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“Magic takes language, symbols, and intelligibility to their outermost limits, to explore life and thereby to change its destination.”

Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*

In January 2009, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) made a significant portion of its collection available online and accessible for anyone to view. Through this act, the NFB offered a visual record of the country’s past to the contemporary public. In releasing this vast body of historical material, they also exposed the often-amusing divide between our world and the world of yesterday, a divide evident in three short films chronicling the adventures of a boy named Ti-Jean. The first Ti-Jean film opens in a 1950s household where a woman busy at work in a kitchen keeps an eye on three arm-wrestling boys. The victor stands, puffs his chest, and declares, “No one can beat me!” A moment later, an old man enters the room. “I know one,” he retorts with an air of assurance. “Who is he, Grandfather, who is he?” the children beg to know. Clenching a pipe in his teeth, the old man begins to tell of his time lumbering in the bush in northern Quebec, and of a pink-faced boy who arrived riding a white horse and looking for work. Initially teased by the rough woodsmen, this boy astonishes all by chopping down trees in minutes and carrying logs on one arm through the bush. To the

delight of child audiences across Canada, Ti-Jean showed up the adults with his magical abilities, earning their respect and admiration.

In this and two other films in the 1950s, the legend of Ti-Jean was created.¹ His films were among the most popular ever produced by the NFB, reaching millions of viewers in movie theatres, film caivalcades, classrooms, and television well into the 1980s.² The films follow the boy in his travels through Canada, visiting rural folk employed in industry, learning about their jobs and using magical powers to outperform the work they did—as the narrator reminds child viewers, “The songs and legends of Canada will be full of his new adventures.” In *Ti-Jean Goes Lumbering* (1953) he learns about forest work, bringing logs to the river for the spring runs. In *Ti-Jean Goes West* (1957) he takes a train to learn wheat farming on the Prairies, where he saves a crop threatened by a rainstorm. *In the Land of Iron* (1958) represents the expanding mineral frontier of the Canadian shield—Ti-Jean uses his super strength to return a fledgling mine to profitability. The Ti-Jean films were a subterfuge for introducing a wider subject: they followed the boy to where Canadians worked in different parts of Canada, labouring in forest, field, and shield country. In each region of the country he learned about the landscape and how the inhabitants made their livelihood from the physical setting. Here we show how the Ti-Jean films worked as entertainment for children, but can be read and contextualized alongside the changing nature of Canadian society over the twentieth century.



Figure 1. 1950s boys play restlessly; Ti-Jean arrives at the lumber camp. Source: Palardy. *Ti-Jean Goes Lumbering*. National Film Board of Canada, 1953.

We situate the Ti-Jean films in 1950s Canada in an effort to understand both why they were so popular in their day and how they might still be important or useful to us now. The 1950s was a time of great change for Canadians. Their country had emerged from the Second World War as an independent international actor and major resource exporter, poised to feature prominently in global economic reconstruction. Everyday lives and jobs were transformed by cars, telephones, televisions, and other advancements. For instance, many adults in the 1950s who grew up in an age of horse and buggy now lived in the age of flight, where the ease and speed of air travel made the world seem faster, distances smaller, and time less relevant. This sense of life speeding up, characterized by the rapid transformation of people's experiences of time and space, is often described as the advent of modernity. Yet the meaning of modern is elusive and contingent on geographical and historical contexts. Canada became modern during the late nineteenth-century industrialization that swept through Europe and North America. Historians also usefully describe how modernity appears differently over time, and is linked to new types of communication and production technologies as well as to new forms of citizenship and nationalism (or to the frictions they produce).³

We may take a closer look at the modernization of Canada's natural landscapes, and the transformations taking place in the forests, prairies, and shield rock of the north. New means of mechanization and production incurred wider social and economic change, old patterns of life were rapidly becoming obsolete, and uneven development spurred discontent in parts of the country left out. Modernization brought benefits but also threatened the stability

of the country, exposing rents in the fabric of Canada. Ti-Jean travelled through this world, meeting rural Canadians engaged in the pioneer industries that had sustained them for decades and brushing up against the technologies and economies that were transforming the country during that time. As such, we suggest his films may be interpreted as an allegory for understanding the birth of modern Canada. In part, this may account for their lasting popularity. His exploits hint at both the hope and uncertainty tied to the 1950s. By bridging the difference between old and new, the films seem to offer a novel way of piecing the nation together according to the paradigm that would dominate the remainder of the twentieth century: a nation not of provinces or peoples, but of regions.

Placing Ti-Jean

Placing the Ti-Jean movies in historical context and recovering how Canadians would have viewed and understood them can tell us a great deal about the differences and similarities between the 1950s and today. Cultural outputs of the 1950s can be a source of humour, because they paint a picture so different from our world. Films from this period are full of optimism for the future, enthusiasm for the nation, and a belief that progress, technology, and industry working together will benefit all members of society. The history of Canadian filmmaking offers some clues to explain this convergence. Established by the federal government as a propaganda service in 1939, the NFB expanded its scope in the 1950s when it was given a mandate to “interpret Canada to Canadians.”⁴ Its purpose was to present a picture of ordinary people by filming and telling stories about their lives truthfully and objectively. In this sense they aimed

to make documentaries, yet to *interpret* also meant filmmakers were encouraged to use artistic licence and creativity. Blending fiction and real life would make their stories more meaningful and capable of delivering “higher” truths.

Its interpretive method and close relationships with the state have made the NFB a longstanding target of critique by film scholars. Joyce Nelson argues that early NFB productions should be read as the ideological voice of the government. Zoe Druick shows how films were a vehicle for politics, arguing that the portrayal of “ordinary” people was a form of state instruction about what Canadians ought to be.⁵ Indeed, the Ti-Jean films can be put through this analysis: they say a great deal about dominant expectations of childhood. Brian Low has written on the portrayal of children in the NFB’s films, noting a clear evolution over time. Kids from the 1940s do rudimentary tasks like planting trees, helping with chores, or eating a healthy lunch, while children of the 1950s are bold and sophisticated, active agents in their own lives.⁶ Ti-Jean’s solo travels across Canada certainly represented changing ideas about childhood and the tension between expectations to behave and the newfound independence of youth.

Ti-Jean’s symbolism operates on multiple registers. He represents childhood but also acts as a symbolic stand-in for the country. A prominent strain of Canadian patriotic imagery has utilized the figure of a young boy to equate the nation itself with ideas of youth, vigour, and masculinity (Figure 2). Even the subject matter of his films—exploration into the forests, prairies, and northern Shield—correlated with the expansion of the Canadian state into new resource frontiers during the 1950s. Likewise, he may be playing



Figure 2. Iconic figures representing youth and nation. Sources: William McF. Notman, "Young Canada," Montreal, QC, 1867, McCord Museum, I-24434; "May the Blessings of Xmas be Yours to Enjoy" ca. 1881-1886, Library and Archives Canada, R11648, album 9, item 66.

out an international fantasy where Canada, long paternalized by Britain and ignored by the United States, asserts its adult nationhood on the world stage: in the films, Ti-Jean often shows up the grownups who disparage him, using hidden superpowers to outdo the work they perform. Indeed, following Ti-Jean's magical abilities opens a useful avenue to understanding the significance and lasting popularity of his films. They are the most entertaining aspect of the movies, not least because Ti-Jean at first appears childish and weak. When he reveals his powers to the farmers, loggers, and miners who have pre-judged him for his youth, the men are amazed and impressed by his strength and speed. Yet it is important to recognize that they are not mystified or inquisitive about where these abilities came from: ultimately, they accept what is happening as an everyday part of their world. In literature and film, such devices are often associated with "magical realism"—an artistic genre that presents fantastical events as part of the rational and everyday world. Ti-Jean's magic is in this respect ordinary, and viewers in turn are not meant to question the surreal nature of the experience. This premise extends to every aspect of the character, including his anachronistic fur-trade-era clothing and the white horse he rides around the country, both of which are unremarkable to the characters in the films. But at the same time, his supernatural abilities are clearly not arbitrary. We are left with the question: What did Ti-Jean's magic mean?

We can think along with Ti-Jean's supernatural powers, but not in the ways that are conventionally applied to NFB films and other cultural sources. For instance, we could follow the writers and directors, Jean Palardy and Raymond Garceau, to learn about their

cinematic visions and whether magical realism was the intended trope. Alternatively, we could follow the character. As a figure, Ti-Jean can be traced in French-Canadian folklore to ask whether meanings of magic persist in cultural structures. Yet another form of historical media analysis may position Ti-Jean within a wider genre of NFB children's films. Yet these do not necessarily move us closer to understanding how children themselves would have understood the films in the 1950s, how the information the films conveyed about Canada was reconciled with what the children already knew, or how they made sense of Ti-Jean's magic. Instead of film scholarship, we suggest that thinking geographically about the films can reveal the meanings they carried, and show why they still matter.

