

## TESTIMONIES



Melissa Twance\*

# Pictographs and Indigenous Presence in Northwestern Ontario

**N**orthwestern Ontario is often hailed as a wilderness playground and it's not hard to see why. The region is set in the heart of the Canadian Shield, resulting in a landscape dominated by lakes too numerous to count, thick boreal forests of spruce and pine, waterfalls the color of root beer, sandy beaches, and swathes of exposed granite. Tourist brochures call it "an unspoiled and rugged paradise."

Every year, outdoor enthusiasts flock to the region's national and provincial parks, paddling canoes along the turquoise waters of Lake Superior or the red-brown tinged lakes of the interior. Often, these lakes are enclosed by tall granite cliffs and exposed bedrock. Paddle up close to the rock face and you may see some faint red-brown mark-

ings, figures in a canoe, animals, thunderbirds, and other mythical beings. These are pictographs, also known as *mazinaabikiniganan* to the Anishinaabe people who call this region home.

Rock art sites can be found throughout Canada. In fact, pictographs and petroglyphs may constitute Canada's oldest, most widespread artistic tradition. Ontario is home to at least 400 of these sites in all and the majority can be found between Lake Superior and what is now the Manitoba border. The archaeological record shows that red ochre, or onaman, the pigment primarily utilized in creating these images, has been in use for at least 7 000 years within the Great Lakes region and that Ontario's *mazinaabikiniganan* tradition may be up to 2 000 years old. Today, many of these sites are located in national or provincial parks. The most pressing questions are often how old they are, who made them, and what they mean.

As an Anishinaabe woman, I have always been fascinated by the history of my people. I fell in love with our stories when I was a young girl, listening to my great-

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grandmother recount the many exploits of Nanabozho, a trickster figure and cultural hero featured in many traditional stories and legends. As I got older, I spent time with my grandparents as they reminisced about their childhood and their younger years spent out on the land, trapping, hunting, and fishing. When I entered the university, I was drawn to courses that allowed me to explore my people's stories and history further and to deepen my understanding of Anishinaabe peoples' connection with land and place. During my time in the Indigenous Learning program at Lakehead University, I had the opportunity to work with a professor on traditional land-use mapping within the Robinson-Superior Treaty Area, allowing me to learn the political and cultural histories of different communities throughout the region I call home. The more I travel, the more aware I am of how much history the landscape holds, a history that many Canadians are unaware of.

Indigenous/Aboriginal people in Canada account for nearly five percent of the nation's total population. There are 133 First Nation communities in Ontario alone, but indigenous peoples have been nearly invisible in the nation's consciousness until fairly recently as the new era of Truth and Reconciliation pushed us to the forefront. *Mazinaabikiniganan* and indigenous peoples have both literally and figuratively been erased from the Canadian landscape. Due to settler-colonial policies and actions, both historical and present, we have become dispossessed of many places and sites that are central to our cultural histories as indigenous peoples.

In the first year of my master's degree studies, I took a road trip with my family along the north shore of Lake Superior. We visited the *mazinaabikiniganan* at Agawa Rock, located in Lake Superior Provincial Park and I was immediately struck by the disconnection between people and place. On the hiking trail leading down to the water, interpretive panels give information on the history and geology of the area. Every panel described my people in the past tense, informing me that this used to be our terri-

tory and that we once fished here, set up our lodges here, lived here. In some places, someone had come along and scratched out the past tense and left their own message: "We are still here."

Environmental dispossession is a term that describes the processes that reduce indigenous peoples' access to resources and traditional territories. This dispossession can take both direct and indirect forms. Natural resource extraction is the backbone of Northwestern Ontario's economy. It is the province's most sparsely populated region and most towns are small, with populations under 5 000. These towns have been built on mining or the pulp and paper industries, which have a direct impact on indigenous peoples' ability to use and connect with sacred places within our territories. This includes increased mining activity, hydro-electrical development, as well as the introduction of pulp, paper, and steel mills. Indigenous peoples' access to land and traditional territory becomes limited, even restricted. Hydroelectric dams have flooded lakes and submerged many *mazinaabikiniganan* sites. Privatization of property and increased mining and logging limits indigenous peoples' ability to access ceremonial and sacred sites. In some cases, increased accessibility, made possible through provincial parks and tourism, has actually lead to vandalism of these images. In one notable and recent example, cottagers on Mazinaw Lake, Ontario, had spray-painted a large Canadian flag on a rock face that holds over 100 *mazinaabikiniganan*. Local indigenous peoples protested the vandalism, but these sites have very little legal protection today.

More indirect forms of environmental dispossession, including assimilation and acculturation, have also destabilized indigenous peoples' relationship with the land. Residential schools played a major role in the erosion of indigenous knowledge and severed indigenous peoples from land and communities. The introduction of Christianity also saw the renaming of sacred places, remaking them into evil places, often associated with the devil. Northwestern Ontario has some notable examples. Devil's Armchair is a small rocky outcrop that lies just off the shore of Lake Superior near Sault Ste. Marie. Originally, this place was known as Nanabozho's Chair and, according to one story, that is where Nanabozho rested after creating the world. Anishinaabe people who paddled along this section of the lake often left offerings there as a sign of respect or to ask for safe passage when crossing the



open water. Devil's Warehouse Island is another example. This island is believed to be the source of the onaman used to create the *mazinaabikiniganan* at Agawa Rock. Through this renaming, sacred places become places to be feared and avoided.

One of the most enduring myths at the core of Canada's national identity is the notion of pristine wilderness that literally erases or ignores the historical and enduring presence of indigenous peoples. By associating *mazinaabikinigan* with a bygone era or cultural periods that precede modern indigenous communities, we have been written out of the control of our own cultural sites causing governments, archaeologists, and cultural heritage managers to step in as the "owners." By removing indigenous presence from the land, *mazinaabikiniganan* become a blank slate for the uncritical consumption by non-indigenous peoples.

Separated from the communities that created them, *mazinaabikiniganan* have become veiled in settler colonialism, often resulting in misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The restricted access to sacred and significant locations creates museum-like exhibits around our country—dead things from the past. *Mazinaabikiniganan* cannot exclusively be interpreted by archeologists, historians, or by the government of Canada. We have our own stories that tell us *mazinaabikiniganan* are not part of some remote and distant past, as the majority of Canadians tend to believe. Rather, they continue to be used as places of ceremony and learning for many First Nation communities. *Mazinaabikinigan* are visual reminders that this land is not a vast, empty wilderness, but a local and familiar place populated with oral, cultural, and family histories

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that have been passed down from generation to generation. Emphasis must be placed on the traditions, knowledge, and cultures of indigenous peoples to acknowledge the full history of human habitation of the land. These sites continue to hold stories that can be used to educate the strained relations that landscapes hold and still hold to this day.

*Mazinaabikiniganan* open the door to wider conversations about history, connections to land, and what it means to be Anishinaabe today. It is time to reclaim our knowledge, share our stories and inspire those around us. It is a time of awakening, where information panels at provincial parks will no longer describe my people in the past tense, where indigenous peoples are recognized and valued for their cultural foundation and not regulated by government ideals of propriety. Northwestern Ontario is a wilderness playground, but it is also a vast landscape of Anishinaabe storied pasts and persevering futures. We need to challenge the notion of an "unspoiled and rugged paradise" and consider that this land was, and continues to be, indigenous land. *Mazinaabikiniganan* offer a way to connect the myths, legends, and history of First Nation communities with contemporary landscapes. It is time to recognize that our presence as First Nations people cannot be so easily erased. ■■■