributed to existing knowledge.

Critical self-reflection in autoethnography can unveil the ways personal experiences may be common across a population. As a result, personal accounts can serve as indicators of structural power and privilege. Gloria Anzaldua emphasizes the importance of including broader connections within personal writing, stating: “The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision”
By linking personal experience to broader power structures, personal behavior can be analyzed in relation to sociological phenomena rather than as existing solely at an interpersonal level. This encourages change beyond solely the individual and the importance of systemic reforms.

Understanding individual experiences as a product of social forces can work to build a sense of community and promote critical consciousness. Patrick Camangian discusses the outcome of his Autoethnography classroom exercise given to his high school students. This particular high school suffers from significant racial conflict and many students are from low income families. He found that the assignment created a positive sense of unity and community within his classroom:

Not only did students unite on the basis of recognizing similar community struggles, they also recognized common social oppression and marginalization. Students mentioned how sharing autoethnographies made them more conscious of society as a whole, in particular their subjection to an unjust world (Camangian, 199).

Autoethnography, which engages in self-reflection, can incite a recognition of both privilege and oppression as pertaining to a broader identity trait, as opposed to an isolated incident. In doing so, a critical consciousness of systemic injustices are recognized and understood as widespread struggles.

1.12 Self-Defining Identity

Emphasis on personal experience offers an opportunity for research subjects to self-define (Collins). As discussed previously, researchers hold privilege due to the ability to perceive and frame individuals into research subjects. Historically, this originally occurred through colonial settlers casting observations of the peoples they met and later colonized. Irma McClaurin discusses the way in which Autoethnography
enables the ability to subvert the power relationship inherent in research as it enables the ability to “represent the speaker/writer’s subjective discourse, but in the language of the colonizer. In speaking the colonizer’s language, the ‘native’ demonstrates her capacity to be both like the colonizer and unlike him” (McClaurin, 65). Gloria Anzaldúa emphasizes self-definition as a form of creating a representation that is not filtered through the observation of an Outsider researcher, as she articulates:

I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me (…) To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul (Anzaldúa, 169).

Self-definition enables the ability to promote a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate through their own communities. Self-definition does not necessarily serve to represent a community or group, but rather offers an opportunity for connection (Ono, 122). Rather than an Outsider’s observation, autoethnography can “explicate the subtleties of our culture, and by delving into and using the subtleties of our personal expression, we may ‘reveal exactly how things stand with the ‘inner life’ of (…) communities’” (McClaurin, 71). Comprehension of the “inner life” of communities is important for understanding how broader political structures affect individuals’ daily experiences. In doing so, the impact of historical and political context is tied to the way in which factors of social identity impact experience:

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives- our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings- all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity…our refusal of the easy explanation to the conditions we live in (bridge called my back, 23).

Feminist scholarship and Autoethnography values the importance of “flesh and blood” experiences in order to work towards social justice oriented research by first
creating an intervention on dominant tropes and stereotypes of individuals, groups, and communities. This figured largely in my interest in conducting research on tree planting. I was interested in getting beyond the ‘image’ of tree planters and into discussion of more personal and contextualized aspects of planters experiences.

Camangian notes that agency through writing can offer a source of group empowerment:

The value in sharing stories of struggle was that rapport developed in their mutual understanding of their common circumstances. The struggles they were articulating and affirming had more to do with their collective sense of survival than any wallowing in group self-pity. More than a misery-loves-company gratification, their connectedness was rooted in overcoming struggles (197).

The ability to self-define through personal voice can promote a positive sense of community. Individuals carry multiple subjectivities, as Jones, et al. state, “we found that it was in the ambivalence and experimentation, the navigations and negotiations of different contexts, that we were our authentic, multifaceted, ever-changing selves” (Jones, et al, 716). The way in which an individual navigates their simultaneous personal privilege, oppression, and context is “often related to issues of professionalism, survival, or safety” (Jones, et al, 718). The authors thus suggest that different aspects of identity are emphasized and deemphasized through awareness formed by context. They found that emphasizing different aspects of identity in different contexts supported the notion of identity as fluid. In other words, an unchanging identity across different contexts was not necessarily realistic as attempts to live out a static identity were complicated and could be costly due to the social repercussions caused by power and privilege. Through discussing identity as fluid, the relationship among social structures, privilege, and power are emphasized, offering a recognition of broader politics.
A major aspect of my experience tree planting was the change in context from the classroom to far more isolated manual labour which necessitated adjusting my identity to the social norms of my environment. This reflects the fluid nature of identity and its role as method of social survival for navigating differing contexts (Jones, et al, 713). An individual’s marginalization in a new context may create an emphasized awareness of particular aspects of their social identity.

Describing experiences and feelings through personal voice can offer multiple aspects of the researcher’s identity. Kent Ono articulates the role of voice, noting, “voice makes up so much of our daily experiences. It seems to be an apt metaphor for how we think about who we are in the world” (Ono, 115). His article, structured as a letter to his mother, describes the differences between talking to an academic audience and to his mother. He writes in a way that both his mother and academics will understand (Ono, 117) and simultaneously writes as both son and academic. The voice an individual chooses to adopt can reflect which subjectivity, such as academic researcher or son, is being expressed. Interweaving multiple aspects of identity such as researcher, child, activist, worker, or friend can be challenging. By working through these complexities, structures of power and privilege can be unveiled.

1.13 Methods

In order to gather data for my research, I took daily notes over the course of my three seasons of tree planting - during the month prior to the season, in the evenings after work and on days off, and for the month post-season. Many planters keep a notebook for recording their planting numbers and a list of items to purchase on the next day off. I combined this type of notebook with my observations which was useful for reinforcing
my sense of having a dual role as planter and researcher. I wrote down my observations of the day’s logistical complications, interesting conversations, and my mood or general state of mind. Most days were fairly uneventful but note taking allowed me to remember and consider seemingly insignificant moments in different ways. In order to make sense of the data, I coded recurring themes and compared my findings with previous literature on tree planting. These themes included notions of rugged individualism, sentiments of liminality, strength, gender, and the body. The structure of my analysis is based on these themes and offers a relevant contribution to research interested in tree planting.

1.14 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined important facets of Autoethnography. Autoethnography requires critical self-reflexivity through connecting personal experience to their broader social context. Without this connection, autoethnographers may risk self-indulgence and lose opportunity for offering insightful social analysis. These concepts from Autoethnography inform my understanding and interpretation of my data notes. My analysis is influenced from previous authors’ research discussing gender and neoliberalism and puts this research into conversation with my own experience (Sweeney 2005; Bodner 1997; Main 2009; Ekers 2014). Building on their work, I engage in dialogue and offer a contribution to research interested in tree planting through my analysis in the following chapter.
Chapter 5  Data and Analysis

This chapter describes how my experience both reinforces and disrupts popularized imagery of the occupation. Grounded in my own experience, I offer insight into why middle class university students continually engage in and valorize an occupation that was once prison labour. In order to do so, I have organized relevant autoethnographic data, selected from daily note taking over the course of three seasons of tree planting, into five sections accompanied by analysis. I have edited my field notes for the reader by adding explanatory details and editing grammar. The data I offer therefore read as narratives but do not largely differ from their original form. The first three sections are in chronological order by planting season and show the trajectory of my perspective of the occupation. In my first season, I enjoyed the independent work environment and working for a feminist boss. In my second season, I found the neoliberal work environment overbearing and by my third season, felt disillusioned by the rugged individualist culture of tree planting. I discuss my changed perception of a ‘strong woman’ in the fourth section and in the last section discuss tree planting and the body, particular in relation to neoliberalism.