Geography is the study of human–environment relationships. There are many of these in the films. When Ti-Jean threshes wheat, cuts trees, or mines ore it seems clear that we are meant to see him as a powerful agent transforming the natural world: he turns the environments he encounters into goods and wealth. One method of geographical thinking would study the human role in reshaping nature and the meanings associated with these actions. In this article we recover some of those meanings, showing how children were exposed to a larger narrative about humans remaking their environment and, in turn, shaping the nation. Geographical thinking thus shows how ideas about nature and the human use of the environment have played a role in making Canada,⁷ but it often also asserts that the environment is an equally powerful force shaping and influencing human affairs.⁸ This perspective asks us not to treat nature as a stage on which human actions appear, but to

consider how the environment may be considered *constitutive* of human action. Before we can understand the meaning of Ti-Jean's magic, we must consider if he was the only star of these movies.

To understand the meaning of Ti-Jean's magic, we need to incorporate nature as a central character in the story of historical change and the representation of resources in Canada. Nature clearly has agency in the films, because Ti-Jean's powers appear and make sense only when they are applied to the environment. More importantly, they can be seen and measured only when set against the men and machines who are also transforming Canadian environments in the 1950s. An analysis of the Ti-Jean films requires that we bring further context to environments, men and machines, and the meaning of Canada in the 1950s. We can do this by showing how Canadian schoolchildren were taught to understand physical environments in the early-twentieth century through geography textbooks. Part 1 of this article provides a broader context for interpreting the films: viewers who saw a forest on screen or heard the narrator invoke "golden fields of grain" parsed these representations through prior knowledge about how to value and see the environment. Children were taught that the work men did in these places and the natural endowments of the landscape were somehow essential to what Cole Harris calls the "fabric" of early Canada.⁹ Yet by the 1950s the fabric seemed to be unravelling. Part 2 looks at how life was changing in the forest, the prairie, and the iron frontier of the north. We use Ti-Jean as a guide here, since these are the same areas he visits in the films. Even though they are presented as part of a pioneer idyll, we show that they were undergoing profound change as older forms of organizing and

conducting work based upon the family and local knowledge gave way to an era of corporate primary production and mechanized deskilling beholden to global market forces. This lets us return to Ti-Jean's magic in Part 3. We argue that his power was not only to use his great strength to transform the environment, but that his magic actually resolved tensions of labour, technology, and geography appearing in 1950s Canada.

The Ti-Jean movies seem to be about the emergence of a new kind of Canada and a new way of understanding nature in different parts of the country: regionalism. The value of thinking with Ti-Jean is not that he helps us understand magical realism—the blending of the supernatural and the ordinary—but rather magical *regionalism*, how his superpowers helped to reconcile the contradictions of modern Canada. It is not surprising that Ti-Jean's movies struck a chord with young Canadians and remained popular for so long. He shows how people undergoing Canada's transformation into a mechanized, resource-industrial nation imagined their own past and their relationships to nature as they reconciled inherent challenges within the experience of modernity spreading across the Canadian landscape.

PART 1: NATURE AND NATION IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY CANADA

If Ti-Jean was a new character for Canadians in the 1950s, the nature they saw in his films was well established. When images of lakes, mountains, fields, and forests were displayed panoramically on televisions and movie screens, they also connoted meanings taught to children about the relationship between nature and nation. These

physical landscapes fit into deeper understandings of Canada because they represented the consolidation of nationhood through rights to produce and harvest “resources.” This tale opened with Canada as a nascent colony locked into a trade arrangement with Great Britain, wherein natural resources such as fur, copper, and timber were transported back to Europe to be manufactured into hats, kettles, and furniture. This mercantilist relationship, in which cheap staples left Canada to have value added overseas, was eventually seen as exploitative and a major inhibitor of Canada’s ability to grow and develop. The British North America Act of 1867 altered this framework by creating an independent Dominion of Canada through the transfer of ownership of land from Britain to the new country, in turn, according certain rights to its provinces. Canada moved from “colony to nation” when it developed an industrial production cycle for harvesting *and* manufacturing its own resources.¹⁰ Thus, control over the economic returns from the physical environment was profoundly connected to national sovereignty. This point is clear by the number of bureaus established to oversee the territorial extent of Canada’s economic possessions, including the Geological Survey of Canada, and Departments of Interior and Agriculture—arms of the “national policy” to open the northwest to development and create industries in the east.¹¹ The depth of this economic nationalism extended to young Canadians in public schools: children were taught to see “vertical landscapes,” surface markers of rocks and fossils to be evaluated in terms of their location’s subsurface potential for mining.¹² Knowing the value of resources was thought to be important, since geological knowledge

was often connected to the “opening up” of the northern interior and development of settled areas.¹³

Economic values for the physical environment were tied to the very meaning of the country. But while the meaning of *Canada* could be defined through law, territory, and economy, a sense of what it meant to be *Canadian* was more elusive. The BNA Act guaranteed that Canadians were British subjects, and that suited most people who self-identified as such until the status of “Canadian citizen” was created in 1910. But the consolidation of an inclusive Canadian identity was far from complete. In the early-twentieth century the designation *Canadian* evoked little meaning outside Ontario and Quebec; rather, geographic barriers, limited transportation and communication networks, old colonial grudges, and ethnic divisions were seen as enduring obstacles to a homogenous national identity and thus as problems to be resolved.¹⁴ A unique attribute of Canadian identity is how the natural features of the country were used to offer a message about the meaning of nation. People were asked to see the discontinuous physical pattern of the country and the types of people living in it as pieces of a broader whole. Quebecers were not French Catholics, they were people of the Laurentian lowlands. The Western patchwork of Eastern European settlement became the Prairies. The aggrieved coal miners, fishers, and lumberjacks of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick consolidated as the Maritimes, characterized by the coastal settlements. This unifying picture of the country, embellishing the distinctiveness of the physical environment over its ethnic and cultural fault lines, would be called regionalism.

While regionalism was a unifying idea of Canada by the mid-twentieth century, a closer study of its development before the 1950s reveals that the perception of environment underwent a sea change in definition, from something frustrating the development of a Canadian culture to the very thing bonding it together. The details of the story are a useful precursor to understanding *Ti-Jean*, because they tell us about how Canadians were taught to see environment and country, providing the historical context for understanding how the films were read and why they were so popular. Geography textbooks produced during this period were the main conveyors of such narratives. As James Blaut and others have shown, textbooks are windows into the prevailing mentality—they reveal what past generations believed was important to impart to their children about how to understand the world.¹⁵ Geography textbooks taught students to interpret the natural features of the earth and the subject itself was a crucible for ideas of nationalism at the turn of the century. In an age obsessed with maps, territories, and resources for industrial development, geography also proposed to explain the role of environment in “determining” levels of civilization and culture.¹⁶ Typical geography lessons on Canada took three forms: enumeration of resources, explanations of human–environment relationships, and celebrations of “technological modernity” in overcoming physical challenges presented by the country.

Children had long been taught to equate physical landscapes with economic values and patterns of life. However, nineteenth-century geography textbooks placed Canada as a colony of Britain, offering only a cursory glance at the plants, animals, and political territories found there. They had little interest in the history of

peoples, preferring merely to enumerate them and list their heritage. But by the dawn of the twentieth century, textbooks appeared with a different message. Publisher Grafton's *New Canadian Geography* (1899) consciously declared Canada's economic independence. Alongside scenes of commerce and industry, it declared "In all matters relating to local affairs Canadians enjoy full powers of self-government, and are not subject to any interference from the Mother Country."¹⁷ Assuring students that independence was a profitable decision, the book reminded them, "Large districts which once seemed only a wilderness of rock and scrub, are yielding vast treasures of gold, silver, iron, coal, copper, nickel, and other riches of the mine," making Canada the wealthiest former colony.¹⁸ Understanding the origin of such industrial wealth was the next task of geographical learning, and in accordance the country was best differentiated by the raw materials it provided to industry. Maps were a favoured tool in expressing the logic behind early Canada: In figure 3 pink shading illustrates the distributional extent of wheat growing and timber, while the illustrations of men threshing grains or chopping wood indicate that the importance of this environmental knowledge is connected to the economy. The presentation of nature as an economic resource was associated with the larger wealth of the nation. There was no real cohesion between bounded spaces within Canada and particular resources—it was the larger map that dominated, emphasizing the extent of territorial sovereignty over northern North America and its resources.

