PADDLING AS PLACE: Arts-Informed Inquiry Into Experiential Learning of Place and Ecological Identity

by

Erika J.M. Bailey

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Graduate Department of Adult Education

University of Toronto

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Abstract

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I explore how recreational canoeists develop sense of place developed and ecological identity through experience. The intersection between artefact and narrative is the entry-point of exploration of understandings of how recreational canoeists learn through experiences.

There are three structural elements. A factional narrative arc of a canoe trip frames the work. Fragments of collective narratives: weave into this story and add richness and depth of experience. Participants’ interwoven narratives form the second element of this work. Finally, footnotes underpin this text to explain and support the research. They emerge to reflect the complexity of telling, and understanding, experience.

This is a story of stories. This is a story of a trip that never happened. It holds real participants’ narratives based in lived experiences that shape this story. Narratives emerge between artefact and experience, between experience and ecological identity, between ecological identity and place, and between place and story.
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Images used with permission unless otherwise marked.
John Tamblyn is a friend and fellow paddler who kindly shared his images for the purposes of this thesis.
Bill Bailey is my dad and our family finds him behind the camera more often than in front of it.

Glossary of Terms

**Bow**
Front of the canoe. The person who sits in this seat is the ‘bow paddler’ or the ‘bow’.

**Class One, Class Two, etc. Rapids**
Rapids occur when water travels down-hill and over boulders, ledges and other obstacles. The wave formations indicate where the obstacles lie. The basic formations are ‘V’s and ‘U’s. ‘V’ shows where the water squeezes between two boulders. ‘U’ occurs when water runs over a boulder. “Rapids are classified as Class 1 if the downstream Vs are not too numerous and are easy to follow. The difficulty rating goes as high as 6. Class 3 is the upper limit for the open canoe,” (Mason, 1988, p. 163).

**Draw**
A paddle stroke where the canoeist reaches out sideways, canoe blade parallel to the boat and pulls the paddle through the water to the side of the canoe. This makes the canoe travel sideways and is used when running rapids.

**GORP**
“Good Old Raisins and Peanuts.” A fortifying snack often eaten on canoe trips. I always include chunks of chocolate and a varied mix of nuts and dried fruits. Also known as trail mix.

**Grumman canoe**
A canoe originally made by the Grumman Company. “Standard thickness [aluminum] canoes are very tough and rigid. Absolutely no maintenance required... Will dent but can be pounded. They stick on rocks and this can get you into trouble when running rapids,” (Mason, 1988, p. 142).

**Gunwale**
The edge or lip of the canoe where traditional cedar-strip canoes brace the interior supports. Provides strength and stability to the hull.

**Hull**
The body of a vessel, here, a canoe, excluding other parts (Encarta Dictionary: English (North America), August 7, 2009)

**K**
Kilometres

**Kevlar**
A strong fibrous material used in some canoe construction.
Line

To the bow and stern lines (ropes) to walk the canoe along the river’s edge and lead the canoe upstream and/or past challenging rapids.

Naptha

White gasoline, a fuel that burns very efficiently.

North Canoe

“Large bark canoes paddled by voyageurs and used for distance transport” (Canadian Canoe Museum: http://www.canoemuseum.ca, August 7, 2009)

Otter Tail Paddle

Paddles are crafted into differently shaped blades. Canoeists select paddles based on personal preference and the type of canoe travel (river versus lake). Mine has a long and thin blade and looks like an otter’s tail. I use it deep-water canoeing.

PFD

The Personal Floatation Device, or life preserver, fits around the torso and is mandatory boating safety equipment.

Portage

Portage is French for ‘carry’, a place where canoeists carry their canoes and gear across land. “Anyone who tells you portaging is fun is either a liar or crazy, or maybe both. However, whenever you are tempted to cure the portage, remember that it’s there to circumvent the rapids and falls that can’t otherwise be negotiated, and that its existence forms a barrier that helps to preserve the wilderness,” (Mason, 1988, p. 166).

Scout

To read rapids and plan the run. Canoeists land the canoe and walk along a rapid’s shoreline to familiarize themselves with what the course will look like and how (or if) they will canoe down-river.

Solo

To paddle solo is to paddle in a boat alone. Carrying a canoe on your own is also called ‘soloing’.

Stern

The rear of a canoe. The paddler in this seat steers using number of different paddling techniques.

Strokes: C & J

These are two common steering paddle strokes used to direct the canoe. The C sweeps away from the canoe’s hull. The J is a regular stroke and curves away from the body of canoe at the end of the stroke.

Swift

A swift occurs in a river where a slight drop in elevation creates faster flowing water, but not significant enough to be called a rapid.
Thermarest  Brand name of a self-inflating sleeping pad. Usually about 1 inch thick when fully inflated.

Throw Bag  Throw-bag is a sleeve that contains a coiled rope. Mandatory boating safety equipment used to rescue people from the water.

Thwart  Brace across the width of the canoe. There are usually two. Provides strength and structure to the hull.

Topographical Map  Also called “topo” maps. These maps show the physical geography of land and water, including swamps, roads, elevations, sand, shallow waters, names of rivers and lakes, trails, railways, buildings, and names of districts, rapids, waterfalls, towns and other landmarks. See Appendix A for this thesis’ topographical map.

Toronto Fibreglass  A canoe manufacturer.

Tern  A fishing bird that nests on and near freshwater lakes. They protect their nests by swooping close to the perceived danger. Their cries are quite piercing.

Wanigan  “A food box or “wanigan” holds all the utensils, bowls, cups, and food that you need at every meal,” (Mason, 1988, p. 64.).

Yolk  Centre thwart, or cross-beam, shaped to more-or-less comfortably to rest on the carrier’s shoulders and to make for an easier portage. Similar shape to oxen yolks.
“Only when one comes to listen, only when one is aware and still, can things be seen and heard.”

1 Olson, 1972, p.xxii.

“The truth about stories is that’s all that we are.”