Rookie Season – 2012

I apprehensively packed my belongings for the season ahead, including a large hockey sized bag of clothes, sleeping bag, 5 liter water jug, and boots. My sister dropped me off at the train station, and I felt the thrill of departure as I boarded the train, punctuated by a flurry of animated waves from my nieces through the sunroof of the car. They didn’t entirely understand what this was all about but loved it nonetheless. When I arrived in Toronto, carrying all of my belongings through the train station proved an interesting experience. I seriously questioned how I was going to take on a job that I
could barely even carry the equipment for. As I sat atop my mound of belongings on the sidewalk, I received a medley of strange looks and grins. A faithful friend picked me up, and shook her head and laughed at the sight of me. That afternoon, I met a friend-of-a-friend who sold me her plantings bags and shovel, parting ways with a knowing grin and ‘good luck’. In the evening, I met the owner of a used tent I found on the MEC community website, who turned out to be a veteran tree planter, and gave me the same grin and ‘good luck’ when we parted.

My friend and I went out for my final supper, and her brother and his roommate joined us. Sitting in the back of a mom and pop Ethiopian restaurant, I savored the food and comfort which I knew I would likely not have for some time. Her brother’s roommate turned out to be a veteran tree planter and was ‘rookie highballer’7 his first season. He offered advice and tips, including the suggestion to be attentive to my digestive clock, as going to the bathroom at camp was far more comfortable and wouldn’t waste valuable planting time during the day. He and the two other planters I met that day were kind and offered a deeper sense of engagement than most interactions with strangers provide. I liked them, and hoped that the people I would soon be joining would similarly be kind and interesting.

The next morning, I departed ways with my friend at the Toronto greyhound station, after a few maddening circles around the block in search of a drop off spot, made worse by our mutual anxiety over how I was going to carry all of my belongings for the rest of the journey. Using what was left in my dwindling bank account, I purchased a bus ticket to North Bay and noticed a tree planter sitting nearby. Identifying a tree planter in a bus station is no challenging task because of the plantings bags, shovel, and dirt encrusted luggage. He later became one of my favorite people on the planet. He picked up my belongings before asking if I needed help, and we made our way to the bus as I attempted to carry the rest of my bags with a stoic and controlled air. He greeted several fellow planters on the bus as we boarded and they shared their annual updates along with gossip related to the job and other planters. I felt like an outsider, but attempted to not show fear or discomfort.

We arrived at the North Bay greyhound station and met our management team who stood next to several large fifteen seat vans. The veteran planters happily greeted each other and the first year rookies introduced themselves. Our curiosities were finally satisfied after months of wondering who we would be spending our summer with. I was happy and excited, it was a much better way to start a summer job than the usual tour around the restaurant accompanied by warnings of the manager’s various pet peeves.

We loaded the vans, and organized ourselves by crew to drive from North Bay to the camp site. I was happy that my crew boss was familiar to me and felt much more at ease because of it. The veterans were friendly, but I knew that they were quietly eyeing

---

7 The first year planter who plants the most trees.
the rookies to assess whether or not they would survive the season. I could tell it would take time to make friends with the veterans but looked forward to it because they seemed like interesting people. On the way to the camp site, I noticed how remarkably different northern Ontario is from the fields of southern Ontario. There are more trees, boulders, and lakes, particularly trees growing on boulders on the edge of lakes. Finally, after months of preparation, I had arrived. I had only told my closest friends that I was going tree planting, because I didn’t want to engage in speculative conversation, and had a significant fear of failure. Somehow that made the experience feel more like my own. As my wider group of friends slowly found out, as they inquired about my whereabouts, they were amused but not entirely surprised. By that time I was in my own little world, their role in my life somehow magnified by my intensity of my emotions during the day but simultaneously dimmed by distance and new distractions.

The first few days were comprised of learning how to cut the shovel in the ground, which spots to plant the trees in, trees spacing, strategies for efficient planting, and camp safety meetings. I was apprehensive but enthusiastic about the novelty of a new environment. After several training days, my crew boss designated me my first piece\textsuperscript{8}, and my rookie enthusiasm provided me with the energy needed to work continuously throughout the day. I was disgruntled by the realization that my piece was not, in fact, organized into a square shape, making it challenging to strategize how to go about perfectly covering the land with seedlings in six by six foot increments. My shovel did not thrust into the ground as easily as I had hoped. The trees I had planted were difficult to see, despite the sea of yellow flagger\textsuperscript{9} I distributed behind me as I went along. I kept running out of trees in the middle of my piece, causing me to have to ‘dead walk’ back to the cache, wasting valuable time that I desperately needed. I planted no more than three hundred trees that day. At ten cents a tree, I made only $30 for that backbreaking day (how long a day was it?). With twenty dollar a day camp costs, it was not exactly a lucrative day. I realized I would not be making anywhere near the amount of money I had initially projected and my high baller fantasies began to dissipate. Having spent five hundred dollars on equipment, however, I was financially locked in to the job. The planting season was only two months long, and I needed to make that money back as well as enough to pay for rent and food costs until I found another job upon my return. I had no idea where I was going post-planting but felt comfortable with the idea of figuring it out later. Worst-case scenario, I could always go home.

***

A rookie’s first goal is to hit 2,000 trees in a day, which I did toward the end of the season in a piece selected by my crew boss for this purpose because it was easy to plant. Towards the end of the day, I was just short of 2,000, so my crew boss let me ‘push the road’ which meant planting right beside the road until I hit my goal. The next day,

\textsuperscript{8} Area of land designated to an individual planter

\textsuperscript{9} Brightly coloured biodegradable marking tape.
however, I was informed that I had to re-plant the entire piece. I had planted my trees too high on the furrow and had to re-plant them all six inches lower to the ground. I managed to fuck up furrows, the easiest land to plant. Pathetic. Oh, rookie woes.

***

Tree planting feels like a parallel universe. There is something about bush karma out here. I don’t read signs in anything because tree planting and unpredictable chaos go hand in hand. The bizarre is common. It’s this weird system of work, but everything aside, it comes down to strength. There is no other characteristic necessary to tree plant. It doesn’t really matter how, what kind, why, all that matters is that you have the strength to find the energy to do what you need to do. You can choose whether or not you think planting trees is a sign of a person’s strength. I think that in the end it is, because anyone can tree plant. Your body doesn’t matter. It is one of the few jobs that reveal the raw character in a person. I have seen myself in my little bitch fit mood, my flight over fight, and unwavering pitiful exhaustion that no amount of internal rallying is any match for. But I have also jumped back into myself and remembered who the fuck I am because I lost myself for a bit there from going stir crazy in Kingston. Tree planting is obviously controlled by humans but the day to day work of tree planting does not work in the way that things do outside of the bush. It’s interesting to live in a world controlled by the force of nature rather than the force of humans. I like it. It’s like nature is fighting back because it knows we don’t belong out here.

Prior to my research project, I had never been tree planting before nor had any experience in working in a manual labor or rural environment. The crew boss who hired me was a former classmate and our relationship did not extend beyond that of acquaintances but we shared many mutual friends, similar interests, and political perspectives. Many of the tree planters hired had some sort of social connection to the crew boss. This hiring model is a major component of what Sweeney describes as ‘communities of practice.’ Brinkman’s early recruitment of workers in universities in the 1980s began the roots of this social network. The majority of most tree planting camps are white, which might be caused by dominant whiteness in southern Ontario universities or white students’ interest and social value in the romanticized image of tree planting. My camp was a majority of white students, in line with Sweeny’s findings in the late 1990s.
that “the labour force was estimated to be over 90 per cent students” (Sweeney 2009).