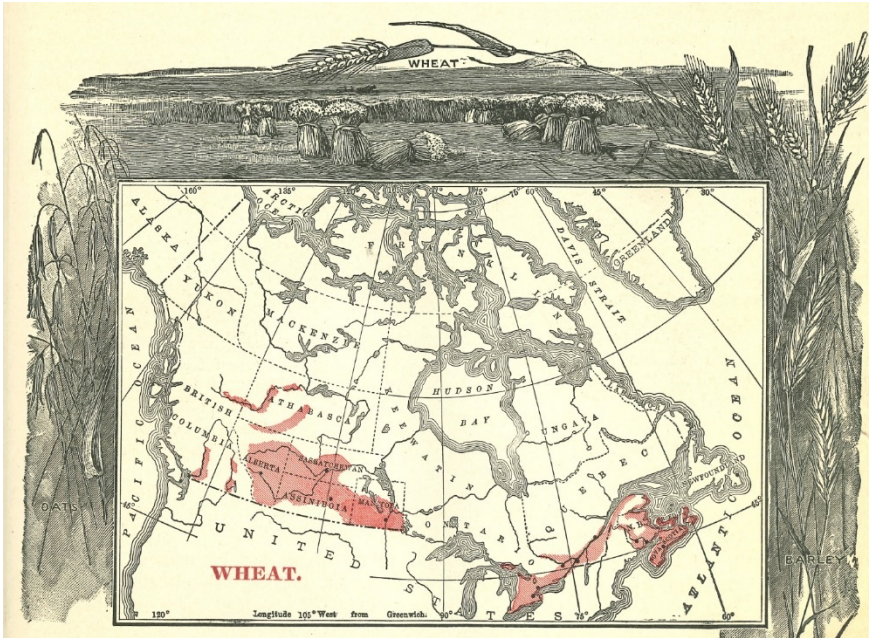


Figure 3. Mapping the extent of wheat farming across Canada. Source: *New Canadian Geography*, F.E. Grafton & Sons, 1899, 75.

Grafton’s *New Canadian Geography* reflected themes current in the discipline, such as the descriptive and areal models, which aimed to separate and list different parts of the observable world. The textbook focused on the natural wealth of Canada, which it organized according to the different zones making up the country—the east, the inland, and Pacific Coastline—though other than climate variances it did little to explain regional difference. When books did divide the country, the preferred method was along the political provincial and territorial boundaries. These they treated largely as the “Mother Country” had treated Canada: as an assortment of colonial resources to be itemized and assessed. But in the twentieth century a new picture of the country was emerging.

New Elementary Geography (1915) offers a glimpse of the transformation underway. This book reminded students that the predicate of studying Canadian geography was to learn how a sovereign country derived wealth from the land: the country is “entirely independent in all money matters; she collects her own taxes and spends her own money, and is, in fact, mistress of all her own resources.”¹⁹ To explore these resources, the book divided Canada into five sections based on physical landscapes: the Maritimes, the St. Lawrence, the Prairies, the North, and the Mountains. In the Maritimes, “short rivers produce water power, supply safe and commodious harbours, and teem with fish.”²⁰ The St. Lawrence section is “mostly covered with valuable timber,” while the Prairie section celebrates its agricultural potential.²¹ While *New Elementary Geography* followed the established model of evaluating resources, it departed from earlier books that subsumed everything under a national framework. In this case, the extent of wheat or timber across the larger nation seemed less important than associating wheat with the Prairies, lumber with the St. Lawrence, or minerals with the mountains and the north.

In the early twentieth century a geographical interpretation emerged in which Canadians were taught to see the country in terms of specific areas and the types of things produced there. *Canada* was increasingly tied to physical environments, but the idea of how a *Canadian* related to them was still unresolved. When geography textbooks did discuss people, they were treated in one of two ways. If they were Indigenous, they became the focus of an anthropological view that analyzed their dwellings, clothing, and hunting practices for the general level of “civilization” achieved, sometimes going as far

as mixing people with plants and animals native to North America. Indigenous peoples were treated as part of landscape and history, outside the modern spaces of settlement and civilization. Non-Indigenous settlers appeared at the level of populations—of major cities, provinces, and the like. These numbers were a means of benchmarking the gradual spread of Western society and values over the frontier, indicating the development of environments, and the displacement of Indigenous inhabitants. In the 1920s and 1930s, the two ways of treating people shifted significantly: Indigenous peoples all but disappeared from the picture, while Euro-Canadians were presented as “tied” to the landscape. Gage’s *Public School Geography* (1922) reproduces this shift. For example, “men who live by hunting and fishing” included fur traders of the river systems and the fishers of Nova Scotia. Schoolchildren learned about where and how they fished, the length of the trapping season, and the ways they depended on and managed the landscape.²² The jobs people did in different spaces were an important means for grasping the unity of the country. Understanding the significance of this way of seeing society and environment in relation tells us much about pre-1950s Canada.

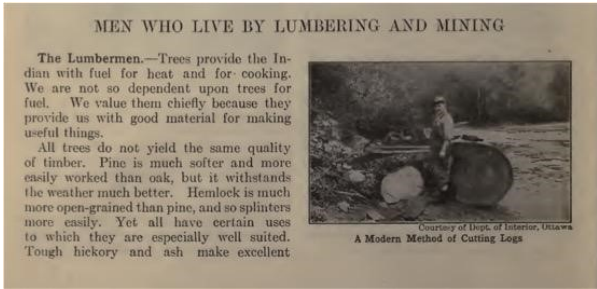


Figure 4. “Men Who Live by Lumbering and Mining.” Source: *Ontario Public School Geography*. Toronto: W. J. Gage, 1922.

In Canadian textbooks, Indigenous peoples' prominent association with natural landscapes were downplayed or erased in favour of non-Indigenous associations of Canadians' work in frontier spaces. These textbooks always left some "wilderness" for Indigenous peoples, but in the Prairies, the Cree and Siksika were replaced by farmers. In Ontario, the northern forests associated with Anishinaabe peoples now became the landscape of the "lumberman." In place of truly Indigenous peoples, a settler-colonial "indigeneity" was presented. Deeply placed regional identities depended on the landscape and extraction of primary resources: in lumbering regions, "many men are employed in the Canadian woods, felling trees, cutting them into logs, and transporting them to saw-mills, where they are sawn into lumber."²³ Sections on mining and farming rely on the same kinds of equations—that the primary meaning of the "men" who live in these various parts of Canada is economic production and the work of transforming environments into exportable resources.

By the 1950s, Canadians were being asked to see environments in at least three different ways. First, as resources guaranteeing the future prosperity of the nation. Second, as physical landscapes distinct unto themselves, like prairies, forests, and mountains, making up a larger territorial body of Canada. Finally, as places where people worked, transforming environments into wealth and themselves into Canadians. The base of regional identities formed by mid-century is important as the foundation of the *Ti-Jean* films. He goes to the forest, the prairie, and the mineral frontier of the north to discover how people *work* in the different

environments of the country, to see how Canadian economies grow and understand what makes Canadians who they are.

One key to understanding the Ti-Jean movies is to know how Canadian schoolchildren were taught to see nature and nation. For young students, knowing about Canadians meant knowing how they derived their livelihoods from harvesting resources from the environment. Ti-Jean replicates many of these ways of understanding space: by transforming nature into value and by connecting resource wealth to the prosperity of Canada. However, it is also important to consider what Ti-Jean's labour meant as he learned about the spaces of Canada. A regional model was consolidated by the 1950s around the idea of deriving livelihoods from environments, but this very identity was challenged by real changes on the ground. A second key to understanding Ti-Jean requires a review of the contradictions of modernity: how changes at mid-century challenged the new model of the country is central to understanding his magic.

PART 2: CANADA AT MID-CENTURY: GEOGRAPHICAL CHANGE AND TECHNOLOGICAL MODERNITY

By the 1950s, an image of Canada as a unified set of regions was consolidated around people working in diverse physical landscapes, but at the same time the resource frontier upon which this model relied was undergoing a dramatic change. The real momentum of 1950s reconstruction was the development of new technologies enabling transformation and movement on a scale unprecedented in earlier periods. In a short timeframe, transportation had evolved

from vehicles powered by the motive energy of horses to those powered by energy-dense hydrocarbons.²⁴ Once-remote areas grew closer as the improvement of gasoline-powered trucks extended mechanization into places where only rails and rivers could support heavy extraction, while fertilizers and irrigation systems drew new lands into the agricultural sphere. At these new sites, less conspicuous technologies were recasting the regimens of work. Developments in gasoline engines produced chainsaws capable of outperforming a team of workers, hydraulic systems made drilling and earthmoving possible at scales previously unimaginable, snowmobiles reduced the travel required for trapping and prospecting, and tractors and other mechanized equipment meant farmers could better manipulate the land.