2 King, 2003, p. 2.
I was told

I am 18 years old and I sit to my grandmother’s left at the long, polished, light pine dining room table. A slim slip of smoke rises and blossoms into silver ribbon over her head. At the opposite end Poppa’s chair sits empty and dusty. Above the large globe wicker lamp casts orange light. Outside the July sunlight fades over the pine trees. Cicadas and moths throw themselves against the windows, beat their wings, fall, flutter and fly away. I imagine the scene she describes.

~~~~~
I Remembered

It is 1949. Eight gravel-voiced men lean elbows on the long, polished, light pine dining room table. Slim slips of smoke rise and blossom into silver ribbons over their heads. They wear blue, white and grey cotton shirts. Their rolled-up sleeves strain against their biceps when they reach for the finger-print smudged wine glasses. Open collars expose thick, tanned necks, jumping Adams apples and sinewy shoulders. At the far end of the table my grandfather, “Poppa”, Omond Solandt, leans back in his chair and laces his thick fingers across his broad chest. His dark brown hair sweeps across his forehead and thick horn-rimmed glasses perch on his straight nose. Shadows accentuate his cheeks and jaw line. The wicker webbing creaks under him. Above, the globe-sized wicker lamp casts orange light. Behind Poppa’s head the July sunlight fades over the pine trees. Cicadas and moths throw themselves against the windows, beat their wings, fall, flutter and fly away. Poppa’s thick-lipped smile spreads.

They speak about the old fur trading routes through the Canadian Shield of Manitoba, northern Ontario and into Quebec. They share their stories and experiences of the north-country. Poppa talks about his childhood in Winnipeg, his fire-watch in Temagami and his work with the Canadian National Railway. The others nod and tell their stories. They pull out maps and books and they plan.

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What Happened

The beginning of The Voyageurs was at a 1951 dinner party in Ottawa, as Eric Morse recounted in his memoirs, Freshwater Saga. ‘After dinner, in a spirit of gentle banter, some of the Canadians were asking the diplomats how they could possibly learn much of the true Canada on the cocktail circuit. They should experience what it was like to paddle the Canadian lakes and rivers, trudge over portages, feel the spray of rapids, camp among pines and face the insects. In the end the diplomats said, ‘Okay, show us.’

Eric Morse, Omond Solandt and Blair Fraser took three diplomats on a 10-day trip organized by Morse. Of the three taken on the Gatineau and Lievre rivers, one, Tony Lovink, dean of the diplomatic corps and Netherlands ambassador, remained a lifetime friend and canoeing companion of the group.3

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It is September 1972. Rosalind settles slowly into the bow of the canoe, wiggles her blue denim tulip hat onto her head and picks up her spruce paddle. She wears a patterned orange-and-white bikini. Her pale, slim back shines in the hot summer sun. Bill steps into the stern. The canoe wobbles and waves reach into the still river. Rosalind gasps, grasps the gunwales and turns around. Bill swiftly manoeuvres his feet against the wooden ribs of the green Northland cedar-strip canoe.

“Ready?” asks Bill.

“Ready,” says Rosalind.

Omond and Vaire in the canoe ahead cut through the water and leave few waves. Rosalind and Bill follow and weave side-to-side down the narrow channel into Go Home Lake in Northern Ontario. The scent of warm canvas and leather radiates from the packs in the boat as they splash after them.

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4 My grandmother
At the first portage Rosalind reaches for the heavy tent pack. Omond brings over the green canvas bedding pack, lifts it by the top flaps and presents the dark brown leather straps.

“Oh, alright,” says Rosalind. She slips her shoulders into the straps and steps into the forest. At the end of the portage Bill packs up the canoe and they settle back into the boat.

The air cools into evening and Rosalind rests on the warm, smooth rock of the campsite. She watches the quiet lapping waves just below her toes. Pink setting sun ripples, dips and reddens. A gentle wind lifts her thickening dark, wiry hair and cool pine forest scent rises. She wears a heavy, white, Irish woollen cable-knit sweater, a gift from Bill. Poppa delves into the wanigan, extracts a flat tin of smoked mussels, a loaf of heavy, dark rye bread and the wide-bladed kitchen knife. Vaire slices the bread into squares, eases the mussels from the tin, plops them onto the bread and passes the aluminum plate to Rosalind. The little life in Rosalind’s tummy burbles. She crunches on an oily morsel and passes the plate to Bill. She scans the far dark green shore. A king fisher dives from a low branch and swipes a minnow from the lake’s shallow shoreline.

Behind her Omond and Bill uncrinkle the dry topographical maps, press their fingertips against the flattened landscape, peer westward down the lake, bend their heads back over the map and nod. Bill winds his finger across the paper and through pursed lips whistles hollow *whoct, wheet, whhooo* noises as he traces tomorrow’s route with his nail-bitten fingertip.

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5 “I make sense of the world through stories. Stories passed down to me from the women in my family. Their stories resonate with me, seep into my skin, rattle my bones, become a part of me, of my vocabulary when I tell my stories; when I string together words and images to make sense of the world around me and my place within it. But I can only tell these stories when I slow down, take small steps, and inhale the world around me. Only then can I discover the words, compose the image; capture a moment in the lives of women who have touched my life” (Luciani, 2007, pp. 207-208).
It is 1979. I am six years old. My brother Alex is five. We perch on Poppa’s lap who sits in his round, beige spinny chair in the living room of my grandparent’s home, The Wolfe Den, in Caledon, Ontario. Behind us a fire crackles in the field stone fireplace within the central supporting pillar. Below us mottled orange shag carpet runs the expanse of the living, sitting and dining rooms. Poppa spins towards the floor-to-ceiling windows and we stare south over the blue and purple autumn hills, into the haze and towards Toronto. Poppa knows how to drive a tractor, how to build tables and how to fix pipes. He knows how to cut down trees and how to carve a roast. Poppa knows about the Aztecs in Mexico and he knows about the Inuit in the Arctic. He tells Alex and me stories about corn crops and about seal hunts. He tells us about long rivers, strong winds and smooth rock. My legs dangle over Poppa’s khaki-clad thigh and tangle with Alex’s. I press my ear into his warm chest. His deep, rumbly voice growls through my head. My eyes blink slow and heavy.

It is early July 2009 and I prepare for the upcoming canoe trip with Stacey, Geoff, Khal, Candice and George on the Mississaugi River in northern Ontario. I canoed this route in 2005. Please note that this story is not an accurate account of the Mississaugi route.

I spread out my equipment across the cool, squeaky, wooden kitchen floor and eye the packs into which this stuff needs to be stuffed. I sigh, grab my chin and pace around the piles of gear. I imagine the packing order: tent, clothes bag, sleeping bag slide in first. Squishy and small bits are scrunched into the gaps. Tarp, tools, rain gear and first aid kit sit at the top of my bag. The scent of dried mud, the feel of rough nylon and crinkly tarp remind me of my parents’ cool basement. I remember Mom’s swift, slim hands sorting the gear.

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6 The Mississaugi Canoe Route is well-mapped and detailed by Kevin Callan (1999). I canoed this route in 2005. Please note that this story is not an accurate account of the Mississaugi route.
I remember her bright blue eyes under her wiry silver-black hair shifting from object to object. “Could you please pass me the orange freezer bag, Darling?” she asks. She nests item into item. I stand, I shuffle my feet and I watch. 

I have camped and canoed all my life. I remember the feel of sticks and mucky stones, the brush of dewy leaves against my arms and shoulders. I remember crouching to inspect crawling things. I remember the summer smell of green-and-orange canvas tent, the feel of sand in my one-piece bathing suit and of gooey lake floors between my toes. I remember arguments, laughter, fear, swimming and sore muscles. These are the messy, sticky, inextricable sensations of embodied knowing, learning and these are the foundational experiences that inform who I am today and how I choose to live my life.

Alex inherited Poppa’s cedar strip canoe and some down sleeping bags. He uses these now when he takes his family on canoe trips. I inherited a couple of Poppa’s canvas-and-leather packs, his old wanigan and his prospector’s tent, along with other bits and pieces. Each carries stories untold and adventures that I will never know. When I hold these objects I inherit more than their sum’s worth. I hold within me a deep love and wonder of the immense power of travelling through these waterways. Now I plan and organize trips. I prepare the foods, navigate and read land and water. I carry packs and stories and community with others.

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7 “To conceptualize representational possibilities is to be thoroughly alert to the various alternatives that resonate deep within our creative and epistemological makeup. It is to be vigilant and responsive to the metaphorical cues that lives offer” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 212).

8 Kolb’s (1984) theory helps me understand experiential learning: Experience (I do something or something happens), Reflection (I pause and think back), Meaning-making (I make sense of what happened), and Application (I use my new understanding in future experiences).

9 “Researching [is] an activity that is an extension of who we are as individuals” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 25).

10 Also known as a campfire tent. Usually made of Egyptian cotton and is basically a lean-to with sides. (Mason, 1988)

11 In conversation with a First Nations’ friend he shares with me that objects are stories and stories, objects. Personal reflection, April 2009.

12 “We like stories because we think in stories; it’s how we derive meaning from the world” (Franklin, 2007, p. 111).
I come to this research thankful for this inheritance. Through this research I explore the sense of well-being, belonging, wonder, awe and humility I experience when on canoe trips. This writing inquiry helps me understand how my experiences as a recreational canoeist have informed my sense of place and ecological identity and practices. These responses emerge from experience.

Pedagogically, I believe that adults (re)learn and (re)identify with experience through reflection, conversation and (re)telling experiences. My interests in experiential learning and my passion for canoeing join in this work to discover topographies of understanding sense of place and ecological identity. I set the route and direction of this work. Through this I (re)discover this landscape uniquely shaped by thinkers, writers, participants, reflexive practice, my personal and my academic histories.

This is a story of stories. This is a story of a trip that never happened. It blends the real experiences of real people, the participants, within the framework of a canoe trip we never took together. The participants’ narratives, based in real experiences, shape and inform this story. Narratives emerge between artefact and experience, between experience and ecological identity, between ecological identity and place, and between place and story.

13 “If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6).

14 “How people perceive themselves in reference to nature, as living and breathing beings connected to the rhythms of the earth, the biogeochemical cycles, the grand and complex diversity of ecological systems” (Thomashow, 1995, p. xiii).

15 This research story contains three fonts to identify the unique, and integrated voices. The purpose of this delineation is to clarify voice and to create a space, and place, where all three important aspects of this work may exist as a symbiotic whole:

The factional story arc is written in Papyrus font.

Participants’ stories appear in italicized High Tower Text font.

Footnotes appear in smaller High Tower Text font.

16 “An artefact is a physical object. It is something that can be handled and observed. It usually has a temporal quality, meaning that it ‘speaks’ of actions at a particular time and place. Often an artefact has meaning much larger than its obvious meaning or use” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 85).

17 “Life does not unfold in chapters” (Sheilds, 2003, p. 28).
I invite you to travel with me, with us, into, through and along this story and our experiences of place.18

18 “The new nature writing...rather than being pastoral or descriptive or simply a natural history essay, has got to be couched in stories – whether fiction or non-fiction – where we as humans are present. Not only as observers, but as intrinsic elements. I feel this is important, because we’ve got to reconnect ourselves to our environment and fellow species in every way we can, every chance we have. In my thinking, it is the tradition of the false notion of separation that has caused us so many problems and led to so much environmental degradation. I believe it is our great challenge in the twenty-first century to remake the connection. I think our lives depend on it” (Peelle, 2008, p. 12).
Chapter 2
Tobacco Offering

I lunge one leg over the black mesh seat and into the two-foot space in the stern of the blue kevlar canoe. I bend my second knee, lower my hips, grasp the gunwales and push the boat free from the gravel launch into the flat, inky river. The canoe wobbles as I lift my free leg up, over and in. A blue heron lifts its legs and picks through the reedy banking two hundred metres away. It lunges at a frog. George turns around and watches as I settle into the canoe, clip my day pack to the thwart in front of me and tuck my ankles under my seat. I wiggle my life preserver down, grab my wood otter-tail paddle and smile.

“Ready?” asks George.

“Absolutely,” I say.

We paddle out into the north end of the Spanish River at the head of the Mississaugi River canoe route. A wood-and-steel bridge runs over the river to the west. To the east the river runs over the Spanish Chutes rapids. I back-paddle and point the nose of the boat towards the launch. George and I watch as the other canoeists grasp the sides of the canoe, pick and clamber over their gear packs, wobble in the water, nestle into their seats and paddle towards us. Khal and Candice’s green canoe flank us on one side and Stacey and Geoff’s red canoe flank the other. Steel-grey skies hang heavy and threaten rain. Faces beam under hat peaks.

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19 “Tobacco is used by native people to represent the honesty that they carry in their hearts when words are to be spoken between two people or to the spirit world. When a request is made, a teaching is shared, a question is asked, or a prayer is offered, the tobacco travels ahead of the words so that honesty will be received in a kind and respectful way. To offer tobacco is to pay an ultimate respect to that which you are asking” Harold Flett: http://www.nald.ca/CLR/chikiken/page30.htm (June 9, 2009).

20 “I think we must make space to invite and explore different representation of experience” (Kraft, 1995, p. 14).
Three canoes21 bump gently against each other in the cool wind. Hands and boots drape over others’ gunwales. I fish around in my day pack and pull out a slim, plastic-tipped cigar. I grasp the white filter between my teeth and balance the grape-brown cigar between my lips. I pop open the black plastic tube and extract a Redbird’s Strike anywhere wood match. I flick its white-and-red tip against abrasive paper. The match rasps, sparks, and pops when it flares into flame and sounds like fluttering wings. I cup the match with my left palm and bring the flame to the tip of the cigar. I inhale and suck smoky-sweetness. I extinguish the match in the river and slip it into my PFD front pocket. I draw a second time and grey smoke slides from my lips and curls down-wind. I close my eyes.

“To the river, the creatures, plants and land; may we pass safely through these waters. Forgive us our hubris,” I say. I open my eyes, squint into the wet skies and pass the cigar.

Khal pulls the cigar from my hand and his long fingers bring it to his lips. Khaleed wears a floppy black hat, red PFD, a long-sleeve collared quick-dry shirt and a half-day of black stubble. A blue whistle dangles from his chest. Short black curls escape his hat and his long legs stretch out in front of him. He pulls the cigar from his mouth and closes his brown eyes. Long black eyelashes press against his high cheekbones.

Khal and I have been friends since first year university. He earned his Bachelor of Science from the University of Toronto in biology and philosophy. He now works as an environmental officer in the Ministry of Natural Resources. His work puts him in contact with industry,

21 “Canoes are a part of who we are, an immutable fact of Canadian life. But if one were to pick up any canoe in any part of Canada, hold it up to the light, turn it lovingly over and admire its curves and imperfections, ask of its experiences on the waters nearby, stories will flow, stories that speak something of the essence of its paddlers and the place it calls home. These stories, many of them known only to the people who built or paddled the craft, deserve to be told to a wider audience, because they sum to a generative tracing of a northern nation” (Raffan, 1999, p. x).
citizens and government. He investigates reports of environmental damage, liaises and educates on environmental policy and practice and visits industrial sites within the Guelph, Ontario district, a part of the Ministry of the Environment west central region.

He and his wife, Kathy, pursue a number of outdoors activities including bicycling, camping, kayaking, climbing, hiking and canoeing. They make a number of choices to live more sustainably: diapers, equipment and toys for their daughter, the car they drive, the foods they grow and consume, the places they shop. Their continuous conscious and deliberate ways of being consumers acknowledge a strong care for and understanding of their ecological and economic impact in the world. Every time I visit with them they have another book, article or story about ecological impacts of consumerism, about the environment and about our broader society.

“Candice,” he says as he leans forward over the blue kitchen pack and stretches forward. Khal exhales grey-white smoke. He smiles.