The gender ratio was fairly equal, reflecting the trend that “many contractors,
managers, and crew bosses currently make explicit attempts to hire equal numbers of
males and females” (Sweeney 2009). In some tree planting camps, hiring practices aimed
at an equal gender ratio can be more a “deliberate attempt to create a heteronormative and
promiscuous working culture with the intention of heightening production levels” (Ekers
2013) than a desire to achieve a sense of gender equity. The community of practice of my
first year was influenced by both a close-knit management and having a majority of
rookie planters, which emphasized a sense of a generational passing on of “knowledge,
norms, values, and language” (Sweeney 2005). Sweeney describes this process, stating:

> each community of practice in a tree planting camp is born out of the
> transformation stage of the previous community of practice, and when it reaches
> its transformation stage, begets a new community of practice. Although each new
> community of practice carries over some of the traits from the previous
> community of practice, it modifies and adapts itself to the needs of the current
> membership (Sweeney, 108).

Our management team knew each other from previous tree planting seasons,
which provided a sense of rapport and positively influenced the camp’s social culture.

Our camp supervisor had not previously led a tree planting camp in this region but was
highly respected due to his reputation and the social ties he created during his time as a
tree planter. He was hard working but had an easygoing nature, which was a stark
contrast to the previous supervisor who was often mentioned by management and veteran
planters as having an unfriendly, tough, and demanding leadership style. My first season, therefore, marked an emerging community of practice, created by a new supervisor and substantial turnover in planters. This significant transformation in employees is common to tree planting camps because planters have a tendency to leave a specific camp or the industry in groups (Sweeney 2005). In contrast to previous years, our camp culture was less ‘intense’ due to the change in leadership and the strong presence of first year planters. The division of areas of land on the cut block by crew, and consequently the transportation vehicles, meant that planters spent significantly more time with their crew than with the rest of the camp. This fostered a strong sense of comradery within each crew and created a sense of competition among crews, which served as a motivational tool.

My management team adopted an encouraging and respectful approach to managing planters, more akin to a sports coach, which was a stark contrast to my many experiences in the restaurant industry. This difference in management style is also influenced by the piece-rate pay system. Crew boss’s daily earnings are determined by the daily sum total of trees that their crew plants (Sweeney 2005). The loss of a planter directly affects their pay, which motivates them to dedicate time and patience to keep each planter. Attempting to hire a new planter mid-season is challenging. Unlike the restaurant industry, workers are not easily replaceable.

First year planters are highly motivated to continue planting due to the high investment cost of going planting. Minimum costs are roughly $700 which includes a tent ($150), sleeping bag ($70), large water jug ($10), steel toe boots ($150), bug spray to last throughout the season ($25), planting bags ($100) and shovel ($70), and a greyhound bus
ticket ($100). In addition to a $20 daily camp cost, there are also costs such as duct tape, day off hotel stays, meals on day off, laundry, etc. Recuperating this initial investment and weekly costs is not possible for most first year planters before completing their first two weeks of work. Most of these workers have safety nets at home, making this financial risk possible. Going tree planting for the first time is a leap of faith because an unforeseen event early in the job, such as an injury or the appearance of an unknown allergy, can quickly put an end to a planter’s season—and any potential to recuperate the initial investment.

Tree planting may seem ludicrous due to the required financial investment, demanding physical challenge of the work, and working conditions of the occupation. These risks and challenges, however, are what contributes to the sense of the work as a ‘rite of passage’. This perception is rooted from the previous generation, for some, directly from their parents:

“It was the work my dad had done for decades and into my childhood. For my dad it was his livelihood. His means to support his family but in the end tree planting tore apart his marriage to my mother. I was drawn to planting for similar reasons as my dad though – it afforded me a livelihood and a desired lifestyle (Fenger, 16).”

The passion of experienced tree planters forms and perpetuates perceptions of the occupation as one imbued with meaning. The stories from friends who had previously gone tree planting shaped the way I experienced my entrance into not only planting, but the environment of the occupation. When I drove from Toronto to North Bay, the length
of the drive and change in landscape created a sense of engaging in a ‘journey’. My perspective of my experience was largely informed by depictions of tree planting as a ‘rite of passage’ which was created by discussion with friends who were tree planters. The distance, lack of connection to technology, and difference in schedule, from week days to shift days, created a sense of disconnection characteristic of rite of passage initiation activities, or ‘liminal’ space. As Bodner articulates:

Treeplanters participate in a number of activities that create liminality: spatial and temporal separations from the ‘real world’; inclusion in and perpetuation of the construction of the wilderness as a liminal space; and participation because of their class and age positions in interlocking ideologies which define one’s first job as rite of passage (Bodner, 181).

The distance from home and change in environment coupled with ‘rite of passage’ rhetoric creates a sense of entering a liminal space. This image of space is attractive to University students because it presents an opportunity to “clear the shit off your soul” (Bodner 1997). This is exactly how I felt after my first season of tree planting. Tree planters spend months performing a repetitive manual task which in my case, provided me with an unprecedented opportunity for self-reflection.

Prior to tree planting, I had spent my previous five summers in various restaurants, call centres, coffee shops, and convenience stores of Kingston, often working two jobs. I sometimes did not feel respected in my work environment, often felt bored and unchallenged, and always wondered where my money was going despite the many hours I worked. My hours exhausted me—as a result, I lived an unhealthy lifestyle, failing to make the time to regularly cook healthy meals or exercise. Leaving my customer service jobs behind was an incredible liberation. I didn’t have any daily tasks such as cooking nor did I have to grocery shop and practice the student balancing act of
making healthy food choices while sticking to my budget. My social life was built into the job and I had no concerns with rent or bills. When financial worries did arise, it served as motivation to plant more trees. Tree planting involves significant physical and mental suffering, but is short term with a cathartic end, which somehow compensates for the previous months. I preferred these extreme emotions, as opposed to the static boredom of my previous summers. I liked the change in coping with my own mind rather than rude customers or disrespectful managers. I was less controlled by trivial details and priorities were simplified into food, water, and trees planted.

My newfound simplified thought process was incredibly freeing. When any worries or concerns arose, the solution was always to plant more trees. I appreciated the new sense of control over my wages and felt less controlled than I did in my previous work environments. I was not under constant watch or subject to criticism from my employer. There were fewer personality dynamics to contend with because tree planting demands workers willing to work outside with no access to internet or phone reception. I enjoyed spending time with coworkers who were hardworking and motivated to engage in a challenging task.

The imagery that drew me to tree planting shaped my perceptions and made sense of this environment. Engagement with tree planting is more than work, it achieves the romanticized image of completing a ‘Canadian’ rite of passage, in line with the image of the lumberjack, beards and plaid shirts often seen in photographs (James-Abra, 1). Tree planting offers a distinct ‘image’ – it gave me a sense of pride because the occupation is broadly recognized as challenging work. Tree planting offers women the opportunity to disprove assumptions that manual labour and physical strength are inherently masculine.
I liked that I could cite my experience with the work as a testament to my physical strength and mental endurance. As a white woman from Queen’s University, tree planting allowed me to associate myself with an image beyond solely a privileged student, and align with disinterest in materialism and beauty regimens.

In contrast to minimum wage work, tree planting subscribed to my imagination of accomplishing a noble feat in the name of continual self-improvement, both physical and mental. The desire to continually improve myself is largely influenced by the neoliberal discourse that surrounds me, which produces and reproduces the idea that hard work will lead to a linear path of social and financial success. After tree planting, I felt that I received respect from my peers in a way that my other jobs did not provide. I can definitively say that I would not have tree planted if recognition and respect did not play such a strong role in popular perceptions of the work. My first season of tree planting allowed me to try something new and spend my summer outside of Kingston. I fulfilled a desire to escape and start fresh. Tree planting gave me a renewed sense of perspective which is a worthwhile and sometimes invaluable tool. I recognized how much better I feel when I am physically active, particularly in the outdoors. I gained more confidence in my ability to try new things and appreciated the benefits of doing so.