The “moral imperative” behind Canadian technological development was driven by an enthusiastic embrace of communications and transportation technology and the belief that it would improve the good of society and create endless wealth.²⁵ Many geographers and historians have noted how a particular variant of what James Scott calls “high modernity” captured the imagination of Canadian planners and civil engineers during this period.²⁶ Scott reveals that these rearrangements relied on an abiding belief that the complexity of the world (say, a sprawling river network) could be simplified into purer forms of knowledge (flow rates, water volumes, and diagrammatics) then redesigned to maximize the extractive power of industry for human benefit (damming and rechannelling into a central reservoir, straightening flow-ways, sending water through hydro turbines). Likewise, urban spaces were redeveloped from the chaos of the nineteenth century into planned apartment

complexes and geometric high-rises. In agriculture, an exemplary piece of high modernism was implemented through the Canada Land Inventory. This information system was a computer database that classified national farmlands according to a numeric scale of arability and was envisioned as a tool for land-use planners to direct farmers in achieving the highest crop yields.

Such schemes relied on repetition of form, the strong will of centralized planners, and the ability of industry to create changes on a massive scale. In Canada, these philosophies helped imagine the widespread rearrangement of nature like the St. Lawrence Seaway project,²⁷ massive urban slum clearances and renewal programs,²⁸ or the relocation of entire populations.²⁹ These projects were supported by modern planning principles and state-of-the-art technologies, and were overseen by university-trained technocrats tasked with creating an organized, rationalized, and simplified set of social and economic relations between citizens, the state, and nature. Arguably, the reach and power of the state was vastly expanded during this period, as previously “undeveloped” regions of Canada were incorporated into the national economy and as the state took a deeper interest in the welfare and social planning of citizens.

It is equally arguable that Canadians were seduced by the social and economic ideology of high modernity, with its overly managed natural systems, faith in experts, and vision of a benevolent state.³⁰ Indeed, many of the changes brought about by the imperative of progress severely undermined livelihoods and disrupted environmental relationships. Jobs in the resource sector were increasingly mediated by machines—it was no longer the logger who cut the tree, but the chainsaw—while operations expanded to regions

previously inaccessible. On the farm, a single farmer with a gasoline-powered tractor could supersede communal farming efforts, while new pesticides, fertilizers, and other technologies increased the size of farms and the definition of arable land. Modern changes cut right to the heart of the new Canada—for people whose regional identities depended on *working* the natural landscape, their work was becoming increasingly irrelevant and replaced by mechanization. The 1950s brought two important tensions to the fore of Canada's future: the spatial scale of the nation was radically transforming as new means of transportation made old geographical barriers less relevant, while old understandings of the relations between humans and nature were being upended by technologies that replaced human work. Both threatened the stability of the country and the presumption of regional balance upon which Canada was established. Ti-Jean's movies played an important role in portraying and mediating these tensions.

Ti-Jean in the Land of Iron: Space, the North and the New Resource Geography of Canada

Thinking through Ti-Jean's 1958 film *In the Land of Iron* can shed light on the ambiguities these new geographies created. The narrative begins with Ti-Jean travelling by steamship along the St. Lawrence River to an unspecified location. Left on the shore of the river, he comes across a young Indigenous girl who informs him about a mining operation in the north. Determined to see it for himself, he steals a plane from a local airfield and pilots it for "iron ore country." Clearly, the protagonist of the film is off to an auspicious start—confirming Brian Low's observations that the NFB

children of the 1950s and 1960s had few compunctions about upsetting rules to pursue adventure. If Ti-Jean represents a nation yearning for independence, the airplane was also heavily laden with symbolism. Planes were a key transformational technology in Canada and becoming ever more ubiquitous in the private sector after the Second World War. The airplane not only tied together far-flung communities, it assisted in the mapping of a landscape previously seen only from the ground, enabling the location of new resources. Because part of the power of the airplane was to make physical barriers in the landscape irrelevant, many saw it as creating a new geography, ushering in an “air age” of peace and prosperity.³¹ When Ti-Jean lands in Schefferville, Quebec, he sets foot into a perfect example of one of these new geographies being created out of the previously “unused” hinterland, remade by the airplane into a northern resource frontier. Our first view of Schefferville is from the air, exposing the radial street pattern intended to facilitate the anticipated progress of commercial, industrial, and residential development that would follow the mine. As Ti-Jean passes over, the narrator claims the town looks like it “fell out of the blue sky,” ready-made for habitation and industry.

Aerial views of ordered landscapes below became a familiar trope in the 1950s. Historians of aerial perspective have emphasized the importance of an elevated viewpoint in representing claims that modern centralized planning was capable of ordering of human affairs “from above.”³² In the film, the spatial pattern of the town represented the structured relationship between domestic and commercial affairs. The radial bands of houses, ringed by an industrial border, were inspired by the Garden City design of

Ebenezer Howard, who imagined cities of the future built and maintained by benevolent corporations. Schefferville was Canada's version of the power of centralized expert planning. Constructed in 1954, it reflected a promise that state expertise and industrial partnership could provide livelihoods and modern domestic affluence for the people of Quebec. In practice this partnership meant the town was a labour base for the Iron Ore Company of Canada's operations in Northern Quebec and the first step in developing extensive mining in Labrador, while for government it served as a NORAD Station of the Mid-Canada Line built for Cold War defence.³³

Ti-Jean's flight over Schefferville reflected a new vision for the Canadian north and highlighted the geographic changes associated with it. The forces of change moved quickly, almost overnight, stepping over hundreds of miles of hinterland to drop a fully functioning town in the middle of the Canadian Shield. The location of community and industry in such a remote space was also evidence that a new geography of Canada was emerging out of modernity, one connecting a whole series of remote locations previously not even on the map. Ti-Jean's visit to the Land of Iron was only one part of a new region some called the Mid-Canada Corridor, a northern development frontier marked by a series of resource towns that seemed to appear overnight across the country, from the oil and gas fields of Norman Wells and Fort McMurray, to mining at Uranium City and Port Radium, to smelting in Timmins and Cobalt.³⁴ The expanding spaces of the Canadian state were accompanied by the contraction of time. Ti-Jean took less than a day



Figure 5. High modernity: aerial views of Schefferville and a hydro facility. Source: Garceau. 1958. *Ti-Jean in the Land of Iron*. National Film Board of Canada.

to travel to the Quebec-Labrador borderlands, a feat that would have taken weeks or months only a few decades prior.

When viewers saw Ti-Jean arrive in Schefferville, they saw him travel across new Canadian space, facing the once impenetrable geography of the frontier in a new way.³⁵ In the remainder of the film, Ti-Jean meets figures involved in the production of the mine, eventually using his magic to help the mine operators. But there is much the film did not show. Mining exemplifies the ambivalent and paradoxical relationship to nature that many Canadians encountered mid-century. It brought people and capital into the frontier and created thousands of jobs in the country, but it also disconnected people from the natural world by technological mediation.³⁶ In Schefferville, as if geography (and culture) no longer mattered, Innu from Maliotenam and Naskapi from Fort Chimo were relocated to work in the mine and staff town services, build transportation infrastructure, and reinforce the state's demographic claims to the town's territory.³⁷ Thus, when we see Ti-Jean arrive in the north from the air, we should remember the emblematic modern aerial view and the new geographies apparently celebrated by these movies also held ambiguous meanings for many Canadians. While the spaces of the frontier they opened up transformed quickly and promised affluence, they also jarred the established patterns of life and exposed people to unpredictable crises of capitalism and the vagaries of risk in the resource market.