A mutual friend introduced me to Candice a few years ago. Liisa said that we might have something in common. We did and have not stopped talking canoes since. Candice is a teacher in the Hastings-Prince Edward District School Board in Belleville, Ontario. She plans and runs a program for high-school students called Lifelines. The purpose of this program is to provide students, who experience academic and/or personal challenges the opportunity to develop a stronger sense of self. She facilitates the development of their leadership abilities, reflective and creative aspects of learning. An integral part of this program is to take the students on four wilderness trips between February and June. The year-end ten-day canoe trip in the Temagami area of northern Ontario is the program’s highlight.
During her summer Candice leads trips for Camp Temagami-Clearwater Expeditions, a camp that challenges youth to push their personal limits with trips traditional to the area and a by-gone era. She also guides tours with Canadian Wilderness Adventures, currently in the Algonquin region of Ontario. A few years ago she guided a 32-day canoe trip through Labrador with Camp Temagami.

Candice is a writer, a reflexive practitioner, an advocate for wilderness experiences and for the wilderness itself. This curiosity started in high school when she learned about global warming. Her undergraduate degree in geography eventually led her to her Masters of Science research. Her work explores the glacial mass balance record of the Canadian high Arctic through ice core analysis and examination of trends in climate change, both current and past.

Candice looks back to the group, exhales and her steel-blue eyes catch mine. She smiles and coughs. Candice extends her arm across the green canoe and touches George’s plaid-clad shoulder.

George turns his black, broad-brimmed oiled canvas hat away from the feeding heron and toward Candice. He extends his thick hand and takes the shortened cigar between his forefinger and thumb.

“Thank you,” he says. He twists his palm, turns the cigar sideways, pauses, brings it to his mouth and lifts his jaw towards the tree tops. George’s tanned forearms poke out of his pale blue denim collared shirt. He wears an orange PFD, teal quick-dry pants and a large-faced silver watch on his left wrist. A gust of wind knocks the side of the canoes and the heron rises from the long reeds, flaps its broad six-foot grey wings and croaks.

I met George over three years ago on the Montreal River canoe trip. On that trip we quickly determined that we shared similar ecological ethics around impact, awareness and practice. George retired from his work in computer programming and systems-analysis in 2006 but keeps very busy as one of two volunteer river protectors. Together he and his colleague steward the Rocky Saugeen River that burbles through his family’s property in Grey County, Ontario. He and his colleague monitor silt levels, river temperatures, and fish habitat as a part of on-
going negotiations with the power dam up-river for sustainable river uses and practices. George has volunteered hundreds of hours to regenerating and protecting the Rocky Saugeen.

During George’s short four years of canoeing he has packed in quite a number of trips, including the Nahanni River in the Yukon. He continues with a number of other outdoor pursuits including biking, hiking, sailing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and fishing.

At home on his farm, George and his wife, Jenifer, maintain large bio-diverse gardens of garlic, beets, carrots, artichokes, beans and peas to name just a few. He keeps bees, spins honey and taps and boils maple syrup. He has set up a motion-sensor camera that photographs a number of critters, including coyotes, deer, beaver, dogs, racoons and humans as they travel through the property.

George draws deeply through his silver-black moustache. The cigar pops as he pulls it from his lips.

He holds his breath and says, “Stacey?”

Stacey blinks her hazel eyes, smiles and nods. Her dark brown ponytail bounces. Her long fingers pinch the cigar from George’s thick fingers. George exhales. Stacey closes her eyes and quietly hmmmms. The canoes bob.

Stacey was my first friend, and my learning partner I began my graduate studies in 2006. She received a Masters of Education from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto(OISE) in 2008. She studied adult learning, community building, embodied knowing, and transformative learning. As an instructor at Niagara College in Welland, Ontario she teaches adults in the Recreation and Leisure Services Diploma program. Her field experience is in municipal recreation using a community development approach to support neighbourhoods to meet their leisure needs. Stacey teaches eight courses during the school year including, community development, ecological identity, leadership and outdoor recreation.

Stacey’s previous many years of community and recreational work has led her to being an advocate for public leisure spaces and services. Recently she presented at the World Leisure Congress in Quebec on the effects of neo-liberalism on municipal recreation policy and practices.
At seven years old Stacey became a canoeist at Camp Ki-Wa-Y. Many years and many different roles at summer camp helped shape her community values and her ecological identity which set the stage for her career path. She and her husband, Dave, and their daughter and son live in West Lincoln, southern Ontario. They, too, enjoy many outdoor adventures year round. Like the others, their family makes sustainable choices, deliberate over their food and items purchases and maintain a strong, deep commitment to living within the world as gently and with as little impact as possible.

The cigar burns shorter and Stacey opens her eyes. She lifts her cupped left hand into the smoke and brushes her hand over her forehead, over her heart and over her torso. She raises her right arm and whispers, “Thank you.”

“Geoff?” she says as she leans backwards over her green pack.

Geoff presses his khaki'd knees into the thwart of his red cedar-strip canoe. He reaches his thick, black-haired forearm and square fingers over the blue food barrel and leans his belly on his green canvas and brown leather strapped backpack. He grabs the cigar. Stacey scrunches upright. Geoff plonks into his seat. He nods his shiny head, squints to me, then peers down-river and into the water. His light brown shirt mirrors his eyes and silver-black shadow grows over his round face. He rests his left hand on the unvarnished, square-bladed, dimpled, blonde-wood paddle across his knees. A white stripe travels across his ring finger. He puffs.

I only recently met Geoff who took my friend Tim’s place about a month before our trip. “He’s a solid dude,” said Tim as he assured me that Geoff’s canoe-tripping experience outstrips everyone’s collective river time by about fifteen years.

Geoff grew up near the Grand River and, from the time he was a very young boy, spent summers in the YMCA camp system. As an amateur painter and photographer, Geoff has woven these arts into the many opportunities he has had to travel across Canada by canoe. Now retired
from a life-long career as an outdoor educator he continues his involvement with groups and organizations by donating both time and money to these initiatives.

Geoff's short frame rocks with the red canoe in the breeze. Smoke travels down-river.

"Here you go," says Geoff. He pulls out his camera, frames a couple photos of the group and stuffs the camera back in his waterproof stuff-sack.

"Thanks," I say and I take the shortened cigar.

I shut the view of packs and people and paddles from my mind and breathe. I puff one last time, remove the moistened plastic tip, place it in my PFD pouch, lift the cigar to the sky, pause and release it into the breeze. The cigar sizzles in the brown-black water.

"Which way?" asks George.

"That way," I say and point west toward the open lake. Three canoes separate and laughter bounces off of the boulders.

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I recognize and acknowledge my place within this research text. I am a first generation Canadian woman from English and Scottish descent. I had a very safe, nurturing and supportive childhood that provided many and diverse opportunities to learn. I realize canoe trips impact the immediate environment. I acknowledge that Canada's history includes European settlers who appropriated and sold, or gave away, these lands, first inhabited by indigenous peoples.

It is for these reasons I enter this endeavour mindful of paying respect to the earth, waters, skies and all manner of living thing as well as to those who will share their stories. I take these canoe trips because I reconnect with this landscape, waterscape, skyscape. Canoeing nourishes
my heart, mind, soul and body. It is an important part of my identity as a woman, as a Canadian and it is how I identify with the environment. I canoe to rediscover myself and my little place in this extraordinary, breathtaking world. I also pay respect to the canoe, an ancient technology developed by First Nations people so they could travel through this place. My grandfather, and his friends, were some of the first in the 1950’s to turn canoe tripping into a form of leisure which secured the canoe as an integral part of Canadian identity.

In this same spirit of humility I observe this moment at the entry into this research text. I must thank a number of people who have helped me on my journey. To Poppa who passed away years ago but still lives within three generations of paddlers. To Mom, Dad, Alex and all the Baileys Junior whose quiet, proud support in all things I do and unwavering belief in me has been a true lifeline in rough waters. To so many friends who cheered me on, held me up, fed me full, held my hand, guided my inquiry, mopped up tears, made me tea, and patiently listened to me repeat myself. To my Partner. To Rachel, Paula and Andrew who all edited my work and shared their great insight. To so many professors and classmates at Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and within the Centre for Arts-Informed Research community whose quiet, thought-filled listening, curious minds, enlivened conversations, community and understanding provided such a strong foundation for my studies.

To the Burbidge Linds who so generously hosted me at their writer’s cabin in Haliburton, Ontario, a beautiful place and a wonderous space to think, create, edit, swim and paddle. To my participants who shared more than I could ever include in these pages and whose voices are the life-force behind this work. To Ardra Cole who encouraged me to push my boat out. And finally to J. Gary Knowles who helped me find my paddle.

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22 Thomashow (1995) discusses throughout *Ecological Identity* the importance of environmentalists’ reflective practice as a way to understand their commitment, their role as teachers of sustainable living. I extend this recommendation to personal choices around leisure and recreational pursuits, in addition the big and small choices we make that impact how we choose to live within the world.

Chapter 3
Height of Land
Erika

The edges of the river pull the river grasses eastwards. Three canoes push against the flow of the Spanish River and turn west. We paddle and natter for twenty minutes, through the narrowing river, up-stream against a swift and spot the first 500-metre portage on the south bank of the river. The entrance to the portage is wide enough for two canoes. George and I bob. The others nudge into shore, clamber over their gear, unclip the backpacks from the boats, bung them into the brush and hoist canoes onto shoulders and packs onto backs. Five minutes later we nudge into shore. Gravelly mud grinds against the hull.

George flips our canoe onto his shoulders and steps down the trail. I huff behind him with my big blue pack on my back, a round plastic blue barrel on my front and the lunch pack over my head. I grasp my paddle as a walking stick and navigate the path's lumps and bumps. My shoulders ache. Half a kilometre down the mud-and-rock path Geoff hoists a pack onto his knee, leans it slowly into the red canoe, and shuffles it into the boat's belly. He repeats this with next pack, then the next. George flips the canoe off his shoulders and lowers it onto the muddy shore. He turns to me and helps me lift the big pack off my back and drops it at the edge of the clearing.

Back in our boats we paddle out into the lake. Dull crests rib the wide shores and gusts of wind ripple the waves. My nose, cheeks and chin chill. My neck, arms and back burn.
“How far across the lake?” asks Geoff. Stacey bounces in the front of the boat.

I crouch over the map case and count grid squares. “Seven K,” I yell. Geoff nods, squints and pushes forward.

“Let’s tuck into those islands ahead,” Geoff gestures with his chin. Candice looks up from her maps. 24

“Then hug the north shore. There’s some elevation that should cut some of the wind too,” she calls and points to where one o’clock would be if the canoes were clocks. The head-wind presses us backwards and our grunting progress moves into the wide body of the lake. Spanish Lake’s treed horizon bobs ahead of us.

Our canoe bounces through waves. I think about email and voicemail messages, work politics, professional interactions, family concerns, my nephews, my niece. I worry about friends and their hearts. I think about my life path. I wonder whether my garden will survive my absence. 25

I glance over the packs and think through my list. Again.

24 “Maps are often implicit in the narratives we share. This is especially true of personal narratives, where, faithful to Montaigne’s notion of “the essay”, the author takes the reader on a journey, an amble through personal experience – often looking back, capturing and exploring key moments, lingering over intriguing details, taking detours and straying down promising conversational trails, finding the way through to an understanding (or discovery) of an intimate landscape” (Gandelman, 2007, as cited in Nash & Garrett-Petts p. 123).

25 “How does a woman choose a form to write in? Is there a connection between the form she chooses and the circumstances of her life” (Scott, 2001, as cited in Crowe, p. 125).
tent  sleeping pad  sleeping bag
matches  axe  saw  shovel
pliers  knife  cutlery
mugs  plates  folding camp seat
ground sheets  tarp  ropes
throw-rope  PFD  extra paddles
bail-buckets  carabiners
two large pots  large frying pan
tank of gas  two-ring camp stove
campfire grill  cooking gloves
coffee thermos  kitchen utensils and knives
dish soap  tea towels
clothes line  paper towel
trash bags  air-tight bags
bungee cords  carabiners
dry boots  rain gear
thermal underwear  wool and thermal socks
hat  mittens  thermal gloves
silk scarf  extra shirt  thin wool sweaters
fleece tops  fleece pants
swim suit  towel
first-aid kit  lip balm  sunscreen
sunburn and bug -bite cream  soap
toothbrush  toothpaste
tampons and pads  hair elastics
pencil and note pad  camera
sunglasses
Three canoes navigate the lake’s narrowing north shore. Pine and poplar trees press the sides. Ahead a stream trickles through a steep rocky creek. The portage trail peeks from the south side. We carry our canoes, our gear and our paddles the 150 metres uphill into Bardney Lake. The little bay protects us from the wind. The mosquitoes find us.

Lunch, I think. I lunge over Stacey’s backpack and grab the thermal cooler lunch pack. I remember lunches Mom and Dad prepared: heavy grained bread, squeezy cheese that squirted from its plastic casing through a belly-button spout, peanut butter and chocolate spread. Sugary crystal juice washed down the gooey thick bread.

“Okay, we’ve got bagels, cheese, sausage, onion, mango chutney,” I say, “oh, and a couple apples and some chocolate.” We settle into the scrubby banking, unsheathe our knives, place paddles across our knees, slice our lunches and swat mosquitoes with sticky hands.

“It looks like we have another open crossing,” says Geoff. He holds half a bagel in one hand and presses the map against the pack in front of him with the other. His fingertip traces the grid. He reads down his nose, through his glasses and squints towards the west. “It should open up in about two K and then it is straight across for about six, six-and-a-half,” he says. His bagel points the way. I groan.

Stacey rubs the red abrasion in her palm between her thumb and forefinger. Khal stands and stretches his arms above his head. Candice rubs her shoulder and nods. George wanders the short shoreline.

After lunch we enter the sheltered bay. Water gurgles and a lily pad swirls in the vortex of the little whirlpool from George’s paddle. We pass by a lumpy little island within the bay. We round the treed lip and find the wind persists in Bardney Lake as we plug into sudden, wide,

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26 “The striving for objectivity is thus understood, phenomenologically, as a striving to achieve greater consensus, greater agreement or consonance among a plurality of subjects, rather than as an attempt to avoid subjectivity altogether” (Abram, 1996, p. 28).
wavy water. Khal, Geoff and I point our canoes towards the two large treed lumps in the middle of the horizon. Candice, Stacey and George lean into the breeze and dig water with paddles. Their sleeves slap against their arms.

From my seat I watch the clouds shift. Paired mayflies blow across our canoe and rest on the lunch pack. A gust of wind dislodges them and they whip west and away. This far from shore, I hear only wind. Fresh water carries the scent of oxygen, remote swamp algae and dirt. My neck aches.

“Switch sides?” I ask George over the wind. One hour of travel has brought us to the set of rocky islands. He transfers his paddle. We watch the terns wheel, screech and dive at us. I manoeuvre the canoe into the lake and toward Geoff and Stacey. Stacey lifts her face to the sky and scans the horizon; the clouds still have not dropped their moisture. We catch up to Candice and Khal who cling to the steep shore where the lake pinches. Above them dark green, feathered evergreens stand erect like soccer fans in a stadium. Their branches reach over each other. Bare rock belies the steep incline. Shadows cool us even though the wind cannot reach us.

“The map shows the portage over there,” says Candice. She points south-east. More thick trees jump from the rising land. “We should be there in about twenty,” she says.

“That’s the Height of Land portage, isn’t it?” I ask. The landscape says it is.27 That is where we will travel up, over and into the Arctic watershed. We pass a deep inland bog. Two blue herons swoop overhead and the gravelly caw of crows carries over the treetops.

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27 “Experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality” (Tuan, 1977, p. 7).