**Second Season – 2013**

It was the third day in a row that the checkers had found my planting quality to be insufficient. This meant that I had to go back to my piece, pull out my trees, and re-plant them. My quality had slipped because I was overly confident in the assumption that I knew what I was doing. Unfortunately, despite having already made it through a rookie season, I had not planted my trees deep enough, failing to ensure that the pods of the seedlings were in mineral soil. I was bitter, angry, and defeated. Furthermore, I made my crew boss look bad, as crew bosses are responsible for checking their planter’s trees to make sure that they are planted correctly. As I re-planted my way back through my piece, I realized that I should have kept my promise with myself from last season, that no matter
what, I should not return planting. The real irony of this particular piece was that it was on my last block from the year before. I was planting along the exact piece of road where I had made my final exit with complete indifference, except for the certainty that I would not return to this hellhole.

This hell was first and foremost, self-induced. My negative attitude disgusted me, but not enough to lift me out of my pool of loathing. As was the case the year before, I was stuck there due to my financial investment, and quitting was not an option. Despite this, quit fantasies were my secret lover. I thought about all the ways I could get out. I could hitchhike, I could sell all my clothes, I could sleep on a friend’s couch, and I could surely find a minimum wage job. I could do absolutely anything, but be here.

***

Hitting 3,000 during my second season required drop off directly in front of my piece, a sea of easy to plant sphagnum moss, surviving on only three apples to save precious minutes, and the willingness of the high baller planting next to me to stop planting so as to allot me space for 3,000 trees. This meant he had to move pieces mid-day, costing him time and money, something he does not like to do. He was in a good mood that day, however, and paid me a visit mid-day, his legendary grin offering a much appreciated uplift. He’s a bit of a character - on the previous double day off, he picked up his girlfriend at home and took her to New York City. This was made possible only by his ability to drive through the night and still plant thousands of trees the next day.

At the end of my 3,000 tree day, I felt hungry, exhausted, and not at all victorious. I was zoned out, unable to focus my eyes or really have a conversation, and hated that I could be peer pressured to such an intense mental state. I recognized this intensity in other planters at times. It’s the same look in someone who is mentally ill - more connected to forces that only they can see than the people around them, not a good scene. Deep down, I wasn’t doing this for myself, I didn’t really care how many trees I planted. I did it to prove that I could do it. Deep down, I knew I didn’t really want to do it again. 2,000 trees, a two hundred dollar day, is realistic and enough. I’m the only person that agrees with this. A highly socially unacceptable statement, most planters would scoff at this. Many of my fellow planters likely think that I am a ‘slacker’ and blame it on a lack of mental strength. I can’t believe I got sucked into this world.

***

Planters have the expectations of athletes, as opposed to simply manual laborers. This is made apparent in the common use of posting ‘Top Ten’ lists of both veterans and rookies in camp which are updated weekly and for motivation and to increase competition. In my camp, many planters planted 3,000 trees daily, more than a handful achieved planting between 4,000 to 6,000 in a day many times throughout the season, and
some reached even higher personal best days. As a result of these efforts, many planters achieve great physical feats and subsequent financial success through tree planting. These planters might argue that their achievements are for their own fulfillment and financial aspirations. While I grant planters this agency, what I find problematic is that planting several thousand trees a day is the expected standard rather than exception. This phenomenon occurs because “communities of practice define competence” (Wenger, 229) and competence in this case is planting 3,000 trees a day. The competitive culture of tree planting is an important aspect for motivating planters. However, this competition can weigh too heavily in the culture of some tree planting camps and become unhealthily intense, both mentally and physically. Sacrificing adequate meals during the workday is common and taking breaks is discouraged. In my tree planting camp, the unspoken use of caffeine pills was rampant, which altered my perception of tree planters achieving physical feats through ‘inner strength’ and ‘sheer willpower’. My respect for successful tree planters was heavily influenced by a glorified perspective of their character. I recognized that this success often necessitates a competitive intensity that does not resonate with me.

After I planted 3,000 trees, I recognized that this was not a realistic daily goal for me because I had just barely reached this number in near perfect conditions. I planted these trees to prove to myself and other planters that I could achieve the standard. I have always taken pride in my sense of independence and celebrated my individuality. Rather than either of these sentiments, I felt a stark realization that I had well and truly succumbed to peer pressure. I held myself to the standards of my social environment despite having no prior athletic history. The reality of spending an entire day performing
intensive manual labour while subsisting on three apples and water struck me in a profound way. I felt more ridiculous than victorious. The money I earned was not worth sacrificing eating food or the mental state effect caused by the physical demands on my body. After that day, I became comfortable with planting between 2,000 and 2,500 trees per day. This comfort was largely enabled by the fact that I had planted a season previously so felt familiar and unfazed by my physical and social environment. I no longer believed the aphorism ‘there’s no such thing as bad land, only bad planters’ and realized the extent to which a neoliberal work ethic underpins tree planting. A major component of this rhetoric is the belief that mental anguish will lead to incredible physical feats.

Accepting more realistic standards for myself involved the recognition of how my competitive setting normalized incredible athleticism. Although my community of practice offered positive social aspects, a major negative impact was the strong sense of peer pressure to plant a large number of trees. Extreme athleticism is prioritized over realistic expectations or the health of worker’s bodies. These standards weighed heavily on planters and it was not unusual to see other planters in tears because they could not achieve this standard. Conversations among rookie planters were often based on fears of not eventually improving or feelings of inadequacy. The inability to achieve unrealistic standards causes individuals to feel as if they have individually failed.

I began tree planting when I was in graduate school, but a majority of the tree planters in my camp were undergraduates. I was among the older planters in camp and my management team was not significantly older than I was. Due to this age gap, I experienced the pressure to compete differently than younger planters. When I cried, it
was from disdain for planting in the rain or relentless bugs, not necessarily because of what other planters thought of me. I absolutely felt strongly influenced to plant more trees. However, I ultimately respected rational considerations for my health. I was not going to continuously survive on three apples a day whilst pushing my physical limits.

Planters gain and lose respect from their co-workers—and for themselves—by the numbers of trees they plant. I had only two incidents over the course of three seasons where I received negative comments directly from co-workers. In one instance, a co-worker who I respect and consider a friend, called me a ‘slacker’. I can understand why I might be called a ‘bitch’ because I was unapproachable and at times had a negative attitude. However, ‘slacker’ frames my character as if I am a lazy person with a poor work ethic. I internalized his perception of me despite knowing he was wrong. Beyond his negative feedback, my desire to achieve the image of the archetypal woman tree planter meant that I eagerly conflated the number of trees I planted with my character.

My age and interests allowed me to develop enough positive friendships in camp to make me socially comfortable. If it were not for my age difference, however, I would likely have felt more affected by my camp’s tree production based social hierarchy. Sweeney notes this phenomenon in tree planting, stating, “a poor work ethic, low productivity, or lack of effort on more stressful days (of which there are many) can have a damning effect, and relegate the planter to the bottom of the social ladder for an extended period of time” (Sweeney 2005). This social structure serves to “validate the achievements of core members” (Sweeney 2009) which in turn ensures trees are planted as quickly as possible. Social expectations involve not only number of trees planted but also the attitude of the workers.
Tree planters’ social expectations are to ‘rise above’ the challenges of the work. A common aphorism in my tree planting camp was ‘There is no such thing as bad land, only bad planters’. This works to transfer the effect of external factors to the internal attitude of planters. Main discusses the use of similar rhetoric in her experience in tree planting camps in northern Ontario. Tree planters are expected to work harder to overcome common challenges such as the terrain of their piece or weather conditions (Main, 97). Employing these factors as reasons for planting fewer trees is viewed as making ‘excuses’. This social philosophy is essential to continue the system of work.