Ti-Jean Goes West: Nature, the Prairie, and Redefining Environmental Relationships

The high modern 1950s ideology that informed development at Schefferville was only one tension exposed by the new geography being created during this period. Each of Ti-Jean's destinations was undergoing a transformation that was redefining the picture of the country and the regional, labour-based identities in the different areas now represented. The prairie landscape, which had grown to be a characteristic icon of family wheat farming, was one such region in transition. In *Ti-Jean Goes West*, we enter the west on a train through an emblematic small-town hub of resource activity built around the service of the farm. In Ti-Jean's usual fashion, he learns about the cycles of life on the family farm and uses his super-strength to scythe a field by himself. The film offers a bucolic presentation of farming life working the land. Yet considering the environment as an "actor" on the screen reveals another set of changes being ushered in by modernity. The prairies are commonly seen as an erstwhile "natural" space, but are actually among the most modified landscapes on earth, with at present only one per cent of native prairie grassland remaining amid drastically reduced biodiversity.³⁸ Ti-Jean saw this managed landscape at the farm of Fred Fetterman, where he helped bring in the harvest. Fetterman's 1950s farm reflected a long process of re-engineering the prairie landscape that was entering a new phase with the introduction of new technologies and petrochemicals as Ti-Jean arrived.

Even before the modern era, the prairie endured longstanding human interventions. Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples extensively managed tall grass systems and bison herds. However, as Barry Potyondi has demonstrated, the prairies endured three periods of rapid social and environmental reordering,

beginning shortly after the arrival of Europeans. This process began when the bison were extirpated and their role in the distribution of seeds and fertilization of prairie grasses was undermined, altering the relationship between Indigenous societies and grazing herds. In the next period, the ecology shifted further following the arrival of ranchers, who introduced cattle and suppressed prairie fires. Cattle cleared native grasses while fire suppression altered the regeneration cycles of many species. The last period, underway during Ti-Jean's visit, saw efforts to redesign prairie ecology through fertilization and hybridization of special strains of wheat and other grains.³⁹

Central to understanding these changes was the rise of modern capitalist practices, which required stable, controlled, and increasingly productive environmental conditions. Contemporaries such as Joseph Schumpeter recognized that innovations arising from capitalism often led to what he called the "creative destruction" of antiquated labour practices and technologies.⁴⁰ The same term has been applied to the environment: David Harvey has shown how contradictions of capitalism are often overcome by the spatial fix of claiming new space or technologies of transforming landscape into resource. For him, "creative destruction" produces an inherent volatility in the process of wresting profit from the landscape and leaves producers in a precarious and uncertain relationship with the land.⁴¹ These accounts reflect the situation in which many farmers found themselves in the 1950s, tied to financial backing and debt economies, and exposed to markets and environmental change. The promise of modern technologies to return profits yearly was based on new fertilizers, viable seeds, reduced labour costs, and improved efficiency of mechanization. The massive investment needed to



Figure 6. Ti-Jean brings in the harvest on time; Ti-Jean learns from Farmer Fetterman. Source: Garceau. *Ti-Jean Goes West*. National Film Board of Canada, 1957.

compete in the new farming economy required that costs were reduced elsewhere, namely in labour, further exposing the separation between farm labour and the land. According to Potyondi, “The radical re-ordering of the environment took place as regional inhabitants abandoned the age-old pursuit of lasting subsistence for the more uncertain benefit of immediate financial gain. Economically, the change represented the triumph of market capitalism. Ecologically, it entailed an unparalleled loss of natural diversity. Culturally, it meant recurrent social crisis and physical dislocation.”⁴²

The history of farm production is thus the transformation of a relationship to nature in which society becomes financially tied to what Don Gayton calls a “wheatgrass mechanism” seeking to escape nature’s cycles.⁴³ The world of prairie wheat Ti-Jean visited was in the midst of this upheaval. External forces were distancing farmers from nature, who saw their day-to-day relations mediated by technologies, chemicals, and global markets rather than by ecological possibilities and constraints. The farmers Ti-Jean met were anachronisms more suited to a nineteenth-century textbook than a reflection of the corporatization of agriculture, the intensification of modern farming, and the growing western resentment towards perceived market exploitation by the east.

Ti-Jean Goes Lumbering: Labour, the Forest, and Environmental and Social Upheaval

Throughout the 1950s, mechanization, technology, and capitalist imperatives meant that Canadians’ relationships with the environment were modified, accelerated, and expanded. As we have

argued, geographical thinking can show how humans and their environments are implicitly relational. This line of thought can also illustrate how changes in natural relationships also affect social relationships. Like the mining and agriculture examples above, forestry in Canada exemplifies the interrelationship between environmental and social change. Here again, we can take another area that Ti-Jean explored and ask what was transpiring in Canada at the time. When Ti-Jean visited the logging camps of the northern boreal forest, viewers saw him entering a margin between tradition and modernity in a changing forest resource economy. Much of this antagonism resulted from long-standing tensions between mechanization and the value of skilled human labour; yet, unseen by the camera's eye are the labour politics that were playing out in the northern forests. Bosses appreciated the efficiency of new technologies like mechanical fellers and skidders, while workers felt they undermined the human skill and vested positions that experience brought.

Richard Rajala has suggested a deeper level to the antagonism between workers and managers in the forest, arguing that bosses encouraged technological innovation and modernization for the same reason loggers themselves feared it—because highly skilled employees were often able to set the terms of their own employment. Rajala takes the log-skidding ox driver as an example. The ox driver's skills were based in his tacit knowledge of animals, wisdom that took years to acquire. Because of their importance in moving trees to a landing, ox drivers could significantly affect the efficiency of a timber operation and thus, from the boss's perspective, held a frustrating amount of power over local operations. But his favoured status was

imperilled after the mechanization of the donkey engine, a coal-powered cable device that mimicked the work of oxen. The ox driver was quickly replaced under the promise of increased efficiency, the great short-term goal of capital intensity. This exchange became a way to displace the labour politics of skilled workers with an interchangeable unit, the donkey engine operator, who required minimal training. These low-skilled jobs were necessarily precarious, an added benefit for bosses, but a term of employment that workers were forced to accept. Mechanization led to the “degradation of labour,” the devaluation of loggers’ work and knowledge of their environment.⁴⁴ Harry Braverman has suggested that machines were so swiftly taken up in the mid-twentieth century precisely because they offered the opportunity “to wrest control of the workplace from skilled craftsman.”⁴⁵

Braverman and others have shown that modernization and mechanization flattened workplace subdivisions of knowledge, expertise, and pay-scaling. As these changes were underway in the workplace, they were also reflected in home and social life. For instance, Barnes, Hayter, and Hay have addressed what happens when resource-dependent towns lose their primary industries. In Port Alberni, BC, economic shocks from a mill closure caused reverberating social effects. In the town, household norms were often tied to employment and gender roles, but when industry left bosses and workers unemployed, the townsfolk faced a recalibrated social structure.⁴⁶ Without the buttress of an established workplace hierarchy, the perception that an elite class of owner-expert was distinct from a labouring class of generally unskilled workers disappeared. Despite the internal integration of regions portrayed in



Figure 7. Ti-Jean at work in the forest; Ti-Jean defeats Beaudry in a show of strength. Source: Palardy. *Ti-Jean Goes Lumbering*. National Film Board of Canada, 1953.

geography books, many have shown that Canada was still dependent on external markets for forestry.⁴⁷ When the global forest market shifted, the changes resonated through the margins of the country, with economic and social repercussions.

1950s Ambivalence(s) and Contradictions

For 1950s viewers of *Ti-Jean*, natural landscapes on screen—whether forest, field, or frontier—were part of a larger narrative of Canada’s geographical composition. In it, these environments guaranteed the wealth of the nation and its independence, and were places where people found their Canadian identity through the hard work of transforming nature. However, in the 1950s, these aspects of Canadian life were being challenged by mechanization, the incursions of capital into farming and resource economies, and transformations associated with high modernist planning. Even as the *Ti-Jean* films offered a reassuring worldview, where youthful adventure across the nation was safe and interesting, the parts of Canada he travelled through were in upheaval from internal and external forces affecting society, space, and human–environment relations.

Ambivalence characterized Canada’s resource frontiers in the 1950s, which were producing security and assurance in the same quantities they provided uncertainty and contestation. State-sponsored expansion and modernization projects aimed to improve social lives, but also opened up paths to exploitation and economic precarity. Mechanization questioned the traditional value of labour: people agitated for their roles as workers, challenged the growing authority of managers, and reacted to the alterations that followed

industrial capitalism.⁴⁸ The rate of progress also seemed to place time in flux. In a world where the airplane coexisted alongside human and animal-powered technologies, the difference between “modern” Canada and the previous era seemed particularly stark. Likewise, technology altered the spatial pattern of the country. New areas of resource development opened as others closed, forcing Canadians to reconcile new relations between their labour, their societies, and nature. As their textbooks reveal, Canadians were taught to understand their country through its geography: in terms of the resources found there and the kinds of jobs and livelihoods performed. But as the second half of the century dawned, the manner in which people were connected to place, through time and tradition, gave way to connections to space, change, and modernity. A new model to explain the country, and stitch it back together, was beginning to emerge.