Height of Land portage begins at the tip of a long, narrow finger of water. The slim, muddy take-out allows one canoe in. Stacey jumps onto the shore, bends her knees and hauls the canoe, and Geoff, further up the mud. She braces the canoe as Geoff climbs over the gear. Stacey pulls one muddy foot from the goo, steps up the banking, yanks the boat inland and yanks again. The two pick through mud and rock and load the bags to the sides of the path. Candice and Khal join them at the head of the portage and do the same.

Geoff and Stacey lift the canoe into the narrow path. Geoff grabs one side of the canoe by the gunwale and lifts its red belly onto his thighs. He reaches one arm across the width of the boat, bends his knees and rocks the boat one-two-three. In one swift motion he pulls his extended arm in, pushes his inside arm up and hoists the canoe above his head. Geoff lowers the canoe over his shoulders and jostles the yolk into place at the back of his neck. He steps into the forest.28

Stacey swings a thick pack onto her back and the cooking pots clatter. She lifts a second pack onto her front. Stacey’s enveloped torso, her white hat and her legs disappear into the rising shadows. Candice follows Stacey with the green canoe nestled on her shoulders. Khal carries two packs and three paddles. He follows Candice.

I point George towards the lined mud where the others’ canoes travelled, lean backwards and thrust one more strong paddle stroke in the swirling, murky water. Sucking, moist mud halts our drive in-land. George steps out and up to his ankles in mud. A faint smell of rotting leaves and algae breaks open.

28 “We each take an end, turn the boat upright and set it down on the grass. The smell of cedar and old varnish wafts up through spiderwebs and takes me to a place where I’ve been a million times. There is laughter, there is music, there is pine and water. There are memories of rain and sparkling white light, of tears on portages, of burnt food and cans of peanut butter crushed and oozing in the bottom of aged green canvas packs” (Raffan, 1999, p. 60).
“Oh, gross,” I say as I watch him pull his boot from the wet mud. Green-brown sludge rings his wool sock. He slips backwards, stumbles over a slippery log and catches the side of our canoe. He grabs the bow in one arm and pulls me and the canoe towards land. I climb out and into the mud. We remove the packs and George drags the canoe to solid ground, stomps mud off his boots and swiftly collects the canoe over his head.

“You alright with those packs?” he asks.

“Yup,” I grunt as I sling them on. “Dandy-o,” I say. George plods uphill over Height of Land portage.

I grab the duct-taped black tarp bag and sling it over my shoulder and onto my back. The added weight transfers into my hips and thighs. Muddy water trickles and tickles my neck. I scratch it and find a squashed mosquito pressed into my fingers. I scratch my ear and pick out a black fly. Hot skin tightens around the dripping blood on my earlobe. I step forward over a cedar tree root. Damp, sharp pine scent sparks. A shrub rakes against my calves. I lean forward and crane my neck uphill.

The portage runs 430 metres. 420 of those climb over 100 vertical metres. The pack wobbles on my back. I peer around the barrel on my front, fumble with the hip belt, step and stumble sideways. The packs’ weight drags me off the path and my ankle rolls. I swear and catch a branch with my left hand. The branch halts my fall and cracks free in my palm. I regain my feet and open my hand. The short, smooth, light curved branch reminds me of a stick on my bookshelf at home.

“"The body is my very means of entering into relation with all things” (Abram, 1996, p. 47).
It is August 1989 and I am sixteen. I, Mom, Dad and my friend, Tania, paddle the Lady Evelyn Smoothwater Provincial Park in northern Ontario. At the portage I ease the aluminum Grumman canoe over my head. The fat, green, home-made yolk cushions rock forward onto my shoulders. The 68 pounds drop into my hips and thighs. I bounce twice and the boat settles into place. I step once and wobble. I step a second time. Bright orange pine-needles sprinkle across the sloping glacier-scraped shield rock. I suck summer air through my gritted teeth and follow Tania down the portage and into the pine forest.

The canoe burns into my shoulders. I feel stretched summer skin, fatigued muscles and bug bites. Sweat tickles my neck and rolls down my spine. I swat a mosquito, stuff a loose strand of hair behind my ear, and lunge down the path. It appears and disappears with each lumbering step. Warm earth fills my nostrils. Each heavy puff resounds through the body of the aluminum whale and leafy summer branches screech slowly along its body. I watch Tania’s mosquito-bitten calves recede. I puff, the canoe sways, my feet pace left, right, left, right, the canoe sways and I puff.

I think about my grandmother and remember her broad frame, thick ankles and sharp humour. I think about Mom and her tough, bright energy and vibrant curiosity. I think about Dad and how he plays rugby and runs and works weeks on end. I think about the skinny, popular girls at school and wonder where they vacation. I think about Mozart and hum his Clarinet Concerto.³⁰

Tania’s white runners disappear farther down the portage. I plod alone under the canoe. The landscape lowers into a gentle descent. A crisp, wet breeze refreshes my lungs. I smush a mosquito on my elbow. The slim trail narrows and I waiver as I tip the canoe up to scan my direction. Ahead the portage shimmies and dips through two upward-sweeping shield rocks. They swoop in a graceful, grey ‘V’.

I set one foot, stork-like, into the skinny earth path between the rocks. I lift my second foot and drop forward. A deafening ‘dong’ resounds within the canoe, through my palms and my ears ring. It feels like someone put a pan over my head and hit it with a hammer.

³⁰ “Because lyric language is associated with the personal and with the imaginative, it is often segregated or marginalized...lyric language allows us to hear the music of the other” (Neilsen, 2008, p. 95).
I try to move forward but the metal gunwales lodge against the rock. We, the canoe and I, wedge into the portage. I stand one foot forward, one foot back. I do not lift the canoe alone for fear of damaging it or myself.

I giggle and call out, “Hello? Help?”

A few moments later Dad appears around the path. He scowls and his face reads like thunder. He steps up and under the canoe, pushes me aside and spits, “What the hell are you doing?” He pops the Grumman from its halting place and storms to the end of the portage.

My burned, bitten, stretched skin prickles and my throat constricts. I surge after Dad’s tight, tanned, bare legs. We stand, hands on hips, on opposite sides of the canoe at the water’s edge. I return his grey-eyed stare.

“How was that my fault, Dad? I wasn’t tall enough to get through? That’s not fair!” I yell. My heart races. I flinch. Water laps my grey tread-bare runners. Birds flutter through the cedars. Dad turns on his heel and retreats down the portage. Weight lifts from my shoulders. I exhale.

That night, I scrub the sticky dinner dishes. I hum a “Here comes the Sun” by the Beatles. Dad whistles along, he dries the dishes and packs them away. After, Tania and I sit cross-legged on the campsite’s long beach. We trace curling patterns into grainy sand and watch the sun drop behind the trees. She gives me a smooth sand-washed pewter-coloured stick and says, “Isn’t it beautiful?” She tilts her scarved, smooth brow and smiles. Her gentle hazel eyes beam.

“Thank you,” I say. I run my fingers over the sandy, smooth surface. I pack it away in my bedroll.”

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“Experiences of place are not fixed; they are multi-dimensional and enter the mind, body and heart through waters imbibed, dirt under nails, smells pressed into memories and images inextricably linked to imagination. “It thus fell to the tradition of phenomenology to call into question the distinction between space and time at the level of our direct, preconceptual experience...to attend, as closely as possible, to the way phenomena present themselves in our immediate, lived experience” (Abram, 1996, p. 204).
It is November 2007. I stand in my humid, cold, leather boots on the St. Clair West southbound subway platform in Toronto, Ontario. I think about connecting pieces of stories. I think about this a lot. I don’t know how to do it. The billboard photo across the tracks features Margaret Atwood. She peers out from the poster at me. She holds her most recent book. I think, “There is a woman who knows a story line,” and snort under my breath. I think it is a lot like finding a line in the rapids. Something connects it all. I just don’t know what.

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It is December 2007. I stand before my classmates and professor who sit in the cozy student lounge at OISE. Wet snow taps against the windows. I throw my hands above my head, place one foot in front of the other and wobble. I re-enact my encounter with the Canadian Shield and a canoe. I explain why a smooth, pewter-coloured stick is a part of my research project. It is then I recognize how my complex and embodied ways of knowing, telling and expressing experience connect with artefacts. Artefacts are quiet embodiments of memories and stories of experiences that run just below the surface of my skin. When I try to explain my experiences, objects, tools, images, artefacts, help me remember and illustrate. They help me express complex stories and serve as place-holders of my experience. Artefacts are safe entry points into memory and are powerful embodiments of telling and relating. The physicality of these experiences stay with me and the sensuous and emotive responses quickly re-emerge at the smell, touch, sound, feel or taste of similar things. Artefacts are what connect these stories together.

To better understand how the intersection of artefact and narrative might work as the methodology in this research, I enter an installation piece in a public art exhibition, Power of Place, at the OISE library in the spring of 2008. Warm spring sun beams through the long windows and I stand beside my piece.

A man sits on the floor by the stereo speakers and listens to my recorded canoe trip stories. Two women stand beside him and watch my images of Place projected onto the canvas of my grandfather’s wanigan. A leaf, rocks, a stick, bits of rope, maps, a compass, gorp, kitchen utensils, a canvas hip belt, a bug hat, a water bottle, a note pad, sun lotion, plates and personal clothing fill the bag. Over twenty-five people

32 “I wonder if, in fact, we have reached a stage where the distinctions among the cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects of mental work have outlived their usefulness” (Horwood, 1976, p. 227).
open up the piece, gently unpack the items, ask questions, to me and with each other. They laugh, sniff, rub, listen, shake, and stand back to watch. Each person connects with an object, tells a story, connects to that place of learning, and re-enters the phenomenon of experiential learning of place on canoe trips. With each item, each layer, each conversation and each connection the stories grow complex and stronger with each other’s understandings and experiences. The objects contain, and collect, stories. The canvas of this canoe trip experience shifts with each interaction and engagement.

In practice, I asked participants to bring or describe one or more artefacts that reminded them of canoeing or held a special meaning for them. I asked them to tell me a little bit about their artefact, where it came from, why they chose it and where they keep it. The artefacts discussed included paddles, a map, a bottle cap, a couple lapel pins, a rock, knives, throw-rope and a stick. I then asked if they remembered a story about that artefact or a time when they used it. The participants told me more stories than I could possibly fit into this thesis. I asked participants to draw a memory map to show me a place of one of the stories. This final piece illuminated the details of their special places; what they noticed, how they described the place, the particulars of place.

What the audio recording did not capture was how the participants told their stories with their artefacts. I found we all manifested gesticular immediacy; the physicality of experience emerged through the manipulation of and playing with the objects. During the interviews, we poked, bounced, demonstrated and fiddled with the artefacts. They were displayed in a special place in each person’s space (office, home,

33 “As researchers we can only ever “come close” to understanding the experiences or life of another and we can only go so far in unravelling the complexities of the broader social condition” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 23).

34 Nationally recognized, Ardra Cole and Maura McIntyre demonstrated the use artefacts as a way of entering into experience in their research, ‘Putting Care on the Map: Portraits of Care and Care-giving across Canada’. Artefacts are a powerful and respectful way to hold ambiguity and invite viewers in to interpret and experience and draw on their own understanding (2007).

35 “The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home” (Snyder, 1990, p. 26).


37 “These artifacts are powerful reflections of how I perceive myself, a reminder of how much of my identity is tied up in my possessions” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 75).
memory, shoebox, bookshelf). We handled and kept our objects with care, attention and thoughtfulness. Language of the body spoke through the artefacts when participant could not. I observed emotional qualities held within the objects; they were reminders, provided safety, acted as metaphor. They became a focus point when we could not express our experiences.

Object is an expression of the multiple ways of knowing and understanding experience. It is a vehicle of developing understanding for both participant and for me as a listener. The objects are entry points into experience, rendering the story accessible to the person reading or engaging. Artefact, then, on the cycle of experiential learning is a place-holder, a memory-keeper. It helped (re)enter into (re)experience and was a reminder or an interruption on previous experience. Artefact’s embodied nature helps (re)tell as a way toward reflection and meaning-making.

This intersection between artefact and story, between embodied story and personal narrative is a liminal space where the individual experiences emerge and evolve from the internal language to the external. Voicing experience through the use of artefact created a common place of knowing embedded in the object and differently expressed through the unique voices of the participants.

Personal narrative is a form of reflexivity. At the time of the interviews, a couple participants had already critically reflected on and written about their experiences. They easily articulated their thoughts on what canoeing means to them and how it unfolds in their lives. Others, like myself, were in the early stages of understanding what these experiences meant. The act of consciously and critically reflecting on place-based experiences, like those on canoe trips, brought up new meaning and understanding of where we come from and how this unfolds into our lives.38

38 “Being place-based, has never meant that one didn’t travel from time to time.... Such working wanderers have always known they had a home-base on earth, and could prove it at any campfire or party by singing their own songs” (Snyder, 1990, pp. 27-28).
I hold the small branch in my palm, loose hair sticks to my neck and sweat drips from my temples. I smell pine needles, camp smoke and sparkling water. I taste of fresh blueberried pancakes and anger, bug spray and clean water. I march uphill.  

The land arcs over a boulder-strewn ridge and the path squeezes between damp trees. I pass Stacey, Geoff, Candice and Khal who return to the start of the portage.

“Just another 100 metres,” says Candice. I pull my lips tight, roll my shoulders and the straps fall into the grooves in my muscles. The weight of the packs shifts forward and my toes press into the front of my boots. Ahead I hear the rustling clunk from George who lowers the canoe onto the pebbles. The air freshens. Sulpher Lake peeks through the thinning branches.

“Ahhh,” I say as George eases the pack off my back. “One more run,” he says.

“Yip,” I say. We hike over the arctic watershed and collect the remains of our gear.

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39 Solnit (2007) discusses “accomplished walker-philosophers, who not only used walking as a method but who described their walking in their work...These philosophers used walking as a form of invention, the process of finding out what one wishes to express” (as cited in Nash & Garrett-Petts, p. 131).
“Being reflexive in research means engaging in an ongoing process of reflecting ideas and experiences back on oneself as an explicit acknowledgement of one’s locatedness in the research.”

Three canoe bows bump against a smooth point of rock. Waves slide up the lip of land and back into the lake. Geoff stands on the land above us. The wind whispers hollow through the pines.

“How many tent spots?” asks Candice. She cranes her neck up the rise.

Stacey appears, “There are two good spots, for sure,” she says.

“How sounds good,” says Khal. He staggers out of his boat, drops to his knees and presses his lips to the rock and smiles. We laugh. “Ugh. I didn’t think this would ever come,” he says. We nod. We unload packs, nest two canoes to form a kitchen work table, and collect wood. The women’s red tent pops up under the trees and behind the firepit. The men’s orange tent pops up on the point of land between water and firepit.

Candice and Stacey wander down the portage trail and into the woods. They collect dried, fallen branches and logs from the forest floor. George and I erect the crackling blue tarp between three trees in a diamond-shaped lean-to just over the canoe-table and just beyond the firepit. Geoff floats in a canoe out from shore. It rocks as he pumps the water-filter. The wind carries away any sucking-clicking-gushing

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41 “Man, out of his intimate experiences with his body and with other people, organizes space so that it conforms with and caters to his biological needs and social relations” (Tuan, 1977, p. 34).
noises. Khal stacks collected branches near the firepit, grabs the saw, bends and reaches for a dry pine branch. The wind gusts. His hat flaps and flies off his head. He lunges, catches the falling hat and I hear a metallic crunch.

“Oh man,” Khal mumbles. I glance over my shoulder from the kitchen pack. He squats and reaches to where his foot trod, lifts his green Swiss Army Knife, blows into it and pulls a knife blade. It clicks.

