Jessica Dunkin: ***The Canoe Paddle***

What avenues of inquiry might we open if we begin not in the canoe, that icon of Canadiana, but with the more unassuming technology of travel, the paddle? The paddle has a long history as a tool of mobility, although its form and meaning have changed across time and place. For many North American indigenous groups, the paddle offered a means of propelling their variously shaped watercraft, including canoes and kayaks.[1] Groups as diverse as the Kwakwaka'wakw, the Anishnaabeg, and the Mi'kmaq found in the paddle a useful instrument of trade, travel, subsistence, and play. Much like other objects of material culture, paddles were often decorated with designs reflecting, amongst other things, spiritual beliefs and family ties, which were embedded in the "natural world."[2] Contact with Europeans changed Aboriginal lives and livelihoods in countless ways. However, the paddle remains an important tool of mobility for indigenous peoples, both in practical and symbolic terms.

Paddles were also central to the functioning of the continental fur trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Teams of men with paddles propelled large canoes weighted with beaver pelts and other trade goods across vast stretches of territory. Whereas few voyageurs had the skills to build canoes, most crafted their own paddles, and decorated them as well, inspired perhaps by their Aboriginal colleagues.[3]

In the late nineteenth century, the paddle was re-imagined by Euro-Canadian and -American members of the middle class as a recreational tool. Although it had certainly been used for play and pleasure by Aboriginal people and voyageurs, the repositioning of the paddle outside the realms of subsistence and work, as a purely recreational technology was unprecedented. Of course, even within the context of leisure, the paddle remained a work tool for some, including Indigenous guides, tourism outfitters, and summer camp counsellors.

As it travelled back and forth across these cultural boundaries, the paddle variously served as a symbol and instrument of colonialism, and as a means of resistance. In addition to buttressing the commercial structures of the fur trade, the paddle facilitated the exploration, mapping, and territorialization of the land that would become Canada. Even the seemingly benign activity of wilderness paddling—which to borrow from Beverly Haun-Moss, "has been constructed as a pleasure without guilt that does not pollute, make noise or alter natural space," but "actively facilitat[es] an appreciation of the environment, healthy exercise, and self-definition"[4]—reproduces the hierarchies and disparities of colonialism. Not only does recreational paddling construct an ideal participant that is typically white, middle-class, male, and able-bodied, but it links that participant with a quiet mastery of their tool, and by extension the environment.[5]

In more recent years, the paddle and the canoe have emerged as sites for cultural renewal amongst indigenous peoples. In 1996, for instance, six elders from a Dogrib community in the Northwest Territories, assisted by six student apprentices from the local school board, built a birchbark canoe at a spring hunting camp near Rae, a conscious effort to recover knowledge and skills long dormant. Amongst the Dogrib, the canoe—and by

extension the paddle—is both a tool and a "metaphor for travel." Canoe paths link named places, each with their own story, which provides "information pertinent to Dogrib identity, history, and survival."[6] Meanwhile, construction materials, such as spruce roots and poles, and birchbark, reflect geographies of land use and environmental knowledge. Whereas some materials were gathered near the construction site, others were purposefully acquired during trips of many kilometers.[7]

In both guises, as a tool of labour and leisure, the paddle provided and continues to provide opportunities for encountering nature. My own historical investigations of recreational paddlers have uncovered how the canoe inspired and enabled multiple modes of movement through nature-culture spaces, but also the ways in which the paddle linked bodies in myriad ways to watery landscapes, and in doing so produced information about water depth, currents, wind patterns, and shorelines. Although the environmental experiences of the recreationalists are often privileged, Richard White reminds us that for many people, environmental knowledge is produced not through leisure, but work.[8] Aboriginal traders and hunters, voyageurs, mapmakers, prospectors, and guides have all encountered the natural world, in part, through their paddles.

The paddle I brought to the workshop was a one-piece, single-blade, cherry Ottertail, a Christmas gift from my father a decade ago. It seemed an obvious choice for a gathering concerned with mobility, the environment, and borderlands. The scratches and dents, which mark the blade and shaft bear testament to travels within Killarney, the French River, Kipawa, Muskoka, and the Rideau Canal. More than just introducing me to or re-acquainting me with places, this paddle has provided opportunities for knowing people. It has endured long conversations, equally long silences, and even fights with fellow paddlers.

More recently, this paddle has come to represent, along with its sibling technology the canoe, my academic preoccupation with the annual meetings and encampments of the transnational American Canoe Association in the decades around the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Not only were the encampments—two-week affairs that took place at different points in Ontario, New York, and New England—typically located in the borderlands, but, with members drawn from Canada and the United States, a good portion of the canoeists invariably crossed a border on their journey to the meets. The question of place reveals another connection to the workshop, this one geographical. The "workship" route took us past one of encampment locations: Brophy's Point on Wolfe Island.[9] There, in 1893 where water meets land, the canoeists, oftentimes with paddle in hand, played, mingled, competed, and explored.

The canoe paddle has at different times and places constituted the natural world and travel in diverse ways. It has facilitated commerce and subsistence, work and leisure, colonialism and resistance, sociability and antagonism. Likewise, it has enabled the framing of nature as something to use, subdue, admire, protect. Perhaps what links these diverse stories is the paddle as a technology of epistemology, as a way of encountering and knowing the environment, others, and the self. In spite of its necessity to the canoeist, however, little attention has been paid to the paddle. Perhaps it is time to change that.

[1] In an effort to recognize the long history of the paddle amongst North American indigenous groups, I use the past tense. However, I am cognizant of the ongoing import of the paddle to Aboriginal cultures in Canada and the United States.

[2] This practice of separating nature and culture is a Euro-North American one. Most indigenous worldviews don't distinguish between the two.

[3] Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

[4] Beverly Haun-Moss, "Layered Hegemonies: The Origins of Recreational Canoeing Desire in the Province of Ontario," *Topia* 7 (Spring 2002), p. 52.

[5] Haun-Moss, "Layered Hegemonies"; Bruce Erickson, "Canoe Nation: Race and Gender in the Making of a National Icon," (Ph.D. Dissertation: York University, 2010).

[6] Thomas D. Andrews and John B. Zoe, "The Dogrib Birchbark Canoe Project," *Arctic* 51.1 (March 1998), p. 79.

[7] Andrews and Zoe, p. 80.

[8] Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living? Work and Nature" in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), pp. 171-185.

[9] Roughly ten of the encampments between 1880 and 1902 were held in the Thousand Islands. Since 1903, the annual meetings have taken place at a permanent campsite on the St. Lawrence River in 1901: Sugar Island, which sits midway between Gananoque, ON, and Clayton, NY.

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