PART 3: TI-JEAN’S MAGIC

Much of the popularity of the Ti-Jean films can be explained through the character and his exploits. His spectacular abilities, impish charm, and capacity to upstage adults surely delighted audiences. In *Ti-Jean Goes Lumbering*, for example, the grizzled bush workers who laughed at the boy’s precocity are astonished after he bucks a tree in record time: “The men were afraid of him,” the narrator recounted. “This little champ appeared to have some magic gift.” In every film, his super abilities provide the same hook: he lifts heavy objects ordinary people never could, runs faster than trains, triples the work rate of mining ore and lading ships, and eats twice as much

as an ordinary worker would in half the time. But while Ti-Jean's magic is used to elicit laughter and amazement, the other work it does warrants closer investigation.

The subject of magic and its meaning in society has long been debated by scholars. Whereas “magical realism” refers mainly to literature, anthropologists have also had much to say about magic in the lived experience of the world. Many have built on work of the early ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski, who articulated a difference between magic and religion.⁴⁹ Whereas religious doctrine could answer unexplainable queries such as *what happens after death*, magic was meant to explain uncertain phenomena in the lived world such as *why the crops have failed* or *what the weather will be like this growing season*. For Malinowski, magic “is to be expected and generally to be found whenever man comes to an unbridgeable gap, a hiatus in his knowledge or in his powers of practical control, and yet has to continue in his pursuit.”⁵⁰ For example, in his studies of Trobriand Islanders of the South Pacific, Malinowski found that travellers between islands had detailed and accurate knowledge of ocean currents and weather patterns, yet still performed magic rites in advance of a voyage to ward off storms. As such, magical thinking is almost scientific in that it explains observable phenomena, but transcends reason where science cannot.

Malinowski saw magic as “functional” in Trobriand society. His views of the islanders also reflected chauvinistic cultural assumptions of the 1920s. Nonetheless, he provided a general theory of how magic operates in society to reconcile the irreconcilable, mitigate risk and uncertainty, or resolve differing forces. More contemporary anthropologists studying societies undergoing

industrial transformation also find magic and the occult operating hand-in-hand with modernization. Michael Taussig showed how Colombian and Bolivian plantation workers equated colonial economic growth with a “devil pact” and employed magic attributes in correlation with commodity fetishism.⁵¹ Likewise, in their studies of post-colonial African states, Jean and John Comaroff charted the rise of “occult economies” as countries meshed traditional magical beliefs with globalization.⁵² Canada’s rapid modernization during the 1950s may be considered in the same range of dramatic economic and social transformation. As we have established above, high modernism brought many benefits to Canadians, but it also upset conventions around the value of labour, affected domestic roles, destabilized relationships with nature and the environment, transformed the experience of space and time, and placed a question mark over the geographical linkages making up the nation. These contrasts in the experience of modernity indicate a way of working toward the meaning of Ti-Jean’s magic: does it provide any functional role in society to bridge gaps, or explain forces that were otherwise conflicting? Revisiting the films from this perspective, we can see how Ti-Jean’s magical feats spoke directly to the new human–environment relations developing in the 1950s.

Ti-Jean at Work: Equivalency of Man and Machine

Ti-Jean’s magical abilities are clearest in the incredible strength he demonstrates, whether loading massive logs onto a sleigh or picking up a heavy steel farm implement. In the films these everyday jobs are typically performed by machinery. But when Ti-Jean completes them by his strength alone, often with greater speed and efficiency,

the narrative created lets us see his intervention as magical. In *Ti-Jean Goes West*, the “big farmer” Fetterman is bringing in a grain harvest using his diesel-powered combine and thresher. Ti-Jean has already learned to stare admirably—“full of wonderment”—at the machine and enjoys riding it. But as Fetterman notices heavy rain clouds on the horizon, he realizes that his new swather has broken down. With the crop threatened by the rain, Ti-Jean “sees his chances.” Leaping to an old wooden scythe he reaps the field by hand at record speed. The farmers stare: “Ti-Jean has just achieved the most extraordinary feat the farmers of the west have ever heard of.” There may be an allegory here expressed as a familiar complaint: modern machinery is valuable and efficient but prone to failure at the most inopportune times. Yet reading this scene through the 1950s, and considered against the “degradation of labour” that saw workers replaced by mechanical implements, the farmers’ astonishment takes on multiple meanings. Ti-Jean has not only reaped the field, he has done so with specific reference to the labour output of the machine. His magical abilities reflect the new productivity norms of resource economies. This demonstration of the value and worth of labour in the film is significant, but produces an ambivalent result: does he outperform the men he works alongside, demonstrating how much faster he is than the ordinary labourer, or does he outperform the machine, returning value to the historic role of physical work that technological change is threatening? The very ambiguity itself is the key: by drawing equivalencies between old and new kinds of labour, his magic is doing both, reconciling what are otherwise irreconcilable forces.

Ti-Jean's broader exploits in the resource economies of Canada may be interpreted in a similar light. He chops trees faster than a gas-powered chainsaw and uses his superpowers to load a steamship with heavy freight, well beyond the capability of either humans or machines. Again, Ti-Jean's magic addresses the labour politics of the 1950s. As work in the resource sectors grew routinized, mundane, and in many instances more precarious with the influx of machines, labour unions formed as people tried to protect their jobs against redundancy and deskilling.⁵³ In *The Land of Iron*, Ti-Jean encounters Bulldog, a caricature of a potential labour organizer. The narrator makes clear this man is a "bad and spiteful" worker fired from the mine and is nursing a terrible grudge against Landry, the mine's supervisor. When Ti-Jean learns that Bulldog intends to sabotage operations by dynamiting some machinery, he goes directly to Landry and together they foil the plot. In a dramatic sequence, Ti-Jean pounces on Bulldog as he attempts to flee the scene of his crime. Having earned the boss's trust for this act, Ti-Jean next learns that the mine's production is suffering from chronic problems with its machinery. He steps in to assist Landry and puts his powers to work restoring the mine to efficiency. Here, a parable about labour relationships is again mediated by Ti-Jean's magic. He aligns the interests of workers and managers in transforming the resource frontier, implying the dangers of labour unrest.



Figure 8. Ti-Jean takes up the scythe; Bulldog plots his sabotage. Source: Garceau. *Ti-Jean Goes West*. National Film Board of Canada, 1957; Garceau. *Ti-Jean in the Land of Iron*. National Film Board of Canada, 1958.

Ti-Jean, Nature, and the New Resource Economy

When seen through the labour changes of the 1950s, Ti-Jean's powers may be read as mediating the relationships between workers and bosses, and drawing equivalence between humans and technology. Yet there is another key narrative element that must be present for his magic to work. In each film, nature is a central target of Ti-Jean's abilities. His magic is employed to transform dense forests into lumber, ripe fields into full grain bins, and shield rock into piles of ore. The environment is always the foil against which Ti-Jean's powers can be read: his relationship to men and machines is evident only through the rate, scale, and speed at which he can turn physical nature into economic wealth. Indeed, this era is sometimes referred to as the "great acceleration"⁵⁴ in which the first industrial age of steam and coal was eclipsed by a new one of combustion engines and petrofuels, leading to an exponential increase in the transformation of the environment through productivity, carbon emissions, energy expenditure, and resource consumption. Ti-Jean's films frame the intensification of resource extraction during this period, while his magic helps explain its meaning.

As we have shown, geography textbooks taught Canadians about the relationships between physical environments and economic and social development. They argued that human labour applied in transforming nature was key to understanding different parts of the country, and valorized such work as a key aspect of national independence. Indeed, Ti-Jean repeats these lessons with gusto, eagerly learning and joining in with every new resource economy he encounters. He jumps on farmer Fetterman's modern

swather and drives it “like a king,” faster than anyone ever imagined. At the mine, he assists supervisor Landry by taking over field operations, directing crushers, steam shovels, and dump trucks to dramatically increase productivity. The film is scored by a cacophony of noise meant to signal the frenzied experience of modernity. As he pushes the machines faster and faster, their hulking frames race at double speed, set to a frenetic musical rhythm of work reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* and Raymond Scott’s “Powerhouse” themes, iconic cultural touchstones that conveyed the bristling power of technology to remake the terms of work. His own youthful enthusiasm may even be read as a stand-in for the optimism and confidence that characterized mid-century Canada. Yet thinking about *how* nature was transformed in the Ti-Jean stories also illustrates the ambiguous human–environment relations emerging in the 1950s.