I crawl into the red tent I share with Candice and Stacey, unroll my Thermarest and inflate it. I yank the black and grey three-season sleeping bag from its stuff sack and fluff it fat. The materials rustle and swish. Pine needles fall from the mouth of the bag. “Hello, how did you get there?” I ask them. I rest back and my shoulders relax and click. The weight of my body presses into a knuckle-like root under my shoulder and the blood flows into my ears. I slip around and lie top-to-toe. The sound of metal pots and chopping filters through. Cool air chills my nose and the back of my neck. I delve into my clothing back, drag out a pale blue fleece sweater, a knitted wool hat and a windproof jacket. Cut onions waft in and my tummy grumbles.

“Smells good,” I call through the bug screen. I press my face against the mesh window and watch Stacey chop vegetables. Mosquitoes gravitate to my nose. “What’s cooking?”

“I saved papadams, rice and curried lentils,” she says as she wipes a tear from the corner of her eye with the back of her arm. She turns around and watches the water boil over the fire. “Should be about thirty minutes or so,” she says.

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42. “Space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning” (Tuan, 1977, p. 136).
43. “Communicative meaning is always, in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body’s native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape” (Abram, 1996, pp. 74-75).
Thick clouds shroud the sun. The sun paints the clouds yellow-peach. The wind dies and the lake stills. A loon’s wail echoes across the water and chills run over my back. George stands at the point of rock by the water’s edge, cups his hands, and blows. The loon responds to his call from across the lake. He calls back. The water’s lapping slows.

Khal pokes two branches into the fire. It shuffles and shifts and sparks rise. He waves his hand in front of his face.

“Okay, Guys. Supper’s ready,” says Stacey as she reaches for my plate, dishes out a spoonful of rice, two ladles of curried lentils and a couple papadums.44

“Wow. This looks amazing,” I say. Water pools under my tongue. I join Geoff on a log beside the fire and dig my fork into dinner. Candice sits next to me, blows on her curry-filled fork and mmm-mmmms. She takes a bite.

“Oh man,” she mumbles, chews and swallows, “that girl can cook.” We mmm-mmm in response. Legs extend toward the fire’s warmth.45

“So I think I ruined my knife,” says Khal.

“Oh no,” says Stacey, “not your knife. What happened?”

Khal places his blue plastic plate on the pine-and-dirt floor and fingers in his pant pocket. He pulls out his green Swiss Army Knife and rubs his thumb over the deep scar that runs the length of the plastic.

44 “Each sense is a unique modality of this body’s existence, yet in the activity of perception these divergent modalities necessarily intercommunicate and overlap” (Abram, 1996, p. 61).

45 “The heart of a place is the home, and the heart of the home is the firepit, the hearth” (Snyder, 1990, p. 28).
“It just fell out of my pocket and I stepped on it,” he says. “The kicker is that I have had this for so long. It’s an MEC\textsuperscript{46} anniversary edition. I bought it when I was working there back in university. I got one for my brother too.” He turns the knife over in his palm and digs his thumbnail into the side. It clicks but the blade does not open.

“You know, there are instructions on how to clean those things up, right?” says Geoff. Khal nods.

“Oh yeah, for sure. It’s just that I carry this knife with me all the time and it’s been worn in. I look at it and I know it’s been places: Africa, Europe, Cuba.\textsuperscript{47} Actually,” he pauses, glances over his shoulder and grins, “I had to sneak it through customs once when I was leaving Cuba ‘cause I forgot to put it in my luggage.”

“The metal detector beeped when I walked through the gate, so I reached into my pocket and pulled out my change. Then I felt my knife and I’m like, ‘Aww, crap.’” Khal looks up, his eyes grow wide and he pretends to hold something in his pocket. “Just as I pulled it out with the rest of my stuff, some sort of commotion erupted in front of me. Some guy was complaining about his stroller and yelling at the guards. When everybody was looking over his way, I grabbed the knife, put it in the plastic scanning tray and put my passport on top.” He mimics the motions. “It had gone through the x-ray machine. No one looked at it. When it came out the other side, I just grabbed it and threw it all in my pocket and walked off. That’s how I snuck a knife on the plane after 9/11,” says Khal. He shakes his head. Candice cups her hand over her mouth. George shakes his head and says,

“Geez, Khal. You are really lucky you didn’t get caught.”

“Yeah, I know,” says Khal. “That was the same trip I got called ‘Salvatore del Gato,’” he says. He grasps another thin branch and shuffles it into the fire. Sparks crackle and swirl into the darkening sky. Our faces flash in the fluttering flame. Stacey spreads a quizzical half-smile.

\textsuperscript{46} Mountain Equipment Co-op, an outdoor equipment company.

\textsuperscript{47} “To experience in the active sense requires that one venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain” (Tuan, 1977, p. 9).
Geoff chuckles, “Cat Saviour?”

“Yeah. I was hanging out with a couple people in this Cuban mountain town when this man came running up, saying, ‘Do you have’ and doing a scissor motion.” Khal’s mimics. “I pulled out the scissors I said ‘That? Are you guys cutting a rope?’ He shrugged and looked unsure. So we followed him into town and into a crowd of people by the wall. An old lady had been feeding stray cats from a big can of tuna. A stray had stuck its head in to get to the bottom of the can and the sharp edges caught behind the cat’s ears,” Khal says. My stomach flips and I groan. “It was having trouble breathing. It was freakin’ out.”

“So I grabbed my jacket and pounced on the cat. I didn’t want to get scratched by a feral cat; there’s cats all over the place there. I pulled out the can opener and cut around the side of the can to let some air in,” says Khal.

I laugh and blurt, “You have a cat-opener?” Candice snorts hot chocolate.

Khal laughs, “Right. And suddenly the cat was able to breathe. But the problem was that now the cat was able to see too. With the can still stuck on its head it shot off and bounced into the retaining wall, which dazed it. So I grabbed the cat again and used the opener to twist the edge of the can and pry the sides open a little bit,” Khal says and mimics with his knife. “The can popped off the cat’s head and the thing ran off. The people I was staying with called me ‘Salvatore del Gato.’”

“That’s totally awesome, Khal,” says Stacey. “So is that why you carry that around with you?” she smiles.

“Kinda, yeah. Ever since I was young I wanted to be more self-reliant. I like being able to do things and learning how to fix stuff, make stuff,” says Khal. “It’s sorta connected to making-do with what you’ve got, you know?” he asks. Stacey nods, Geoff smiles, leans back and crosses his arms across his chest. George slaps his palm against the back of his neck and asks, “So, what sort of things do you make-do with?”
“Well,” says Khal, “me and Kathy bought this Toronto Fibreglass canoe, ‘Big Blue’ from a guy at work who was trying to get rid of it out of his back yard. We got it for fifty bucks. It’s not a very good canoe. The thwart was broken on it so I replaced it with an old yolk. We’ve taken it on a few trips, nothing really hard-core because it’s a fifty-dollar canoe. I don’t know how it would survive a crack on a rock.”

“So it’s a lake-paddling canoe,” says Geoff. He scratches his beard.

“It is, yeah. We’ve taken it on a few trips and easily gotten our money’s worth of it. We like to feel that we don’t need the newest and the best. It’s nice to just go with whatever you’ve got, basically what camping is in general. That is a big part why I like to go out. It is my way of living. Even our house is furnished with second-hand stuff from my parents’ basement,” says Khal. “No one else in the family wanted it. Apart from one couch, we didn’t have to buy anything. I like being able to do that.”

“So where does that come from, Khal?” asks Candice. She stands up, stretches, and puts two dry branches in the fire. Stacey wafts smoke from her face and George leans back from the fumes. Khal pauses, shrugs and turns over his palm.

“Even our house is furnished with second-hand stuff from my parents’ basement,” says Khal. “No one else in the family wanted it. Apart from one couch, we didn’t have to buy anything. I like being able to do that.”

“My family emigrated from Uganda to Norwich, England when the revolution broke out in the early 70s. They had nothing and built a home. Then they had my brother, then me. In 1974 we all moved to London, Ontario. Eventually my parents moved into a newer suburban area where everyone was wearing Polo and Dockside and all those expensive name brand clothings. But my parents couldn’t afford that. Instead I dressed in black, grew my hair, carried around a blade and listened to heavy metal. As it turns out, London is a test-demographic. The city is fairly homogeneous and relatively detached from other major urban centres. They test out new coffees, furniture, clothing, what-have-you on the population. So it was a consumerist society. Still is. And I rebelled,” says Khal. “My ethic behind all of this, having seen this consumerism, is to not be wasteful,” he says.

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48 “If our knowledge drew us close to the world and the world to us, we would not wish to manipulate the world but to live in harmony with it and thus with ourselves” (Palmer, 1993, p. 37).

49 “As learners we construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from our actions in the world” (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004, p. 60).
“It’s like this one time I was on a trip on Gun Lake, up near Dorset in Haliburton, Ontario. On the first night we had tortillas for dinner and someone from our group burned all the extra tortillas. I couldn’t believe it. They said, ‘Well, we’ve got enough food for the days we’ve got coming.’ And I said, ‘yeah, but it’s food, right?’ They didn’t get it.”

“Yeah, and tortilla breads are so bulky. So heavy,” says Stacey. Khal laughs.

“They didn’t see that you never know when you might need more. That’s kinda what I am saying, you know? Everything is so taken for granted but we only have so much so you gotta do what you can with it,” he says. He drops his long fingers into the brown-black dirt, stirs them through the earth and picks up a pinch. He sprinkles it into his palm and rubs his hands together.

“At one point we were paddling against a 43 kilometre per hour wind and felt like we were going backwards. We were going down-river too,” says Khal. “The water looked like it was going in the other direction. That was just, heavy, heavy paddling. That was the worst into-the-wind paddling that I have ever done.” The group groans and nods.

Candice rolls her neck, George rolls his shoulders, I straighten my posture, twist and crack my lower back. “It turned out that I strained my back muscles that day,” says Khal. He rubs his ribs and back below his shoulder blades.

“The idea was that when faced with abundance one should consume abundantly – an idea that has survived to become the basis of our present economy. It is neither natural nor civilized, and even from a ‘practical’ point of view, it is to the last degree brutalizing and stupid” (Berry, 2002, p. 11).

“A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of the land” (Leopold, 1966, p. 68).

“Stories, like rhymed poems or songs, readily incorporate themselves into our felt experience; the shifts of action echo and resonate our own encounters – in hearing or telling the story we vicariously live it, and the travails of its characters embed themselves into our own flesh” (Abram, 1996, p. 120).

“Over time the feel of a place is registered in one’s muscles and bones” (Tuan, 1977, p. 184).
“We just kept going and going. The campsites were few and far between and all of them were take one after the next after the next. We kept looking at the map and saying ‘Is that one? Is that a site there? Where are we? I think we’re here. The water goes in over there,’ right? Then we saw this site that had this looong strip of rock, it was probably ten meters long, sloping right into the water. This site reminds me of it a bit,” he says and reaches out and swoops his arm across his body. We look over at our water’s edge.

“We could easily pull in the boats, nothing abrupt. We find this site, nobody’s on it. We’ve been paddling so hard. Everybody just wanted to stop. We get out of the boats and say, ‘Wooowww we’re here...laaand’,” he laughs. He pinches more dirt. “We didn’t speak, just dragged everything up, set up camp and then went swimming and lounging and relaxing, right?” says Khal. Stacey crinkles open a package of organic dark chocolate and passes the bar to George. He snaps off a piece and passes it to me. Grainy sweetbitter melts on my tongue.

“We ended up finding a beautiful campsite but it was the furthest one – the last of the campsites. For me it’s the same as winter camping or with even just hiking or biking,” he says. George nods and chuckles. “You just gotta keep going and eventually you’ll get somewhere you can stop, rest and recharge. There’s gonna be these hard parts but that’s part of what you’ve signed up for, right?”

“This was before me and Kathy got together but things were happening. I’ve got a picture from inside my tent. It is early in the morning all you can see is the lake and the trees framed through the window vestibule. I was looking out, in this beautiful place. I had met Kathy.”

“So when I look at that picture I am kind of back in that tent looking out. There’s an anticipation, a wistfulness about it. I wanted to share that sort of shelter, that space, with Kathy. She is into camping, travelling and the outdoors, which is obviously an important part for me. When I look at that picture it was a nice feeling. I was wishing that she was there and at the same time knowing that she will be. Just looking out and thinking ‘life is good’,” says Khal. He sifts his fingertips through the dirt and pine needs, collects a pinch of debris, rolls it between his fingers and sprinkles it on the ground.

54 “The importance of events in my life is more directly proportionate to their intensity than to their extensity” (Feibleman, as cited in Tuan, 1977, p. 184).
“Wow, Khal. That’s really cool,” says Stacey. I rub goosebumps from my upper arms. George crosses his arms across his chest and his ankles near the fire. “So that was a pretty significant time for you, then?” he asks.

“Yeah, for sure. So now Kathy and I always try to get a nice view and try to catch that setting sun, or just the light of it. We both love evening sun, even at home. It’s just so nice and warm and golden, right? That’s one thing to look for. Another for me is swimming, so we try not to land in too-mucky of an area. If there’s a jump-off rock, then all-the-better.”

Images become artifacts of experience,
Artifacts of perception.
Images reveal what is seen in a moment,
Made visible to the eye.
What is seen in a moment becomes invisible,
Once severed from the immediacy of the moment

“Although the fire may not be needed for warmth or protection or even the preparation of food, it is still a primal and psychological necessity. On any wilderness expedition it always serves as a climax to the adventures of the day, is as important to complete experience as the final curtain is to a play. It gives everyone an opportunity to participate in an act hallowed by the devotion of forgotten generations” (Olson, 1972, p. 122).

“Your personal experiences in nature are the source of profound wisdom and personal happiness” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 23).

Thomas, 2004, p. 66.
“It’s funny, you know? My parents did a little bit of camping when we were younger but it was the huge canvas tent, car camping. They didn’t know any better. But then we stopped. Not sure why. I guess my parents weren’t campers growing up. It was a totally different life. Now and then we rented paddle boats and we would go out. I always loved swimming but never really thought about it. Then I got into doing the bike trips and started doing biking camping trips and then hiking trips and then lake trips and then rivers.”

“Part of the excitement for me is that now we have a little girl, it will be really nice to take her out at a young age. It will be very exciting to have that be a part of her life. I hope it will be a way that her time camping will give her some of that identity and that ability for camping and paddling. I really want that to be a part of her life.” Stacey’s grin flashes her teeth and Geoff nods.

“Partly because it grounds you, it can help you remember that in life you don’t need everything. You can survive on so much less, like all rustic. I feel like I’m back to the land and I’m a survivor. We’ve got such amazing gear and stay-sharp knives. It’s nothing like having to survive. But you realize that you can have less and really enjoy it. I think that’s an important philosophy in life. It is too easy to want new things and have everything to match. I don’t want her to be too caught up in that.”

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58 “Most people use their possessions as a means to construct personal identity. But the search for ecological identity challenges that narrow interpretation. Every object a person owns may have utilitarian and symbolic value, but it also has ecosystem value.... Personal property is inextricably tied to the commons” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 73).

59 “Philosophy is thus a place-based exercise. It comes from the body and the heart and is checked against shared experience” (Snyder, 1990, p. 69).
The fire crackles to a glow. Smoke wisps up and over the lake. Rain drops fall between the leaved branches. We rise, douse the fire, rinse our cups and zip ourselves into our nylon homes. Candice slides her paddle beside her in the tent and settles onto her side. Stacey yanks on a home-made woollen turquoise toque. I pull my sleeping bag over my shoulders and head and draw the pull-strings tight. Over the lake the hollow wind whistles.
Light, wet rain splats against our red three-woman tent. I wake. Tingles run through my left shoulder and upper arm. I roll off my side, massage my neck, breathe deeply and groan. The forest’s noises kept me awake. Tiredness aches in my bones. I wiggle into my fleece pants, long-sleeve top and rain gear. I unzip the tent door. Mosquitoes bounce off the screen and fly into the tent. I stuff my feet into my cool leather boots and stand. Rain dribbles over my forehead from the matte grey skies.

I stoop over the firepit, place a few curls of dry white birch bark in the centre and balance twigs overtop in a cone shape. Mosquitoes land on my coat’s sleeve and press their noses against the fabric. A strand of hair escapes my hood and tickles my nose. I reach for dry matches from the plastic container. A wood match strikes, flares into flame and I lower the yellow-orange end to the bark.