The piece-rate wage system makes time available for workers to make money incredibly valuable. There are several factors which affects this time available for work. After trees are planted, they are checked for quality and if they do not meet quality standards, the planter will be required to re-plant these trees. There is no payment for re-planted trees and the hours conducting the task negates the ability to make any earnings. Another circumstance that affects planting time available is accessibility to the block. The distance from camp to work is variable and can range from twenty minutes to two hours. I had a two hour commute during one week out of three seasons but forty five minute drives were more common. In addition to driving time, planters also lose time depending on the walk from their vehicle to their piece. Poor road conditions necessitate ‘walk-ins’ as it can be risky for vehicles to drive. The longest ‘walk-in’ I had was five kilometers during one shift and a half hour walk was common. After a rainfall, muddy roads make it fairly unpleasant to carry planting equipment and 7 liters of water while avoiding falling into mud puddles. Planters must adopt an optimistic attitude to get to work before even making their first dollar of the day.
The social environment of tree planting also enables demands to partake in unpaid labour. Planters contribute to the day long task of building or taking down camp for a move without pay, which is generally anywhere from two to five times a season. This involves: assembling the mess tent, dry tent, water haven, and toilet structures; digging the slurry pit and holes for the toilets; moving refrigerators, lights, tables and chairs into the mess tent; burying wires, laying down temporary flooring, and moving water barrels and various equipment into place. My camp shared a collective disdain for this work but socially compulsory participation continued the procedure. This unpaid labour, like the tree production rate expectations, is perceived as inherent to the occupation despite that this is “essentially forbidden by current labour legislation” (Ekers and Sweeney 2010).

The structure of the social environment is based on notions of individualism. This individualism is tied to the piece-rate wage which workers find empowering through perceived control over their earnings. The piece-rate wage system may be initially attractive to planters but there are many variables which affect their wages including unpaid commute time, difficult terrain, weather conditions, and tree price. The Industrial, Wood, and Allied Workers of Canada offers a broader structural perspective which conflicts with the notions of individualism within my camp:

Tree planters and silvicultural workers are amongst the most exploited groups of workers in Canada. The majority have underpaid, migratory, and unstable jobs with short work years and few benefits. Many face unsafe work conditions and transient employment (Ekers and Sweeney 2010).
The occupation provides little stability as there is no compensation if an injury occurs, which has a high likelihood. Price per tree paid to planters differ depending on the contract and are unreliable from season to season. Silviculture companies compete for contracts through a bidding process which can encourage underbidding on contracts. If this occurs, the contractor must find a way to protect its own profit-margin, and as a result, will lower the tree price paid to workers. Veteran planters might choose a different contract but many first time planters may be naive to tree prices in years prior. Lowered tree prices in Ontario have caused many planters to go to British Columbia due to slightly higher tree prices. However, west coast planters are equally susceptible to market forces and lack of control over their wages.

It is common for student tree planters to take up the job as a way to escape minimum wage work (Bodner 1997), just as this was my motivation. University students are drawn to the potential for making a large amount of money in a short period of time. However, there are many external obstacles which complicate this potential. The social environment of tree planting frames these obstacles as challenges to be overcome. As a result, the many ways in which tree planters are exploited is overshadowed. Romanticized ideology of gaining ‘strength of character’ is a coping mechanism which ignores the reality that tree planters are engaging in a cycle of continual pain until the mind or body breaks down. Depending on the individual, this can be as short as a week or as long as a few decades.

**Third Season - 2014**

April came around again with little change from the year before. For the third time, tree planting solved several dilemmas at once. The core dilemma, as per usual, was a lack of money and desire to escape the restaurant industry. I had lost my romanticized notions of the occupation but it was still my most convenient solution.
I arrive in North Bay, Ontario at 4am and sprawl across the seats in the empty greyhound station. I play the same song on repeat, not bothering to wear headphones due to my lack of company. A woman appears, asking what I am doing as the last bus for quite some time just left. No, I didn’t miss it, I assure her, although the temptation to flee to British Columbia was pretty tempting, I joke with her. She chats to me for the next twenty minutes, sharing her tales of living in British Columbia, what brought her there, what brought her back. She expresses intrigue about my next two months, and wishes me luck. Half an hour later, my boys appear, and lift me in the air for a bear hug. My 4am companion re-appears, giving us greyhound pens for posterity. I really regret losing that pen. As we wedge my things into the car, I laugh at my few belongings, drastically different from my first season, when the same friend had helped me with my things at the greyhound station in Toronto. I have packed what I know are the essentials, which can be reduced to very little with the right attitude. We update each other on the past year and I offer explanation as to why I am back. By their response, I can tell that the topic of my return has already been discussed. The excitement of seeing them slightly dims as reality sets in. They are very good planters and expect the same of me. They like me, but my planting numbers disappoint them.

**

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUC!" I hear from across the road. I look at my watch, four o’clock on the dot.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUU UgaspUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUC!” I scream. I hear the Four O’Clock Fuck anthem carry down the block, feeling appreciation for the fact that we can scream our lungs out if we want to. My scream is simultaneously filled with the joy of being free and anguish of being trapped.

On the way home, the bus breaks down...again. The old school bus, which often takes coaxing and group prayer to sputter to life, is reliably unreliable. Appropriate for transporting large groups, but inappropriate for the road conditions we force it to endure on a daily basis. These are the moments I pack extra food for. It refuses to start and my crew boss takes a deep breath and swivels around. She knows she’s in charge of morale, particularly during these moments. She attempts to radio camp but gets no response. Eventually, one of the tree deliverers, all of whom are still on the block, responds but can do nothing until their job is done.

The planters chat, eat, and eventually unleash madness via wildly decorating the roadside with flagging tape. I nap and recognize that even the parts of the job I usually appreciate, like the commute to work via logging road, are not doing much for me anymore. After another hour, we make contact with management in camp, and are shuttled back in groups as there are not enough vehicles to carry us all. When we finally get back to camp and eat dinner, I question whether I would prefer a more boring job after all.
During my third season of tree planting, I was not ‘buying it’ anymore. My apathy was overwhelming and difficult to overcome. I grew more and more disenchanted by the overbearing sense of competition in my environment. My disdain became impermeable. My only loyalty was to my crew boss and she knew that I was, in short, over it. The biggest mistake I made as a tree planter was returning for a second and third season. I succumbed to the rhetoric of the work environment and clung to the idea that I would somehow significantly improve if I continued to plant. This did not occur. It took me three seasons to accept that my continuous engagement with the occupation was futile.

I recognized the level to which my interest in tree planting was correlated with strength of character. This association was informed by popular imagery of the occupation and what had drawn me to it initially. I perceived myself as a strong-willed and resilient worker and therefore felt that I had ‘what it takes’ to excel at tree planting. I perceived my personality traits as ‘fitting in’ with the work culture and assumed this would support my efforts in making great money planting trees. The correlation between personality traits and physical strength in tree planting is inspired by historical Canadiana and perpetuated through contemporary planters’ depictions of their experiences. Early loggers and courier du bois are often perceived as defining traditional Canadian culture (Sweeney 2005). The image of these workers is largely influenced by their engagement with nature. This connection between nature and culture is indicative of the imagery of the Canadian landscape that nationalism has created. The location of silviculture work offers the opportunity to engage in rugged ‘work in the woods’.

The glorification of tree planters and tree planting as an honorable, character building experience has its roots in the tropes of rugged individualism. Rugged
individualists evoke romanticized ideas of pioneers successfully making their way through the frontier. Rugged individualism engenders tropes of Canadia involving the notion of achieving great physical feats through sheer willpower. Their ability to survive is made possible through “sheer determination and will power” (Jobe, 520). This imagery heavily influenced how I perceived a ‘real’ tree planter.