While a different actor played Ti-Jean in each movie, the character’s values changed little from film to film. One enduring feature is that Ti-Jean always gets paid in the end. He makes enough money to stuff his satchel, in his preferred currency of one-dollar notes, before mounting his white horse and riding off. Children dependent on their parent’s allowance might well have enjoyed watching Ti-Jean fill his rucksack with dollar bills, equalling a small fortune in the 1950s. Yet when recast against the larger story in each, an important lesson is provided about the source of the money. We see the economic reward of hard work, but viewers are always reminded that value can be traced back to nature. On the prairies, “The fields are reaped to stubble” after Ti-Jean’s efforts, but he goes out for the last load anyway. He sees “liquid gold, thousands of

dollars' worth of grain ... drawn into the bins" as he unloads the grain truck into the farmer's elevator. When he's driving the mine to work harder, the dump trucks loaded with crushed ore are "full of riches," while in the forest we are reminded that the winter's efforts always lead to the promise of the spring's bounty at the mill. These episodes also stitch the country together. As the narrator reminds the viewer, the money allows Ti-Jean "to travel to his next adventure" in another region of Canada, where he will find an inexhaustible supply of resources to start the cycle again.

Modernity brought into contrast the difference between industrial mechanized capitalism and the traditional economic roles of Canadians who worked the land. The individual strength, work ethic, and skilled knowledge of nature that could translate into setting the terms for employment in previous resource economies mattered less and less by the 1950s. Yet Ti-Jean's magic again makes these equivalent. By tying *all* work back to the necessity of transforming nature into value, he helps resolve the contradiction of differing forces. Indeed, it is illustrative that the only place Ti-Jean does not employ his magic is in the one job he performs that is disconnected from resource production; when he is forced to take a job in the mine's kitchens. Tasked with filling the lunch boxes of mineworkers, Ti-Jean laments the drudgery of the role as he "finds life in the kitchen very boring," and clearly longs for real work in the mine. Ti-Jean's opinions suggest two localities at the mine: the pit itself, where moral integrity and heroic masculinity are at work transforming the earth; and the kitchen, a servile place with retrograde values. The latter is also the setting of Ti-Jean's first encounter with Bulldog, the would-be saboteur sent to the kitchens



Figure 9. Ti-Jean crows after bringing in the harvest; Ti-Jean increases productivity at the mine. Source: Garceau. *Ti-Jean Goes West*. National Film Board of Canada, 1957; Garceau. *Ti-Jean in the Land of Iron*. National Film Board of Canada, 1958.

as punishment for laziness at the *real* work site. The limits of Ti-Jean's powers are clear: there is no nature here for him to transform and improve, and thus his magic has no function in the domesticated atmosphere of the kitchen.

Ti-Jean and the Compression of Time and Space

The moral difference between the kitchen and the mine aligned with other binaries emerging in the 1950s. The cultural geography of the home was increasingly associated with femininity, and outside work with masculinity—qualities writ large in the Ti-Jean movies. Reconsidering the opening of *Ti-Jean Goes Lumbering* discussed at the beginning of this article is illustrative: the scene opens to three 1950s boys playing restlessly under the watchful eye of their mother. When their grandfather appears and starts telling stories of Ti-Jean, the tales are an antidote to their boredom, but may also be encoded as a rescue story in which the boys are removed from a domesticated, feminine space and transported through the imagination into the masculine realm of the forest. Since the Ti-Jean story here clearly takes place in the past, this film in particular emphasizes the difference between the world of the 1950s and the traditional world in which the boys' grandfather grew up. As such, it reflects popular impressions of the difference between modernity and tradition. Here we can see again how his magic works to reconcile difference: even as rearrangements of labour in the modern industrial frontier were presented as a compelling new adventure, his films valorized older patterns of work undermined in the 1950s.

Cultural historians have shown how notions of being modern recur in different time periods, often connoting a sense of change in the perception and experience of time and space. They recognize that periods where the contrast between new and old appear particularly stark to contemporary observers can be windows into how change happens. An important insight comes from T. J. Jackson Lears, whose studies of late-nineteenth-century versions of modernity correspond with anxieties about change and efforts to reclaim an “authentic” world of tradition feared lost.⁵⁵ Lears and others have shown how “anti-modernism” helps to explain how the progress of the twentieth century also produced oppositional efforts such as “back to nature” wilderness camps, men’s fraternal organizations, the valourization of folk cultures, and the commemoration of pioneer histories.⁵⁶ These correspond to an array of social and racial assumptions: at the turn of the twentieth century, many imagined modernity as an feminizing threat to civilization; others appropriated Indigenous cultural symbols hoping to restore masculinity to Euro-Canadian culture. As historians are keen to point out, most anti-modern efforts wilfully imagined or invented a historical past that never existed or destroyed the very wilderness in which they sought refuge. The cultural critique of anti-modernism can be applied to the Ti-Jean films to analyze anxieties over the meaning of change in the 1950s.

Over the course of the movies, a juxtaposition of the time periods in which the different films take place highlights a profound difference between the old Canada that was and the new Canada that is emerging. In most cases, these appear to be at odds. In the lumbering film set in the past, where Ti-Jean acts as an example for

the boys in the 1950s, he is forced to measure up against a famous logger named Michel Beaudry. Ti-Jean's nascent masculinity is held in question when Beaudry teases him, but is later proven by wrestling his campmates to the ground, eating prodigious amounts in the camp mess, and impressing the older men through his hard work. As a romanticization of what life was once like in the forest, this film is different from the other two which are set in 1950s Canada. Ti-Jean's horse and clothing may seem at home in the world of the loggers, but in *Goes West* and *In the Land of Iron* he is an anachronism. The tassels on his voyageur jacket and sash also set him apart in time and space from the people around him. In the 1950s, Ti-Jean's past-ness is most clearly juxtaposed against mechanical threshers, cranes, rock crushers, steamships and airplanes. When he out-lifts, out-works, or controls these objects, we can read him as bridging worlds, validating the past and present at the same time. He fulfils the same tests of virile masculinity, succeeding in the fixed-wage resource economy while promoting the nostalgia of an earlier period by outdoing the machines.

Paying attention to the modern as an experience of difference in "time" shows again how Ti-Jean's ambiguous position in both the past and present provides a magical resolution to what is otherwise obvious: the machines have made Michel Beaudry and his fellow loggers irrelevant. Other elements of Ti-Jean relate specifically to the type of person he meets when he is in the past versus the present. In the modern world there are no great figures like the mighty Beaudry of the bygone *Lumbering* camps. Rather, the *Land of Iron* and the *West* of the 1950s are populated by ordinary farmers and foremen—people whose jobs are important but not spectacular. Since Ti-Jean

comes from the past, unlike the 1950s labourers indebted to their jobs, he can evoke the freedom of a pre-modern world.⁵⁷ Hence, the end of each episode sees him quitting as soon as he makes enough money to move on to a new adventure.

The same forces that highlighted the temporal break between tradition and modernity also provided new experiences of space. The idea of “time-space compression” is often coupled with the experience of modernity; as technology made transportation faster and more efficient, the distance between two places may remain stable, but the experience and perception of traversing it contracts as the rates of speed and costs of travel are reduced.⁵⁸ In *Ti-Jean Goes West*, the narrator explicitly frames this experience, citing explorers like La Vérendrye and Radisson as archaic counterpoints to the modern speeds achieved by trains: canoe voyages that took months now took days with the aid of industrial technology. We can gauge the meaning of spatial compression in the 1950s by interpreting Ti-Jean’s broader relationships with these transportation technologies. In *Goes West*, he easily matches the speed of a train headed to the prairies. To showcase his speed, the filmmakers employ a clever technique, showing him running to catch the train as the landscape flits by at high speed, metaphorically compressing the vast Canadian landscape. Naturally, the engineer is astonished by Ti-Jean’s magic: it is not just his speed, but the fact a *child* is so fast! Finally, Ti-Jean boards the train and is allowed to drive the engine. The camera faces straight down the tracks as the train hurtles westward, producing another visual metaphor of annihilating distance. “What a big country Canada is—it’s a good



Figure 10. Elena tells Ti-Jean about the land of iron; Ti-Jean collects his dollar bills. Source: Garceau. *Ti-Jean in the Land of Iron*. National Film Board of Canada, 1958; Palardy. *Ti-Jean Goes Lumbering*. National Film Board of Canada, 1953.

thing we have trains to go from one part to another,” says the narrator, interpreting Ti-Jean’s awe.