“C’mom,” I whisper under my breath. A zipper opens up behind me. The match puffs out and I smell the dry snap of extinguished flame. The zipper closes. I strike another match, lower it to the little pile of debris and a gust of wind blows it out. I huff and pivot my back to the wind. I press a third match to the abrasive paper. It breaks. “Shit,” I say.

“Would you like some help?” asks Candice and drops the food packs beside the canoes behind me. I stand up and pass the matches. Two minutes later fire crackles.

60 “What gives value to travel is fear” (Camus, as cited in Palmer, 1998, p. 39).
61 “There is life in a campfire, and a primitive pleasure in watching it come alive” (Mason, 1988, p. 41).
I lug the pot sploshing full of water to the fire and rest it on the wobbly wire rack over the flames. We huddle under the blue tarp, tuck our chins into the necks of our raincoats, cross our arms over our chests and listen to the metallic ting-ting-ting of raindrops drum on the pot’s lid.

“So, One-Match-Wonder, how’d you sleep?” I ask.

“Not bad,” Candice nods. “Did you hear the rain?”

“Yup – didn’t want to get up,” I say.

Moist steam rises in the humid air. I step into the rain, add another stick and lift the lid. Candice pulls two mugs from the pile of dried dishes, drops in two tea bags and I ladle boiling water out of the pot and splash it into the mugs. We retreat under the pattering blue tarp, crouch on a log and wrap fingers around the hot mugs. I rub my nose with my palm. More unzipping and slowly the group gathers with steaming mugs, bowls of thick instant porridge and fat purple-brown raisins. I extract a small fallen twig out of my gooey oats. I pick at the raisins.

“It’s going to be a wet one,” I say.

“What makes you think that?” asks Geoff. He grins over his bowl.

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Three canoes travel twenty minutes under heavy, wet skies. Thick, low shrubs hug the dark grey boulders that line the narrow lake. Ripples lap the bellies of the boats. Swish-swishing fills my ears.

“Well, I guess that’s it,” says Khal from the stern. I nod my head and survey the rounded bay ahead. A yellow sign peeks out from under dripping cedar branches.
“Brace yourself,” I say as we approach the kilometre-long portage. Ahead Geoff and George pull in their red canoe and unload their gear. Water soaks into my exposed ankles. Blackflies zoom towards my eyes and buzz my ears. I groan as I pull a bloodied finger from behind my ear. I roll the dead fly between my finger and thumb and wash the red from my hands in the water. The portage parallels a river, perfect for blackflies; cool, damp weather combined with fresh running water. We pull in beside Candice and Stacey, lump our packs over the edges of the boats, into the forest and onto our backs.

We brush by dripping branches and into the buzzing forest. Mosquitoes land on Candice’s neck and shoulders and a cloud forms over her hood. Above my head I hear persistent whine and imagine my own brown-grey cloud above me. We pass pine trees, cedar trees, birch trees, maple trees and up the rocky, muddy incline. My calves burn and my neck heats up under the packs’ braces. Over the rocks the path slopes back towards the river. Khal follows me with the blue canoe over his head and puffs at the mosquitoes. A pack-laden Stacey joins the train through the forest. We pick our way over boulders past bright green ferns and through glistening mud.

The portage travels away from the river, back up the rock ridge and back down over the other side. Again we slip, clamber, and wend through the forest. My knees wobble as I place one foot in front of the next. I cling to wet, spindly silver maples and lower myself and my packs down the narrow path. I breathe slowly.

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62 “For countless thousands of years men have followed such trails. It is instinctive to pack across them, and you bend and weave, adjust your weight and balance, do all the things your subconscious experience tells you to do without realizing exactly what is happening” (Olson, 1972, p. 72).

63 “Tell me what plant-birthday a man takes notice, and I shall tell you a good deal about his vocation, his hobbies, his hay fever, and the general level of his ecological education” (Leopold, 1966, p. 44).
“Not sure which is harder, up or down,” I mutter to no one in particular. Khal’s canoe bonks against a large trunk and I turn around. He regains his balance, pivots his upper body and the nose of the canoe swoops through the thick brush at the side. He looks up.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he says and stares past me. I turn as Candice climbs another steep banking and presses her palms against the rocks as leverage. Birds above our heads twitter and flit from branch to trunk to branch. They chase each other through the trees. At the top of the rise we meet Geoff and George on their second run.

“Another hellish climb, but the put-in isn’t too far now,” says Geoff as he passes us. “The put-in is a bloody mess, though,” he says. We chuck our bags on the rounded rock that drops jagged and uneven into grey-brown thick water of Circle Lake.

“Look at that,” says Stacey. She points at the opposite shore 150 metres across the reed-lined lake.

“Bet I could throw this rock and hit the other side,” says Khal. We three step behind him.

“Go for it,” smiles Candice under her hood’s peek. Khal steps back, places his paddling-boot clad foot behind him, lunges forward, whips his arm over his head and releases the fist-sized pebble into the air. The four of us hold our breath. The stone sails, arcs and plunges into the murky water with a gallump.

“Okay. Maybe not,” says Khal. We laugh and return to the start of the portage.64

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64 “The direct product of reflection is the discovery of new connections between the most recent experience and past ones, including past thought. It is the discovery of connections, the construction of nets and maps in our minds, that is the stuff of learning through reflection. These are the processes that integrate past experience into the present and allow its projection onto the future” (Horwood, 1976, p. 227).
At the top of Mississaugi Lake we hunker under the dripping branches of the pine trees and munch bread, butter, cheese, red onion and mango chutney. My fingers prune in the damp conditions and the edges of the skin around my fingernails turns pasty-white. Stacey hands around sliced apple. We crunch on the sweet, crisp, juicy flesh. Rain patters the lake and plucks up bubbles on its still surface.

“Can you believe we’ve only gone two and a half K since this morning?” Stacey asks.

“Well, that last long portage was crazy,” I say. “It took ages.”

“You just gotta get your systems down,” says Geoff and he squints at me. “When you get organized properly, it goes faster.” Stacey purses her lips and Khal inspects his sandwich.


The rain slows as we make our way into Mississaugi Lake. We wash our hands and forearms from pine needles, mud and grit. The lake's shores undulate, a steep treed mountain rises to the east and we hug the rocky shores on the west. We pass a pinch-point and our voices echo off the boulders. One hour of paddling later we enter a series of river-like waterways. We continue south.

“We will be entering Upper Green Lake soon,” says Candice. She looks up from the map.

“There should be a fire lookout in the bay just on the left,” says Geoff. “Should we go check it out for campability?” he asks. Pale canoeists nod and paddle. We enter a narrow sandy river that opens up into an expanse of grey-blue. We hug the left shore, cut into the bay and find the steep path into a spongy, flat, treed campsite.
“Beautiful,” says Stacey. She carries our tent to a spot in the trees and away from the campfire. “There’s some garbage around but we can clean this up no problem,” she says. We collect wood, set up tents, filter water, arrange the kitchen and clear out the garbage-strewn firepit: beer caps, burnt cans, soggy plastic bags, half-burnt papers and one bent spoon. George boils his mushroom risotto, spreads goat cheese on crackers and passes the plate.

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“Is this yours?” asks Khal. He stands by the bushes and holds up a yellow throw bag. Rope pokes out the ends. Water droplets stain the ground.

“Oh my goodness. You rescued my throw rope,” says Stacey. Khal wrings it dry and fastens it to the bow of the blue canoe.

“Oh man, that would have sucked if I lost that,” she says. “I’ve had that throw rope for years.”

“It looks handmade,” I say and crunch another cheesy cracker. I brush crumbs from my fleece.

“Yeah, my friends in the Ancient Mariners put the kit together. They wrapped the ends for hoops and loops and sewed it all up for a fundraiser. It was my first piece of gear I purchased when I was solo,” she says. Candice looks up from her cracker. I inspect the fire. I nod.

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65 “We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its processes, and to yield to its limits” (Berry, 2002, p. 20).

66 “Our own past, then, consists of bits and pieces. It finds a home in the high school diploma, the wedding picture, and the stamped visas of a dog-eared passport” (Tuan, 1977, p. 187).

67 “Each of us has a need to find a place where we light a fire, share a form of nourishment, tell stories about our world, comfort, where we take stock, where we can shed tears, vent our anger, tell secrets, crack jokes, feel fear, commiserate, and connect; a place where our souls and our spirits can be destroyed or take wing” (Neilsen, 1998, p. 138).
“I was invited by my best friend’s mom to join the Ancient Mariners on a day paddle down the Grand River in Cambridge. They are a group of retirees that organize all sorts of canoe trips. It was kind of a coming-back in a sense. I had lived in that community with my husband. By then I was no longer with him. So this phase of my life, when I went canoeing with the Ancient Mariners, I was solo. Everything was a new learning experience for me as a single person. I was trying to figure out who I was and where I fit in terms of coping with that major life change.\textsuperscript{68} I found great comfort in going back to the community I had lived in. My best friend had lived there. I knew the river really well and I felt really welcome to be going on this trip with a bunch of older people who knew better than I how to canoe.” Stacey crinkles her eyes, smiles and tilts her head.

\textsuperscript{68} “An individual life event such as marriage, graduation, illness, or job change is a milestone in a person’s life. Cultural life events such as economic depressions, disasters, and social movements shape the context in which a person lives. Both types of events stimulate learning” (Merriam, 1994, p. 76).
“Now I was learning to tie the boat on my own car, my little green machine, with a sixteen-foot canoe,” she throws her arms open wide. “I had to carry it by myself, put it up on the car by myself, I had to tie it by myself and I had to travel great distances. By myself. The first new gear that I got as a single lady in the world was that safety throw rope. I take it on all my trips; it is a steady friend.”

I bend over the fire, warm my hands and shuffle in a small, dry branch. The smells of mushroomy rice, onion, burning wood and sweat mingle.

“I remember learning a lot from that group; how they organized, how they tied up their canoes. I was fascinated by the fact that they built a homemade canoe rack. Right from the start of their trips to during their trips to their technique for getting out at the end, the rituals that they have, I remember being very impressed with their innovation and creativity. I remember being really impressed that they loved canoeing as much as I did.”

“Dinner’s ready,” says George. We line up, tap spoonfuls of dinner onto our plates, toss cubed sausage on top and return to the fire. Saliva gathers in my teeth and my cheeks prickle. The musky, sticky, salty, super-hot supper burns my mouth and my eyes water.

“Careful, it might be hot,” says George. I mumble and Khal waves his hand in front of his open mouth.

“Itsch shhooo good,” he says and lifts another spoonful.

“So you’ve spent some time on the Grand?” asks Geoff. He cups the hot bowl to his chest.

69 “I want to suggest that when we think about transformative learning, our task is not to use critiques as a way to make our understanding of it smaller; rather, our task is to expand the stories we can tell about it in a way that extends and makes our understanding more complex” (Brooks, 2000, p. 148).

70 “For each river, each watershed, each waterway, there is a people or layers of people through time who are bound to the land and to the water by a canoe” (Raffan, 1999, p. 2).
“Lots,” says Stacey. “That was a trip down memory lane for me. I had built my skills on that river. I was a recreational, leisure paddler as a child at Camp Ki-Wa-Y,”71 she says. She leans away from the smoke and shoos falling ashes from her bowl of risotto. Candice leans forward, Khal squats by the firepit and shuffles another log into the flames. Sparks rise.

“I had been on some trips with Camp Wabanaki, on the Moon River and on Lake Kenisis, that kind of thing. But it was on the Grand that I first lead a canoe trip; it was my first time in charge. On this return, all the memories came flooding back of all those trips, all the challenges, all the learning, experiences with rapids.”

“It is very shallow in many places, especially in August. It’s very rocky. There’s a lot of scrapidge.72 So much has happened on that river. I just know that place. The Grand River has a certain smell, certain sights,” she says. “I realized afterwards how polluted the river was. Not knowing, coming from the City of Toronto, I was like, ‘Oooo, we are out in the country playing in the river’. Meanwhile, there was sewage coming into the river at various points along the way.”

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71 “My students have fond memories of a special childhood place, formed through their connections to the earth via some kind of emotional experience, the basis of their bonding with the land or the neighbourhood. Typically these are memories of play experiences, involving exploration, discovery, adventure, even danger, imagination and independence” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 9).


73 “Even for those who can return to pleasant memories, a dark side will inevitably emerge. The great majority of my students have experiences similar to the international group [those from war-torn places] – their childhood places are in some way polluted, developed, or destroyed, and they are overcome by impressions of emptiness and loss” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 12).
“With the Ancient Mariners I was going down it again but in a different life stage. It was a very sensory experience seeing all the landmarks, the bridges, the carry-overs, the portage routes and certain rocky areas. You know those beautiful Vs that remind you ‘ooohhh I love this spot’ and you ride through? It made it really easy to reflect and recollect what I had done before – the memories – to accept them for what they were and what I had learned.”

“By then I had that competence and confidence that when you see that V, you know you are gonna make it right through after you have struggled through all of the rocky part. So there is a great sense of accomplishment and knowing. When you know the river and you can work with it,” she says.

The sky darkens and the Upper Green Lake’s waves catch the last of the daylight. Leaves rustle, the fire cracks and feet shuffle and move towards the fire. Dew moistens the log I sit on.

“Canoeing with the Ancient Mariners, I knew that I would continue to paddle and it was ok that I wasn’t paddling with my partner anymore. Some tragedies had happened, but it didn’t matter because I can always get on the river, because I would continue to pursue that as a passion. And I did. And I do,” she says. I reach for the poking stick and shuffle the logs in the fire. Sparks flutter skywards and the logs crinkle and crack in the glowing heat. Stacey inspects her hands in the rekindled orange light. She rubs her thumb knuckle. “Canoeing is everything. Everything. It’s who I am. It’s a huge part of my identity,” she says.

“I think that’s the amazing part of kids’ camps,” says Candice. “It gives you such a great sense of self. It’s such a unique place.”

Stacey nods and smiles, “Oh, for suuuure. I am very much a paddler. It has shaped me, shaped my life, my interests, my adventures, how I walk in this world, my connection to nature. I am lucky I have the opportunity to take it with me to my work because of the field I am in. I don’t really think I would be in this field if I hadn’t had those experiences.”

74 “Experience can be direct and intimate, or it can be indirect and conceptual, mediated by symbols” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6).
“So do you talk about your experiences with your students? I mean, it’s so personal,” asks George. He opens a plastic container of sticky, nutty, gooey, fruity dessert bars. We ‘oooooo’. He extends the box to Khal.

“Definitely,” says Stacey. “There’s something so powerful about experiential learning outdoors in a group. It’s much more powerful than in a classroom where we just talk about skills. When we are out there in the place, everything is really alive and vibrant. It affects all your senses as well as your emotions and your memories and your cognitive thinking,” she pulls out a dessert square and sucks a caramelly strand from her palm. She passes the treats to Candice. Frogs peep in a nearby bog.

“George, these are sooo yummy,” Candice says. “My students would love these. Can I get the recipe?” she wipes goo from her chin.

“Yeah, there’s something so different about canoe groups,” I say.

“Oh yeah,” Stacey says. “There’s the sharing of experiences, storytelling and a chance to reflect. The students learn different ways to be a leader. Everything is working in motion together, right?” she chews slowly. Embers tinkle in the firepit.

“It’s really the best playground for learning, this place, because of our connection to the land,” says Stacey. “There’s a sense of wonder and awe; holistic aspects and spiritual aspects. That learning really helps you know yourself, feel grounded and it gives you skill sets that you can share with other people.”

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75 Stein and Kompf (2001) summarize Virginia Griffin’s metaphor of holistic learning as a six-stringed guitar providing the beauty and complexity of the human mind in its fullest capacity are the emotional, relational, physical, metaphoric or intuitive, spiritual, and the rational... ‘Holistic Learning’ stresses the importance of understanding these aspects of mind, and of recognizing their interrelatedness (pp. 107-108).