Despite my academic interests in the negative effects of neoliberalism, I became immersed in the tree planting environment, and my own desire to prove myself, and succumbed to neoliberalism. I conflated romanticized qualities of ‘inner strength’ to the ability to plant trees and ignored environmental factors beyond this imagined perception. The rugged individualist stereotype is based on an image rather than the lived reality of an individual engaging in manual labour. I also subscribed to romanticized notions of enduring challenge for the sake of experience, as Ekers and Farnan describe, “the heroic individualism of planters establishes an idealized portrayal of hard labor that reduces tree planting to an experience, rather than work” (Ekers and Farnan, 111).

Through a season of tree planting, individuals are engaging in a character building experience as opposed to simply taking part in a manual labour occupation. As readers and purveyors of tree planting photography and journalism, we are given an image of tree planters as physically strong individuals, but this lacks a realistic portrait of the intricacies of tree planters’ ‘character’. However, I question whether this narrative applies to more than privileged demographics. Ekers and Farnan explore the social privilege this ideology necessitates, stating, “What is the class, gender, racialized, sexual privilege that produces the rugged individualist...The romanticism of heroic individuals steers us clear of such considerations” (Ekers and Farnan, 111). Ekers and Farnan question this
occupational context, noting, “How different are documented and undocumented migrant agricultural workers laboring in British Columbia’s Lower-Mainland or in Southern Ontario from tree planters?” (Ekers and Farnan, 111). Despite the similar challenges of the work, tree planters are more broadly recognized and revered in popular media. Migrant agricultural workers are not engaging in their work for experience sake or to prove their worth, but rather for economic survival. Many tree planters have chosen their occupation instead of minimum wage work and, most often, have a social and economic safety net at home. Tree planters are engaging in an optional risk which is a distinctly different context than migrant agricultural workers.

Although there is a ‘Crown land’ sign at the entrance of every cut block, I felt disengaged from broader histories or political systems that tree planting is a part of. My Silviculture companies’ clients are the logging industry, who engage in these contracts in order to fulfill a government mandated regeneration quota. I planted a monoculture crop that will be logged again. I felt that this work is not a service to the environment. My sense of pride in my work was associated in my ability to do the work, not the purpose of the work. As a white University student from southern Ontario, my perception of tree planting was mediated by the way I entered this space. I had the class privilege necessary for financing initial investment costs and safety net for making the risk of failure or injury possible. Our camp was a satellite space from southern Ontario:

Tree planting never achieves the position of betwixt and between since its economic- and, in many respects, social- success lies in the retention of ties to the various localities of materials, ideology and power (Bodner 1997).
Tree planting as ‘rite of passage’ is problematic because this imagery risks glorifying white settlers working in a resource extraction industry in northern Ontario. Popular perceptions of tree planting are a “middle class utopic vision of discovery and renewal” (Ekers and Farnan) based on perceptions of the Canadian landscape as a liminal space devoid of history. I perceived a clear cut as an opportunity for me to become a better person rather than a forest questionably claimed by the Canadian government, leased to loggers, and re-purposed as a toilet paper plantation. During my first season, tree planting felt like a ‘parallel universe’ but this perception was heavily influenced by my own social privilege. I never experienced a realistic sense of living in northern Ontario. The physical structures in camp and its members were from southern Ontario. Although the physical environment was jarring, the social life and culture was familiar because I was surrounded by like-minded university students.

Planting large numbers of trees did not necessarily correlate to a strengthening of my character. I am now more comfortable with few possessions, plans gone awry, and bad weather. However, tree planting did not offer me any coping mechanisms or long-term solutions for addressing the shortcomings of my character. I now try to gauge my character through improvements upon what I know are my past shortcomings.

My relationship to tree planting is influenced by class because my engagement is based on an interest in the subculture, as opposed to a lack of other job opportunities. Tree planting has been helpful for gaining access to manual labour associated occupations but is, for the most part, not conducive for gaining professional employment due to its popularized ‘unprofessional’ subculture. Without financial support and encouragement from my family, I would have not been able to finish my degrees and,
like many, continued a cycle of working long hours to receive pay that did not feel like sufficient compensation for my efforts. Tree planting may gain me respect on an interpersonal basis, but in terms of my long term stability, the value of my experience lies more in its context as research for my master’s thesis.

**Strong Women**

I see my crew boss appear at the edge of my piece, and my energy immediately increases and I plant in a steadier, more determined way. She asks how I’m doing and I thank her for a good piece. Shallow with relatively organized furrows. I need shallow pieces due to my somewhat less than stellar land management skills. I like pieces that I can see from my cache of trees. I loathe getting lost in the back and can’t load up the amount of trees necessary to get to the back of a deep piece and plant back to the cache. She’s good to me, although her kindness is mutually beneficial, as the more money I make, the more she makes. Nonetheless, I am appreciative of her ability to remain constantly encouraging, despite the fact that I suck. I love working for a feminist boss. I have had many bosses, both women and men, with questionable notions of what constitutes decent human behaviour. She updates me on the crazed state of one of my crewmates, and I explode in laughter. He is a masculine rural type with a good sense of humor, which allows for comfort in mutual teasing. Later, he, his guitar, and a bottle of liquor will transform the day into a great story; one where the bugs drove him to madness, causing him to declare it his last day, leading him on a voyage to nowhere but a giant circle on the block. Everyone breaks down in planting. Everyone. It is both tragic and absolutely brilliant.

***

Beaver fever entails the seemingly instantaneous transformation of consumed food into diarrhea. Luckily, on the day of my affliction, our crew was sent to plant a block that had an unusually high number of naturals\(^{10}\), so I did not have difficulty in finding privacy. However, I spent a majority of the day in a squat and spent more time burying toilet paper than planting trees. On the drive home, I laid down on the seat in a ball of misery, silently begging for mercy to a God that I was not so sure existed. When I arrived back at camp, I timidly asked the cook for plain rice, to which she responded with a smile and demand that I let go of the shame, because “we’re in the bush, for fuck sake. Just say it, got the shits?” She was quite the character- intimidating and foul mouthed, to say the least. I worshiped her.

Most people refer to her as a bitch because she yells irrationally and makes no effort to be kind. The next season, she does not cook for our camp again, and she is not missed. I recognize that I liked her because she never yelled at me and didn’t actively dislike me, which is akin to liking me in her books.

---

\(^{10}\) Standing trees that have been left on the block after logging
Callan Main’s study of female tree planters in northern Ontario offers important data concerning the role of mentors in tree planting. She notes that many of her respondents cited their initial reason for going tree planting as having had previous familiarity with a female already in the occupation. Main cites her own experience, noting that she began tree planting due to encouragement from an older woman who was already in the industry. In my experience, I also entered the industry through a social connection to my crew boss. My crew boss and I both attended Queen’s University and knew each other through having been previous classmates, as well as through several mutual friends. In alignment with Main’s findings, a female mentor was pivotal to my experience as a tree planter. My crew boss and I share similar feminist perspectives, this sense of like mindedness, specifically in terms of our views on gender, was a pivotal aspect of my experience with the occupation. My feminism did not relegate me to the role of the ‘token feminist’ as it had in my other working environments.

I value working for a person who is aware of gender inequality as a systemic issue. In many of my other work environments, sexist incidents were often cast off as the result of one individual’s behavior in need of address. My crew boss’s perspective allowed for a greater emphasis on the need to acknowledge gender inequity as a norm, rather than an exception. I do not recall any sexist incidents or remarks within our crew during my first year. By setting the tone from the onset, through her blatantly feminist perspective and humour, it was known that there would not be any tolerance for sexist behavior. The hiring process empowers crew bosses to select planters based on characteristics that they personally value, which for her, was acceptance of diversity and a kind demeanor. A crew boss forms the character of a crew, as well as its subsequent
development in years following their leadership, due to planters persuading their friends to plant the next year which continues the sense of a crew as a group of likeminded individuals. I trusted their social sensibility, which was a unique experience for me in a work environment.