While diesel freight engines became more powerful in the post-war period, the train itself was by no means an archetype of mid-century modernity. Rather, it is the airplane we encounter in *The Land of Iron* that fulfils this role. The aerial view from the plane stolen by Ti-Jean invoked the technological power of high modernism in remaking the geography of Canada. The camera’s view of the land below finds similar icons of the new era: hydro dams, asbestos mines, and company towns. Indeed, looking deeper into Ti-Jean’s relationship with the airplane illustrates the tensions and resolutions to modernity that his magic offered.

Ti-Jean’s use of the airplane is foreshadowed in the opening sequence of *In the Land of Iron*, with the boy astride his horse on the shores of the St. Lawrence. He encounters a young Indigenous girl throwing rocks into the river. This is Elena, the narrator explains, and Ti-Jean finds “her voice is like the singing birds.” The real importance of her presence is quickly revealed: “The young Indian girl knows her country well,” and she informs Ti-Jean that if he wishes to visit the iron lands he must head north by “flying like a bird.” Elena’s appearance is important on several levels. She is the only child apart from Ti-Jean portrayed in the films and is the only female character in the movies who steps out of the background to fulfil a role. But Elena is not meant to be a mythical equivalent for ten-year-old Canadian girls in the same way Ti-Jean was for boys. Rather, her presence indicates the dismissive representation of Indigenous peoples common to the 1950s, especially regarding her location in space and nature. In the same way that Indigenous uses of

space were “erased” from the landscape, Elena simply occupies the forest, appearing not to use or own it in any meaningful way. Her function and voice are synonymous with nature: when she invites Ti-Jean north, she metaphorically opens the resource frontier to Canadian development. Thus, Elena serves a dual role as the invitation to exploit nature while also affirming it is Canada’s right to do so.

The encounter with Elena in *Land of Iron* is significant in other ways. As Ti-Jean makes his way north, a clever allegory shows that the “bird” that Elena describes is actually the airplane Ti-Jean has stolen from under the noses of napping runway workers in Rimouski. Piloting north with the blessing of Elena, layers of signification are at work in Ti-Jean’s relationship to modern technology. The airplane is a marvel of the new age and the compression of time and space, but it has a double association with the heroic past—as an Indigenous “bird” it also symbolizes tradition, history, and nature. The reality not pictured in these representations is that while the “Indian girl” Elena invites Ti-Jean to go north and recover romantic adventure, First Nations like the Cree of northern Quebec and the Labrador Innu are being relocated, their world being transformed by mining, damming, and the expansion of forestry.⁵⁹ Such paradoxes thrive in the heart of modernity. When Ti-Jean returns from the changing north at the end of the film, he meets Elena again at the St. Lawrence, consolidating the connections between tradition and progress.

CONCLUSION: TI-JEAN AND THE MAGIC OF REGIONALISM

Ti-Jean's lasting popularity among Canadians may owe partly to the social parables told in his adventures about the new nation emerging at mid-century. His films were both "interpreting Canada to Canadians" and a proxy for how a state-sanctioned film bureau like the NFB portrayed Canadians and the meaning of Canada. By bringing different lenses to the films, we have shown alternative ways they can be read. Ti-Jean's relationships with work and machinery in the films helped resolve tensions around the denigration of labour and valorized accelerating resource extraction industries. By examining his power to transform nature into value, we have shown how his magic helped to conjure a labouring subject that fit within a modern resource environment. Finally, when considered against the changing experience of time and space, Ti-Jean's stories resolved contradictions between past and present, weaving modernity into the historical fabric of the country.

Yet it is also questionable whether the Ti-Jean movies really *did* anything at all. It is worth contemplating whether the movies considered here can be held to account for delivering these messages into the minds of children and adults. That is not the purpose of this article and if this were the case, it would be difficult to prove. Instead, they are important because they offered a picture of Canada that resonated with a great number of viewers, in turn making these films useful keys to understanding something about the era in which they were popular. In positioning ourselves relative to the viewer of the 1950s, we have attempted to answer two questions: What did the magic in the movies mean? And what does it mean to watch and interpret these films today? These questions need to be understood together. We have suggested that the power of Ti-Jean's magic

related directly to nature, labour, space, and time. In each register, he was able to resolve tensions of modernity, provide answers where other explanations fall short about the discontinuities between past and present, or reconcile the disruptions in relationships with work and the natural environment that industrial capitalism was bringing.

In the end, putting the Ti-Jean movies in their place in the 1950s means they are better suited as a metaphor for the kind of magical transformations at work in the minds of the architects of the modern state. This helps explain the staid assurance of the narrator's voice, reflecting the same assumptions of many cultural producers during this period: that the average Canadian adult or child was relatively naive about what the future would hold. These films ask their viewers to believe in a kind of magical thinking at the heart of many modernization projects: the idea that progress will bring universal benefit to all with little cost. We do not need to read Ti-Jean's magic as representing anything intentional about government social policy or changing representations of the value of nature. Rather, in thinking geographically about the films, we find a way into understanding the creation of a new idea of Canada, and the stark limits of that idea. The distance between the world they imagined and the contemporary nation is perhaps better seen as a set of tensions: between the pioneer lumber camps of the forests and the ecological damage of large-scale clearcutting, the hard rock mines of the north and the polluting tailings ponds left behind, or the quaint family farm of the prairies and the corporatization of agriculture. These films portray a fascinating moment in the history of the country. But rather than laugh at the naïveté of the Ti-Jean films or

their viewers, we should recognize in them the birth of our own modern, industrial capitalist society.

As we have pointed out, many NFB films from the 1950s can indeed be enjoyable to laugh at or along with. Yet we need to remember that the very reason they are funny is because they contain clues to understanding our own past. Contextualizing *Ti-Jean* shows how aspects of his magic can also be found in the now-dominant geographical model of Canada as a “country of regions.”⁶⁰ This article began in the classroom because this is where most children learned about the connection between physical environments and national identity, the subjects in the background of the *Ti-Jean* movies. As their textbooks reveal, for film viewers of the 1950s, the timber, ore, and wheat displayed on screen were elemental evidence of the role of nature and the physical environment in underpinning Canada’s independence and aligning its diverse citizens. As the country modernized, fewer people worked in these kinds of roles, bringing this picture of the country into question. If part of *Ti-Jean*’s magic in the 1950s was explaining and reconciling these changes, his continued popularity in the following decades is usefully contrasted with the continuing question of the nation. Late twentieth-century regionalism exposed rifts and tensions in modern Canada, made clear in the flag and language debates, labour disputes, the centennial anniversary, struggles around charter rights for women and Indigenous peoples, the growing discord over the FLQ, the White Paper, and the energy crises in Western Canada.

According to Maurice Charland, the answer to the pressures put upon the country at mid-century was “technological nationalism.” For him, the connectivity of the telegraph or train in

overcoming physical barriers was essential to understanding modern identity formation. For Charland, “Canada exists more because of the technological transcendence of geographical obstacles than because of any politician’s will. Thus, technology itself is at the centre of the Canadian imagination, for it provides the condition of possibility for a Canadian mind.”⁶¹ Another approach comes from historians Ramsay Cook⁶² and J. M. S. Careless,⁶³ who suggested that the project of a single national unifying “Canadian-ness” was impossible, since the country had developed around “limited” identities. These were a product of the continent’s diverse environments, which at once divided and unified Canada, fostering a kind of national pluralism called “regionalism.”

Cook and Careless influenced generations of historians with their observations on the nature of regionalism in Canada. Yet they and media theorists like Charland were all relatively late to apprehend this new picture of the country. Already by 1950, a new reading of Canada was being offered in books like Lewis and Josephine Robinson’s *Geography of Canada*. Here the authors eschew the typical enumeration of the different sections that comprise the country and what can be found there in favour of a recurrent inquiry: “What Canadians Do” in each region? The Robinsons go over the typical resource industries of fishing, logging, and mining, before promising the reader that more may be found out about these people by looking at the specific geographical conditions that let them do what they do in “Where Canadians Live,” the title of the second section. The textbook is made so distinct from its predecessors by the address to a “national imaginary”—the Canadian, who is defined by work in the regional resource sectors of the

country.⁶⁴ Ti-Jean's voyages around Canada again provide the foil—they are best understood as a hint of the kind of thinking that helped frame the 1950s. At a high point of faith in science and progress, the films reveal how a certain magical belief was needed to imagine a resolution to the irreconcilable differences in parts of the country, to foster dreams of widespread social and environmental engineering without any negative consequences, and to encourage state-driven capitalism without environmental or labour limits.

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