76 “We gathered our craft together at the large bend in the stream. It was appropriate to rest a moment. In the serenity of the night, we laid open our thoughts. Alternately, we listened intently to the night and to each other. I was silent, allowing Nature to speak – and speak She did” (Knowles, 1992, p. 7).
The misty skies turn dark grey. We pack away our food and garbage and carry them away from camp. We toss a rope over a high tree branch out of bears’ reach and haul the food packs skywards. We wash the dishes, cover the firewood and extinguish the fire. The wind dies down and the mosquitoes whine through the forest. In the distance a screech pierces the quiet. An owl catches dinner.77

77 “As I slowly fill with the knowledge of this place, and sink into it, I come to the sense that my life here is inexhaustible, that its possibilities lie rich behind and ahead of me, that when I am dead it will not be used up” (Berry, 2002, p. 28).

“Oh yeah. It’s a beauty,” I say. I unfold out of the tent into the bright morning and I goop thick white lotion over my red-spotted skin. Candice stretches from the tent. I say, “I think this calls for a fry-up,” and we lace through the trees to our food packs. We release the rope, lower the packs and load them onto our shoulders for the hike back. Geoff stands over a smoking fire, rubs his eyes, scratches his prickly cheeks, yanks his peaked ball cap over his shiny head and nods good morning. Smoke rises and filtered sun glows thick grey white.

Bacon sizzles, shrinks, curls and crisps in the thick, smoky heat. I poke the strips with long tongs and turn them to brown on the other side. I crack eggs, pour milk, grind fresh pepper and sprinkle salt into a separate frying pan, beat the mix with a spatula and move the pan to the edge of the fire. Sliced bagels toast at the opposite edge of the grill. Coffee boils and the sweet-bitter smell curls into my nose. A pine cone drops into the bacon pan. I pull it dripping from the fat and toss the cone into the fire. It flares and cinders. Our humid sleeping bags air over the tarp lines.
“So we have Upper Green Lake, a ninety-metre hop over and into Kahbogama Lake. Then we enter the Mississaugi for another 300 metre portage into Shanguish Lake,” says George. His knees press together and his toes point inwards. He balances a bacon-and-egg topped toasted bagel in one hand and holds the topographical map on his leg with the other. “Then it’s a couple K to the end of the lake for yet another quick portage.” Candice peers over his shoulder. Hot tea steams from her clasped mug.

“Ooo, that looks good in there,” she says and points to the map on George’s knee. “There’s some great rises and narrow pinch-points. It’s open-and-close all the way,” she turns the map over, “to a lovely little sixty-metre portage at a falls. Lunch?” she smiles.
“I love that we are talking about lunch at breakfast,” says Khal. He holds his packed bag over one shoulder.

“Any coffee left?” he asks from under his hat.

I wander to the tent spot. Dry light-brown ground marks the footprint of our home. I pack away my gear, discover my toothbrush, dab on toothpaste, pick past the munching paddlers, down the steep banking and to the water’s edge. I stand on a lopsided, lichen-clad boulder and brush my teeth. I hear Khal’s laugh and Candice’s voice in exclamatory explanation. I brush my teeth. A pair of ducks flap by. I brush my teeth. The water laps slosh, swishing and sucking at the feet of my boulder. I brush my teeth.78 I climb the hill to the smouldering fire and spit. Ashes rise.

“Are you sure?” I ask and peer at Geoff. “It’s your canoe, so it’s up to you.” Geoff shrugs and nods.

I lower myself over the packed hull of Geoff’s cedar strip canoe and crawl over the barrels and backpacks. Geoff lunges us backwards into the open bay. I squint at the eastern sun. I adjust my steering to accommodate Geoff’s paddling. We head south. The bow of the boat

78 “Since getting inside reality rather than getting reality right is the task of narrative fiction, it is inevitable that our stories will never mirror back to us a perfect image. But fiction has the power, dangerous or useful, to normalize the marginal – and we are hearing more and more these days of those voices from the margin” (Sheilds, 2003, p. 35).
breaks the rippling water and it peels open like a book. The rhythmic *sploosh, sploosh, sploosh* taps against the wood hull.79 Stacey and Khal join us in the blue canoe and George and Candice follow us in the green canoe.80

Hot sun beams and sweat drips through my eyebrows. Three hours of paddling and portaging pass quietly81 in the hot, humid air. We pass through a narrow mouth between a low campsite island and the rising mainland.

“This is it,” calls Stacey from the bank. She clambers on shore, wipes her forehead, rolls her neck and pulls Khal and the green canoe further inland. The yellow portage sign nailed to the birch tree and the sound of splashing water welcomes us.82 We carry our gear and canoes to the end of the 60-metre trail.

After our waterfalls swim, George wanders to the group. Fine mist shrouds the edge of the sun’s heat. Our strewn limbs and damp bodies warm on the hot, smooth rock at the top of Kettle Lake. Water drips from George’s swim shorts and the spots evaporate from the smooth rock. His thick greying moustache grins lopsided and he stares at his hand. He sniffs, bobs his head and says,

79 “The movement of a canoe is like a reed in the wind. Silence is part of it, and the sounds of lapping water, bird songs, and wind in the trees. It is part of the medium through which it floats: the sky, the water, the shores” (Olson, 1972, p. 63).

80 “I saw my body and my daily motions as brief coherences and articulations of the energy of the place, which would fall back into it like leaves in the autumn” (Berry, 2002, p. 7).

81 “In the most profound bonds to place I encountered...there was an at times overwhelming sense of inadequacy in words alone to convey the essential nature of what people were trying to convey. Numinous connections to place are all that is awe-inspiring, all that transcends the rational, all that touches the heart more than the mind, all that goes beyond names, stories, and experience and yet still plays a significant role in the bond that links people and place” (Raffan, 1995, p. 136).

82 “A path is little more than a habit that comes with knowledge of a place. It is a sort of ritual of familiarity. As a form, it is a form of contact with a known landscape. It is not destructive. It is the perfect adaptation, through experience and familiarity, of movement to place; it obeys the natural contours; such obstacles as it meets, it goes around” (Berry, 2002, p. 12).
“Would you look at that? I’ve been searching for this rock for years.” Heads swivel.

“What?” I ask. I hold out my hand and George passes me a three-sided pyramid-shaped gritty dark grey stone. A crystalline white striation bisects it diagonally. I turn the rock over in my hands. It is quite heavy although it fits within my palm.

“Let’s see?” says Khal. I pass the stone.

“Sooo you’ve been looking for this rock?” asks Khal, bouncing it in his hands.

“No, no. I’ve got one very similar to it at home. It sits above my desk. I haven’t looked at in years but then I found this one in the rapids during my swim. Unbelievable,” says George.

“I don’t get it,” I say. Candice smells the rock and runs her fingers over the striation. “You have been looking for this rock?”

“The one I have at home is bigger,” says George and holds his hands about eight inches apart, “from our family camp at Minaki. It’s on the Winnipeg River system and it is down-stream from Lake of the Woods and Kenora. Have you ever heard of Minaki Lodge?” asks George.

“Wasn’t it an old holidaying lodge? There was a CNR railway track, the only way to get there,” says Geoff.

“Yeah. It burned down once or twice and went through a zillion of hands. It was one of those fancy hotels, not as fancy as Jasper, but really nice,” he says. “They had a Bay store that had groceries on the one side and hardware and clothing on the other side. A hotel, a railway station, one store and a few houses: that was Minaki.”

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83 Canadian National Railway
“So my father’s father grew up in a cottage and always wanted to have a place out in the wilderness. In 1920, when my father was two, my grandfather bought a mile and a half of south shoreline at the far end of the lake from Minaki Reservation. He decided on one place that had sort of a natural harbour except that prevailing winds blew right into it. The terrain was similar to Georgian Bay but there’s lots and lots and lots and lots of bare rocks and pine forest and huge tracts of bush.”

“Sounds amazing,” says Stacey. She loosens her drying hair and scratches her head.

“It was. There was never any electricity. There was a naptha-powered kick-start pump to bring the water up the hill and into a twenty-gallon tank under the eaves. That gave the kitchen some water pressure. You got cold water or you could get tepid water if there was sunshine. We also used naptha lanterns; you’d put the fuel in and then you’d have to pressurize it and then you’d light the mantles. There was a kerosene fridge; my brother was good at making that work.”

“The main building was yellow-painted clapboard, green trim and a red asphalt shingle roof. It had a big living room, a big dining room, two bedrooms, the kitchen at the back and beyond the kitchen there was a third little bedroom that had bunk-beds in it. The kitchen had a wood fire cook stove. A cast iron kettle always rumbling away. The dining room had a wood-burning cylindrical fireplace that I never saw going. It was like living in an antique store from the 1920s and 30s.”84

“There was a guest cabin with two bedrooms and an ice house with a twelve-by-twelve sawdust floor. They used to cut ice from the lake in the winter and bring it in and then cover it in sawdust. There was a small on-land boathouse. You had to roll your boats past the cottage to get there. There were two separate out-houses; one for the men and one for the women. Later on my grandfather built a one-room log cabin down close to the water. It had room for a double-bed, maybe a sitting area, a little chaise lounge, a couple of dressers and an armoire. They’d have a wash stand but not any running water, for sure. And it was very close to the water. My grandfather and grandmother slept in there.”

84 “One cannot separate memories and impressions of earth, community, and family: these make up a sense of place” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 13).
Stacey passes the rock to George. He weighs it in his hand, turns it over and pokes the tip. “Huh. My Uncle George found this rock when he was a kid. I remember it always stood on the fireplace mantle next to a photograph of him smoking a pipe. Pretty striking picture. He was an amazing guy, two years older than my dad. When he was 17, he had a summer job working at the railway, thirty miles away in Kenora. One night he paddled in the dark and showed up at the camp the next morning for breakfast. By canoe. In the dark. There’s an odd stretch of rapid and one decent one. He was just a big, burly, strong guy.”

“At the start of the war he was chosen to be trained as a commando; he was good at everything, I guess. The Canadian officers were very cavalier with the lives of these guys; they were expendable. One night off the coast of Sicily they sent him and his partner off from the submarine in one of these inflatable canoes. Probably leaked like a sieve. They never came back. They never found the canoe.” George squints into the rapids, sighs and says, “Imagine, as a mother, how you’d feel? My grandmother was hoping to the day she died. She was hoping that he would show up somewhere. No closure. Ever.” George wraps his thick fingers around the stone, lifts it and presses his thumbnail along a ridge.

“The rock always fascinated me from the time I was little, little. I would just pick it up and look at it. I would just,” he pauses, pokes the point, laughs and sits the rock beside him. “Even now it still fascinates me. The one at home is missing the point and I was always

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85 “Men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise” (Leopold, 1966, p. 109).

86 One of the strengths in arts-informed research (eg: Cole, Neilsen, Knowles & Luciani, 2004; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Knowles, Luciani, Cole & Neilsen, 2007, Neilsen, Cole & Knowles, 2001) rests in the space and place for liminality and disrupted stories/histories. By allowing liminality to just be, to show rather than explain, readers are compelled to enter into these experiences and to actively engage with the texts and to connect with the research. This respects the complexity of human experience and expression and removes limitations on it.
frustrated that it lost its tip. It is a perfect triangle, a perfect pyramidal rock except that it is missing the top of the peak. I spent hours trying to find another rock like his, one not missing the end. What are the chances that the rock’s gonna have that shape anyway?” George asks.

“Anyway, we used to go visit my grandparents every summer. I was born in Winnipeg but moved to Montreal when I was twelve months old. We’d take the train from Winnipeg where we visited my mom’s parents. The Friday night Camper’s Special it was called. It’s about an hour and a half – two-hour train ride, which was kinda fun as a kid. Then we had to take a boat down the lake. That was the only way you could get to the cottage.”

“It was only two weeks a summer that we would go up there, but this place to me was the best place in the world, absolute Nirvana. My grandfather’s routine was that you work all morning and you play all afternoon. His day would start the evening before ‘cause he would soak this fantastic porridge overnight; it was his own recipe with two thousand grains. He would be up at five-thirty in the morning and cook it on the wood stove for ages. He had a funny walk. My brother walks a lot like him.”

George grins, stands, says, “He walked sorta like this,” and marches along the water’s edge like a determined chicken. We laugh. “You would hear him clomp, clomp, clomp through the cottage,” says George.

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87 “The gestural genesis of language, the way that communicative meaning is first incarnate in the gestures by which the body spontaneously expresses feelings and responds to changes in its affective environment. The gesture is spontaneous and immediate” (Abram, 1996, p. 74).

88 “Behind and beneath the comic characters and the comic situations exists the real meaning of the story...what the tribe understood about human growth and development” (King, 2003, p. 23).
“After breakfast we’d do chores. Often we would go get firewood with these old tools. You would take your axe and your cross-cut saw and cant hook, which is a levered claw we used to carry the felled trees back to the saw-horse. When we chopped up the cords of wood, my brother and I would play this game. You wedge a wooden match in a crack of the dried log and then try to light it with the axe. I could light a match, not every time, but I could.”

“Other jobs would be re-tarring the leaky old row boat or painting the boats or painting the cottage or repairing something. The place needed constant maintenance. We picked blueberries if there had been enough rain. If it was a dry summer we would have to search out areas where moisture or water was held between rocks, where the bushes would still produce. We fished. The fishing was as good as when my dad was a kid. It was good enough that if you wanted a fish for dinner, you could probably catch pickerel, pike or bass. Then, of course, we’d have to fillet the fish. That’s a handy skill to have.”

“As a kid, I would just be gone for hours by myself walking through the bush or wherever and just looked at stuff. I’d have spent hours studying birds’ nests, ants’ nests, tadpoles, frogs, all that stuff. My parents, they never worried. I guess they knew I couldn’t get into trouble. Apart from this one time.”

“I used to go rowing around in the old row boat. After forty years or so of patching it weighed a ton. It was like a tank and it probably had an inch of tar and it still leaked. Anyways, I’d put my foot on the fishing rod and just troll. I would go out for hours just rowing. Once you got it going it had a lot of momentum,” George says.

89 “My father put me on one end of a two-man crosscut saw when I was ten and gave me the classic instruction of ‘don’t ride the saw’ – don’t push, only pull – and I loved the clean swish and ring of the blade, the rhythm, the comradeship, the white curl of the wood that came out with the rakers, the ritual of setting the handles, and the sprinkle of kerosene (to dissolve pitch) on the blade and into the kerf” (Snyder, 1990, p. 126).

90 “By walking humbly in the world, and treating its living inhabitants with respect, you can learn far more about their true nature than Bent or Audubon and other disciplines of Newton ever imagined” (Horwood, 1987, p. 240).

91 “Children’s curiosity about places is part of a general curiosity about thing, part of the need to label experiences so that they have a greater degree of permanence and fit into some conceptual scheme” (Tuan, 1977, p. 29).
“I guess the getting-going part would have been the hard part,” grins Khal.

“Or stopping,” says George. “This one time, I was about eleven or twelve, I went out fishing. I rowed down the shore and stopped on the way to look at the eagle’s nest about half a mile from camp. A fairly big summer storm blew up. If I had waited an hour it would have blown over. But I headed out. The wind was howling and the waves were crashing. I remember thinking I had to stay close to shore in case it swamps so I could get ashore. I don’t think I had fear for my life. I mean, when you are young that kinda thing doesn’t enter your head. I was going with the wind to get back. But I had to row in the storm down the lake. When I got home my parents were there waiting for me. I remember that they were kinda happy to see me,” says George. He picks up the rock and pokes the peak, turns the rock over and cups it in his calloused hands.

“So over the course of years and years and years between my dad and my grandfather and everybody tromping around, there were these magnificent paths, maybe a foot wide, carved through the forest floor. They would be just worn down to the bare rock, through that big, thick, dark green moss and then the light green moss. You know how the two of them grow together? They would go phwuhh” he gestures into the woods. “Apart from one patch that, I bet, is still there to this day.” George shakes his head.