As Main notes, I similarly find the idea of ‘reciprocal respect’ an important aspect of a working relationship. With my first year crew boss, there was not one incident in which my crew boss spoke to me in a disrespectful tone or behaved in a way that made me feel disrespected. In this way, my perspective of her was more akin to that of a mentor than a boss. A female veteran, from my crew in first year, became my crew boss during my second and subsequent third season. She is also a feminist who perceives social inequality as a systemic issue. She maintained this culture, even during a season when we had thirteen males and only two women, including myself, on our crew. Tree planting gave me the opportunity to work a feminist friendly environment but perpetuated my problematic perception of ‘strength’.

During my rookie season, I worshipped the cook, but I know that I would not have felt the same way if I had been on her bad side. My perspective of her has changed over the course of the last three years which is emblematic of my changed understanding of what constitutes ‘strength’. In Charlotte Gill’s *Eating Dirt* she describes her roommate Aimee who first inspired her to go tree planting:

In the eight months we’d lived together, I had never seen her cry. I’d never seen her anxious over exams or upset about a sub-stellar mark. I’d never heard her complain about mess or cold or waiting. I had never heard her utter a jealous
word. I’d seen her eat stale crullers and drink bad black coffee. I could stand to have my back broken if this was the way a spine could grow back (Gill, 50).

I thought about this description of Aimee a lot throughout my experience with tree planting. Aimee exemplifies the popularized image of women tree planters as rugged individuals in their own right. I wanted to achieve this image, for the same reason I want to be like Gloria Steinem, Gloria Anzaldúa or bell hooks. These women, to me, symbolize strong women and inspire me in many ways. The difference, however, between these writers and Aimee, is that Aimee is an image, as opposed to a developed voice aiming to reflect the complexity of lived experience. Gill notes Aimee’s easygoing nature through mentioning that she ate stale crullers, drank bad black coffee, and did not display stress concerning marks in school. Aimee may exude a relaxed attitude and plant trees but that does not offer a full portrait of Aimee and her complexities. I wonder if she really was simply laid back or if she was experiencing more pressing personal challenges.

Although I will likely never meet Aimee, I did have the opportunity to meet Charlotte Gill when she spoke at Queen’s University for a discussion of her book for the “Queen’s Reads” program. She carried a stoic demeanor, did not smile much, and seemed somewhat distant. At the end of her discussion, I asked Gill how she reconciled being both a writer and a tree planter.

“I plant in the summer and write in the winter”, she replied.

“No, I mean, the states of mind, they seem like very different states of mind, don’t you think?” I clarified. She then understood what I meant.

“Yes, they are entirely different worlds aren’t they?”
During my rookie season, I aspired to achieve the image that I thought Aimee and Gill embodied. I wanted to be like them because of my narrow perception of strength as including “tough and hard” (Ekers, 885) characteristics. Similarly to Main’s findings, I downplayed my traditionally ‘feminine’ characteristics and adopted more traditionally ‘masculine’ characteristics. For example, I refused to care about my appearance, spoke in gruff communication, and attempted to control my emotions, particularly vulnerability, in public. This behaviour was a part of a larger personal defense mechanism embedded in my persona but was emphasized in this environment. I got along with my crew, but my attitude did have social ramifications, as I came across as unapproachable to many people in camp. I was in an environment where being ‘tough and hard’ was valued, and as a five foot female with no athletic experience, I dealt with my sense of vulnerability by adopting what I perceived as ‘tough and hard’ characteristics. However, I recognize now that this was a shallow, easy, and immature approach to embodying strength.

Beyond tree planting, I struggle with exposing vulnerability and crafted my feminism so as to justify adopting a hardened exterior. Exercising patience and expressing kindness was and is a challenge - however, through encounters with different role models and circumstances, my understanding of strength developed. I learned to appreciate the strength in sensitivity and the value in adopting a more gentle approach to communication.

Tree planting and the body

I am ecstatic for our first night off and the opportunity to take a shower. I close the door behind me and revel in having a bathroom all to myself. Unfortunately, my revel is the last one to the party, made apparent by the extensive dirt coverage left by previous occupants. I look in the mirror, and gasp. I didn’t look in the van mirrors during shift and am glad I didn’t. My face is completely covered in red bites and I look like I have very,
very bad acne. I am horrified. I usually exhibit comfort in my body and expound a 
zealous feminist declaration against the oppressive beauty industry’s normalized 
perceptions of the female body thrust upon humanity. Lend me a bra and I shall burn thy 
indignities of patriarchy!

Within the hour, I stand in the aisle looking for my skin tone, completely 
exasperated, recognition of my own hypocrisy adding shame to the situation. Little miss 
confidence queen and anti-media defined beauty, here I am, torn down by a, albeit 
drastic, change in complexion. It’s certainly understandable given my recent whereabouts 
but that doesn’t make me feel any better. I buy foundation and cake on my hypocrisy 
meticulously.

***

I have been set free from my hell hole. My entire body is particularly sore because 
of the overnight bus ride home. The poor woman sitting next to me. She got up to move 
seats because of my admittedly foul stench, but the bus was full of us, and there was little 
chance of escape. My lower back feels stiff like the tin man. My fingers are still not back 
to their usual flexibility and there is still dirt residue under my nails which look 
completely different than when I left. My hands feel stronger and it’s funny how the 
feeling of my hands makes me feel different, more confident. My big toes randomly 
cramp in a way that runs down the entire bottom of my foot. My legs, chest, arms, upper 
and lower back, cheeks, eyes, back of my ears and neck are covered in bug bites or scars 
from bug bites. Somewhat concerned about the scarring but I’m hoping vitamin e makes 
them go away eventually. At least my legs are looking much better than they were a few 
weeks ago, when the locals in Kapuskasing were staring at me with genuine concern. 
Despite the fact that I likely still have a fair amount of deet poison in my bloodstream, 
there is no man made chemical that will guard against the mosquitos, horseflies, deerflies, 
and no-see-ums. It’s a game of luck of the blood type. I get in the shower and proceed to 
spend a good half hour scrubbing and detangling. Goodbye Kapuskasing, Ontario…a 
week’s worth of dirt and grime goes down the drain. I shave off a surprising amount of 
hair and detangle what was becoming the first stage of dreadlocks.

It’s a sensory dream. Every detail is appreciated. A clean toilet with clean toilet 
paper in a clean bathroom. A fresh cup of good quality coffee in a somehow 
overwhelmingly delightful ceramic mug. A cushioned chair with soft fabric. I feel like I 
am in an architecture or design magazine. Everything is just so…clean, and comfortable. 
I feel great, on top of the world.

I have always proclaimed the importance of being comfortable in one’s body and 
have lambasted mainstream culture’s promotion of disordered eating and normalization 
of unattainable standards of beauty. During my first season, however, I was horrified by
the way my skin looked from the bugs despite the fact that this was to be expected in an outdoor environment in northern Ontario. A majority of camp had bites but I loathed that I was on the worse end of the spectrum. I denied the level to which it truly bothered me and attempted to exude a nonchalant attitude. The impact of tree planting on my body extended well beyond my bug bites.

At the end of my first season, my body was the thinnest and most muscular it had been since prior to puberty. When I returned home, several of my friends eyes widened when they saw me and a majority commented on my appearance. My appearance was usually the first topic of discussion prior to the difficulty of the labour or culture of the occupation. Although my peers were well meaning, I found the frequency of these conversations challenging. The minimal daily hygiene and outdoor environment of tree planting deemphasizes the upkeep of appearance which made these conversation feel jarring and irrelevant. I had expected more respect for my achievement rather than attention for the way my body looked. I wanted to fit the image of a rugged individualist who does not care for the frivolities of consumer culture.

