

Brian S. Osborne: *Net-Float and Stone-Weight*

'From Harpoons and Spears, to Seines and Gill-Nets: Mementos of Local Niches and Translocal Connections'

Those of us who think about the human presence in this part of North America think about people on the land: the transformation of forests into lumber and eventually agricultural land; rocks into minerals; rivers into travel routes and water power. For many of us, we turn our backs to the Great Lakes other than to consider their role as part of a transport system conveying staple products out of the region and manufactures and immigrants into it.

But this is such a myopic perspective. The Great Lakes also provided a valuable resource: the fishery. Hence my objects: a net-float and a net-weight. But more about them later. While they prompted my reflections here, they represent the last stage in my piscine-saga of shifts in the context of niches, from the local habitus to that of trans-local impacts.

The first human exploitation of the local lakes and rivers, “great” and “small,” were the native Aboriginal peoples. Archaeological excavations provide evidence of hooks and harpoons. Early French and British travelers report on their seasonal fishing regimes starting with the spring gatherings at river estuaries to intercept the annual spawning migration of salmon (soon to be exterminated by colonial over-fishing!), lake-trout and whitefish. Early artistic renderings capture them fishing from their canoes with harpoons and spears during their seasonal peregrinations throughout the back-country.

And then came the Euro-Canadian colonists. Initially, they viewed the lakes as a resource-commons yielding an array of fish to supplement their farming-based diet. Their technology relied upon giant seine-nets that were towed out into the lakes by row-boats and dragged ashore by teams of men or windlasses, and the indiscriminate catch dumped onto local beaches to be sorted out into those to be kept and those to be discarded. Early maps record how this practice came to be organized into lake-shore fishing-lots while, again, transient artists capture – often in romantic tropes – the operation of the system.

But, with the advent of steam-powered tug-boats, the system changed. They allowed the deployment of a new fishing-technology: gill-nets. They are best thought of as walls of fibre – initially hemp but later nylon – three meters high and several kilometers in length strung out along their owners’ licensed fishing grounds. They also required a new vision of the waterscape, as both the Aboriginal and the seine fishers were shore-based. The gill-net fishermen were as knowledgeable about the seasonal fish-runs but were also interpreters of the shoals, shallows, and seasonal feeding grounds. And they made their mark on the landscape too. All along the shore of Ontario, fishing stations were established, each with a functional array of diagnostic elements; vats for dipping the nets to clean them of algae; racks to dry and repair the nets; and ice-houses to preserve the fish for market.

And all of this is prompted by two objects: a simple float, one of the several deployed along the top of a seine-net; and a roughly carved stone-weight threaded along its bottom to keep that same net vertical in the water. They are mementos of a former economy and way of life.