Tree planting offered me the opportunity to pursue what I perceived as the image of a rugged individualist, akin to Aimee. As previously discussed, my perception of Aimee was based on an image rather than an actual individual. Attempting to achieve an image is problematic because images do not exist, making this an unrealistic task. The image below, taken during my second season, exemplifies the way I reinforced and disrupted the rugged individualist image of tree planting.
The angle of the photo and helicopter in the background creates an image that overshadows the reality of my disdain and loathing. I am scowling with my arms crossed because it was the last shift of the season and I did not want to be there anymore. The novelty of flying to work in a helicopter was mediated by the atrocious quality of the land that we were flying in to plant. This photo does not capture reality and yet, at the time, I took advantage of this illusory image as a token of my own rugged individualism, barely hesitating to distribute it widely via Facebook. Similarly to artists who have romanticized their tree planting experience (Ekers and Farnan 2010), many university students mediate the lived experience of tree planting through photos that provoke rugged individualist imagery.

Rugged individualism suggests a sense of overcoming challenge and turning away from neoliberal ideology. However, I did not escape neoliberal control of the body but rather re-inscribed it as a ‘good for me’ experience. My route to a sense of empowerment
was still based on notions of strength through the body. The work environment of tree planting is heavily steeped in neoliberal assumptions of the universal body. This body, regardless of personal histories, social context, and accessibility, is assumed and placed on all planters. A common aphorism - ‘anyone can tree plant’ - implies ‘anyone can plant several thousand trees a day’. The failure to plant a large numbers of trees is perceived as a lack of will power and weakness. This creates an environment where the number of trees planted carries a deeply personal meaning for planters.

I was drawn to the image of women tree planters because I perceived a sense of empowerment resistant to influence by numbers on a scale, only to discover the scale replaced by a tally sheet. The image of tree planters is akin to the image of the muscular, athletic body in terms of perpetuating neoliberal ideology:

the image of the female athlete body does the cultural work of advertising equal opportunities – anyone can achieve this look if they just work hard enough (and anyone can ‘succeed’ on all levels if they just work hard enough) – that masks the growing structural inequalities characteristic of the global economy” (Heywood, 117).

Neoliberalism normalizes the muscular body through erasure of systemic inequality and assumptions that all individuals have equal accessibility. This influences perceptions that lack of musculature results from negative personality characteristics such as lack of discipline or laziness (Bordo, 195). This social construct is the underlying assumption in the aphorism ‘anyone can tree plant’. As a result of these normalized expectations, planters are encouraged and expected to continuously push their body to what can be unhealthy levels of intensity. After months of this type of labour, planters gain significant musculature which can risk causing them to normalize the desire for muscularity year round. I have noticed how I have now unfortunately idealized my tree
planting body. This is unrealistic as I was doing manual labour for nine hours a day, often hungry, and in physical discomfort.

The conflation of control of the body with moral characteristics is reflective of broader systemic and social structures. Susan Bordo describes this linkage, stating “the size and shape of the body have come to operate as a market of persona, internal order (or disorder) -as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual” (Bordo, 193). Control of the body is seen to symbolize internal control and reflective of an individual’s persona. Maintaining a muscled body involves a lifestyle of constant self-monitoring through dieting and strenuous exercise. An individual’s body is not only equated with their moral character but also their health overall (LeBesco 2011). Self-monitoring is perceived as a method of maintaining appearance but more broadly, framed as taking responsibility for health. The perception of a ‘healthy’ lifestyle is influenced by neoliberal perceptions of health that place responsibility for health on the individual (Crawford 2006; Peterson 2003). Lack of consideration of the impact of social inequality on lived experience drives the assumption that poor health is the result of individual inadequacy. As discussed within the context of tree planting, these assumptions can be internalized and lead individuals to believe that they are ‘slackers’.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

Tree planting in northern Ontario, and across Canada, has risen in popularity due to its distinctive subculture. This subculture was largely influenced by the workforce of Brinkman’s era, comprised of students drawn to ideas of rugged individualism, and this demographic now constitutes a majority of the workforce. Prior to privatization of the silviculture industry, tree planters were not perceived as engaging in a ‘Canadian rite of passage’ and there is little to no record of these workers. This trajectory reflects which bodies are dominantly perceived as representing the nation-state. Contemporary popular perceptions of tree planters are dependent on a framing of history through colonial ideology. Through this lens, remote forested areas are romanticized as opportunities for personal renewal and violent histories of colonial land acquisition and resource extraction are minimized.

My autoethnographic data and subsequent analysis reflects both negative and positive spaces throughout my experience. Tree planting can “clear the shit off your soul” (Bodner, 174) and offer a sense of liberation and empowerment. The labour offers a simplified lifestyle comprised of continuously planting trees, eating, and sleeping which can be a reprieve from balancing school, work and other responsibilities. However, tree planting offers a temporary escape but does not necessarily guarantee long-term stability due to its demands on the body.

I ultimately found that tree planting was my short term, glorified escape from the balancing act of a student lifestyle. However, this escape is imagined as tree planting offers a simplified version of life but does not necessarily guarantee a stable or long-term solution for financial security and interpersonal challenges. It leads to temporary muscles,
a temporary tan, and occasional subconscious reminders that the human body can endure incredible discomfort. When I began tree planting, relief from external factors was liberating, but by the end of my third season, I needed relief from my internal negativity.

I was drawn to perceptions of the subculture for its seeming resistance to neoliberal consumerism and associated pressures on the body. However, recognition of the overbearing impact of neoliberalism within the occupation dismantled my perception of the work as liberation and freedom from control. Rugged individualist rhetoric in tree planting re-inscribes neoliberal perceptions of the body by framing the labour as an opportunity for personal growth. Tree planting is perceived as ‘more than just’ manual labour. An intense level of athleticism is normalized and planters are expected to adhere to this intensity. Failure to plant a high number of trees is perceived as individual inadequacy, or poor ‘strength of character’. Rugged individualism can saturate the work environment and create what can be unhealthy degree of competition.

Rugged individualist inspired imagery of tree planter’s risks continuing a narrow perception of Canadian history. Glorifying the feats of white settlers in the forest offers a palpable image of colonialism dependent on significant historical erasures. This re-framing ignores the recognition of Ontario’s forests as previously inhabited by and subsequently stolen from Aboriginal communities. Colonialism has had a violent impact on the livelihood and health of generations of individuals belonging to these communities. Recognizing problematic aspects of rugged individualism enables a connection among broader socio-political structures in Ontario, popular perceptions of tree planting, and the impact of competition in lived experience of the labour.
References

Adams, Tony E. "Mothers, Faggots, and Witnessing (Un)Contestable Experience."


<http://www.plantingtheplanet.com/tree-planting-jobs/>

Brodie, Janine. "We are all equal now." Feminist Theory 9.2 (2008): 145-64. Print


<http://www.dynamicreforestation.com/>


Fenger, Rea. Women and Queers Tree planting Zine. 2014.

Fernow, Bernhard E. 1907. A Brief History of Forestry in Europe, the United States, and Other Countries. Lectures delivered to the Yale Forest School. New Haven, CT: The Price, Lee and Adkins Co.


Kuhlberg, Mark. A Failed Attempt to Circumvent the Limits on Academic Freedom: C. D. Howe, the Ontario Forestry Board, and Window Dressing Forestry in the Late 1920s *History of Intellectual Culture* 2002, Vol 2 , No. 1


Massey, Josh “We will all be trees”. Conundrum Press, Georgetown Ontario. 2009


Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.


   <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.queensu.ca/10.4135/9781446268308>.

   <http://outlandplanting.ca/faqs.aspx#c>.