“I was about ten when my brother and I each had a friend up. We followed this one path that went back to an independent lake dammed by beavers. There were some steep rock cliffs maybe only six or eight feet high. We thought that this was a great place to build a little shelter. So we started to get logs and sticks and we made our little lean-to. It wouldn’t have been big enough to camp in but it was big enough to sort of huddle in. It needed roofing material,” George pauses and frowns.

“So we started to peel back – uh – I hate to think about it. That beautiful moss; we and put it on the roof. I remember thinking at the time, that maybe we should stop. This isn’t a great idea. First of all it looked like hell. You took this beautiful scene where the rising rocks were blending with the forest then all of a sudden you got vast areas that are bare now that shouldn’t be bare. So visually we ruined it.

“Without writing, knowledge of the diverse properties of particular animals, plants, and places can be preserved only by being woven into stories, into vital tales wherein the specific characteristics of the plant are made evident through a narrated series of events and interactions” (Abram, 1996, p. 120).
I remember I went back there when I was seventeen and it was still - oh god - just looked like we had done it yesterday. It didn’t have the brown dirt from underneath the moss. It was just bleached rock. It’ll be hundreds of years before that moss grows back, if it ever grows back. I think I learned a little respect for the length of time it takes for things to grow and the effect that man can have just like that93. The lean-to would have been taken out by the snow six months later,” says George.

“Whatever happened to the place? Do you still go up?” asks Khal. The wind picks up as we pack up our lunch.

“Mid-’70s Dad called up one night and said, ‘I’m gonna sell Minaki. That’s okay with you, isn’t it?’ I just said, ‘Well, if you decided to do that then I guess that there’s nothing I can say about it. So, okay.’ Both my brother and I, after we had time to think about it, we thought we could get him to change his mind. My grandfather had said to my brother, ‘Don’t ever let your dad sell this place.’ Imagine how he felt. By then my father had already committed and would never have cancelled the deal; that would have been dishonourable.”

“We had one kid and probably another on the way. I understood that it was an impossible situation for him. I was happy to go up for two weeks and try to keep it from falling into the ground, but even with three of us doing it, I don’t think you could.94 It wasn’t practical. I understood why he was doing it, but I just cried. I just bawled in despair ‘cause it was the best part of my life. So we went out with two friends in our beat-up old Volkswagen camper van and took a whole bunch of stuff from there. It was just to have something to remember it by. So that’s when I picked up my Uncle George’s rock from the mantle.

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93 “Intrinsic to an ecological worldview is the ability to see an ecosystem as a part of oneself. This knowledge is gained both through an understanding of scientific ecology and the ability to observe and internalize the interconnections and interdependence of all living things” (Thomashow, 1996, p. 12).

94 “Thus, the living world...is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humus into which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons” (Abram, 1996, p. 34).
Three canoes slip from the rocks, past the trees and through the waves. They head south into the long finger of Kettle Lake. The land lies low. Muted sun heats working shoulders. Silence falls in our canoe. Geoff stern-paddles and points our bow steady fifty metres parallel to the shore. I tip my head to the right. Reaching branches, unfolding ferns, the moist rocks lined by winter’s wear pass. My shoulder cracks. I think of hours spent like this and place slips into place into place. The sway of the boat in the water pulls my hips back and forth, front and back. My shoulders and head respond and connect to the water’s waves.

“So what’s with the tobacco offering?” asks Geoff.

I snap my head sideways. His voice is distant and detached. I falter.

“Um, well,” I begin. I search my mind. What was with the tobacco offering? I swallow a lump in my throat and search my belly for calm.
“Well, it’s something that we have always done at the beginning of our trips.” I say. “It’s not meant in disrespect at all.” I feel sick. I never really thought about it.\footnote{At the put-in of the last portage, a group of cabins mark the site of what was the headquarters for the Mississaugi Forest Reserve. Grey Owl signed the inside wall of the main log cabin during his stay in 1914, but the cabin is now private and remains locked (Callan, 1999, pp. 91&96).}

“It just seems incongruent, that’s all,” says Geoff. He directs the bow back into the breeze, into the waves. “You come from somewhere else, or your parents or parents’ parents do or whatever. Why not use your own traditions?” he asks. I sit and paddle.\footnote{Mezirow (2000) discusses a crucial dimension of adult development that involves a structural reorganization in the way a person looks at themselves and their relationships. This perspective change often results from a contrary, challenging and/or difficult circumstance. Attitudes and value systems are called into question and this ‘disorienting dilemma’ gives pause for reflection and reconsideration.}

My teeth press together and heat flushes my face.

“It’s, I guess, a way of remembering that we weren’t here first. Canoe history is a part of my personal history.\footnote{Parker Palmer (1998) discusses the importance of silence in order to centre oneself. While silence can be a threatening experience, creative tension can develop. After a questioning silence the inner answer emerges, therefore it is important to allow space for feelings.} It’s a part of who I am,” I say. We turn south-west around a point of land and slip between the opening bay and a lumpy, rock-strewn island. I paddle.

\footnote{“And so, such history as my family has is the history of its life here. All that any of us may know of ourselves is to be known in relation to this place. And since I did most of my growing up here, and have had most of my meaningful experiences here, the place and the history, for me, have been inseparable, and there is a sense in which my own life is inseparable from the history and the place. It is a complex inheritance, and I have been both enriched and bewildered by it” (Berry, 2002, p. 4).}
“You do loads of these trips, don’t you?” I ask, “and this is not part of your heritage’s context or culture. Does that mean that you can’t do this because it isn’t your direct heritage?”

The canoe pushes forward through a breaking wave whipped up by the head-wind.99 Thin rattling reeds fill the low land areas and line the shallow part of the lake. The canoe smacks through the water. I paddle. The land ahead glows green. Patches of dark sweep the tree tops. Stacey watches us from under her white brim.

“I think the canoe is a part of being a Canadian,” he says, “I’m just not sure that a tobacco offering is.”

“That’s fair,” I say, “I guess for me the offering is about mindfulness and humility. It’s a way of acknowledging the history of this thing, what I do. I mean, the canoe was developed by First Nations peoples. Now it is how I get away. And that’s very important to me. I guess the tobacco offering links me back to canoe history. It’s a way of remembering how very small I am in this world, I remember humility.100 Besides, it sure is a better way to honour this place than whipping out a set of noisy bagpipes,” I say.

99 “Initiative has survival value in a watery world where changes of weather and current have an immediate impact on the small craft” (Tuan, 1977, p. 81).

100 “The idea of canoe is, at its core, about relationships: between people and place, nature and technology, and among people who would pull together in common purpose. Canoe balances strengths and vulnerability, old and new, regional differences and national interests, Aboriginal and Other, French and English. A durable idea, canoe reminds us of who we are, where we have been, as a nation” (Raffan, 1999, p. 242).
Geoff and I paddle towards and onto beaver dam between Kettle Lake and a small pond down-stream. The pointed, chewed branches fold like fingers across the narrows. Water sloshes around the webbing of the dam and I step out and onto the wall. It wobbles then holds firm. I pull Geoff and his boat onto the dam’s rise, grasp the sides to stabilize it and he jumps out to the opposite bank. I bend my knees, grasp the gunwales and look up at Geoff.

“Well, it sure is the best way to get up into parts of this country. I’ve been places that you just can’t reach any other way,” he says.

I nod.

“One, two, three,” I say and we haul the canoe across the dam. Branches screech along the hull. The stern of the canoe slips towards us and teeters over the waterline. The canoe’s wide belly presses against my shins. I step back and my foot slips into a crack. Water fills my boot.

“One, two, three,” and we haul the canoe along. The bow splashes into the little pond and the canoe teeters on the crest of the beaver dam. I clamber over the gear and drain my soggy boot over the edge of the canoe.

“So much of this land is inaccessible,” I say. “I mean, look at this puddle we are on. It’s tiny. Nothing else could really get us here. No one could access this and yet here we are.” I look over my shoulder. A crow rises and caws rough and throaty.

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101 “No part of any country is inaccessible where there are waterways with portages between them. The canoe gives sense of unbounded range and freedom, unlimited movement and exploration, such as larger craft never know” (Olson, 1972, p. 68).

102 “Recreation is valuable in proportion to the intensity of its experiences, and to the degree to which it differs from and contrasts with workaday life” (Leopold, 1966, p. 249).
“In one sense, we are spoiled with canoeing. Isn’t it just a bunch of middle-class, privileged people trying to find a different place to eat every night? I mean, we take our fancy gear and create some sort of an illusion of self-reliance,” says Geoff. “It’s just a crazy thing to do.”

We pause in the heat. Stacey and Khal drift slowly sideways towards the narrow landscape. Khal turns the canoe straight ahead, points the bow into the racing water. Their boat bounces through the swift. Stacey draws to the right and avoids an overhanging pine tree, a sweeper. We enter the cool narrows. Geoff fixes the bow toward smooth centre of the swift. The water’s shift pulls us through. We cut right, swoop through the deep water to the left, flush out into bubbling water and travel cross-current to shore and along a scrubby point. Tiny pink orchids bob in the breeze, long light grey-green grasses rustle and the bent fingers of compact shrubs rise above the grasses. I pause and scratch the constellation of bumps on my neck. We slip through a slim passage and bobble down the river.

“It’s sorta like what Khal was saying last night. We head out with limited resources and have to rely on ourselves, the little group you go with,” I say.

“For sure. There’s the journey element of the canoe trip that is just a rich and wonderful shared experience so no matter who you are with or what you do, a canoe trip, because you are eating together, because you are travelling together, because your facing the unknowns

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103 “People of wilderness cultures rarely seek out adventures. If they deliberately risk themselves, it is for spiritual rather than economic reasons” (Snyder, 1990, p. 25).

104 “My arts-informed inquiry focuses on sense of place as a worldview orientation that honours the primacy of experience, affirms tacit dimensions of personal knowledge, and awakens to a porous receptivity by embracing embodied knowing. I explore place as interior – perceived through somatic-affective modes of awareness; as autobiographical – experientially perceived through exterior environment; and as sensual – perceived through the body’s way of knowing” (Thomas, 2004, p. 62).

105 “American environmentalism is replete with revised notions of affluence-calling attention to how people live, where their material wealth comes from, how a materialist orientation contributes to the exploitation of natural resources, and so forth. By living simply, and doing so in the public eye for clearly articulated ecological reasons, one challenges many prevailing cultural notions and makes a strong political statement” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 39).
of weather and geography together, stuff happens that gives you things to have in common,” he says. “Plus there’s something about reconnecting with the rhythms of natural order. It’s so much grander than anything humans can do. At some other level, I think canoeing has something to do with answering the need to understand or appreciate the interrelationship of things cultural and things natural.”

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We pull over to the other two boats and we raft up. We face the long slim southern tail of Upper Bark Lake.

“We have a decision on where to camp,” I say. “We have a lift-over, a 500 metre portage and then a 100 metre portage. We could conceivably camp near the ranger’s cottage. It faces south-west and should catch some beautiful light.” I run my finger over the sandied map and count kilometres. “Or we have fifteen more K to the next possible camping spot, about 3 more hours paddling or so, depending.” The sun’s angle falls towards the trees. “It could be a bit dark,” I say.

“How be we see what the cabin site is like and if it’s horrible, we push on?” says George. Three canoes separate and head south to the lift-over.

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The final portage smears thick grey mud over my calves. Its wet smell permeates the backpack I carry. I walk the worn path through the long grasses at the edge of the pine forest. Two cabin roofs, one black, one red, peek over the ridge. The portage leads between the two.

106 “Practically speaking, a life that is vowed to simplicity, appropriate boldness, good humor, gratitude, unstinting work and play, and lots of walking brings us close to the actually existing world and its wholeness” (Snyder, 1999, p. 25).

107 “Still, I go there – pushing along these paths, or clambering over the fences to seek the stillness that only a woods can provide. I am in awe of it and never fail to find a kind of peace at the centre that I can carry home up the hill. I am the container in which that peace is carried” (Findley, 1998, p. 24).
“You should check out the stuff over there,” says Khal when he passes me on his second run. He nods to the blackened wood cabin with the red roof.

I pace behind the cabin. A tarnished scythe, a rusted two-foot D-saw and a wobbly work horse hang under the red eves against the thick, weathered and splitting grey-black horizontal pine boards. They meet in dove-tail construction. Feathery grasses, yellow spiked flowers and bowing raspberry bushes crowd the foundation. A thick-trunked birch tree hugs the front corner of the old ranger’s cabin. The bright white door contrasts the wood. Black lettering stands stark:

Private
Property
NO
Trespassing

A lumpy, torn pile of garbage graces the door step. I smell old oil and rotting cloth.108

“Not bad,” says Stacey as she steps through the campsite across the lake from Grey Owl’s Cabin. Geoff pulls dried branches to the fire pit. Khal bobs in the blue canoe on Bark Lake. The squeaking pump echos back to the point of land. Candice and George uncrinkle the tarp. I drop the collected logs, brush bits of bark from my forearms and wander over to help them. Candice eyes the shoulder of a high tree branch.

“That would be perfect,” she says and points. I crouch, lean my shoulder against the tree and flatten my back.

108 “There will be no ‘tragedy of the commons’ greater than this: if we do not recover the commons – regain personal, local, community, and peoples’ direct involvement in sharing (in being) the web of the wild world – that world will keep slipping away” (Snyder, 1999, p. 39).
“Up you get,” I say. I hear my mother’s voice. Candice steps on my thigh, then on my back and grabs the rough bark of the tree. She lifts her feet. I turn and stand against the tree. She steps on my shoulders, reaches the tarp rope over the branch, pulls it taught and twists it twice around the trunk.

“On the shoulders of giants,” she calls.

“Nuh-uhh,” I say, “Giants on my shoulders.” She grins from her perch. George and I grab Candice’s feet and lower her back down the tree. The tarp goes up.

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Khal passes me as I return from the water’s edge. A towel drapes over his shoulders and his pipe rests in his palm. He carries a slim plastic-wrapped packet of Captain Black Gold tobacco in the other. His tall shadow stretches as a slim silhouette as he wades into the water.

Candice launches the green canoe, steps in and paddles herself into the lake. In the bay she settles herself on her fleece and towel, cracks open her journal, bites the tip of her pen. Her streaked fringe drops over her cheek as she looks south towards the lumpy islands in the distance.

Stacey stands on a point of land, raises her arms over her head, closes her eyes and rolls her neck. She crouches on the look-out rock, reaches into her stuff sack and draws out a note pad and pencil. She feathers her pencil across the paper. She stares over and into the water from time to time. Warm light glows on her shoulders.

I wander the shoreline and pass George. He rests against a lichen-covered boulder, chews on some green leaves and stares at the underside of a moist log over the water. I pause. He pulls a couple leaves from a plant, stretches a handful towards me and asks,

I crouch beside the firepit and arrange its stones. I think of Mom’s hands building fire. I see her slender, sooty, grey fingers break down over-sized fire pits, clean them out and restructure the pits into a small, manageable cooking fires. She secured the rocks to block the wind and to balance the cooking rack. Mom’s hands created our home-away-from-home. I pause, look up at my friends, scan the arrangement of the tents and tarp around the fire and the nested canoes near-by. Geoff sits on a log and whittles driftwood. His paddle rests against the pine behind him. His lined, brown hands wield the glinting, curved blade. Curls fall to his feet. Dry wood crackles and burns in the pit. I place a pot of water, onion soup mix and wild rice over the flames.

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“That’s a unique paddle you’ve got there, Geoff,” I say. I throw my chin towards the paddle behind him. I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye with the back of my wrist, blink and bend over the onions again. “Where did you get it?”

“Ohhh,” he says and turns around, carving blade cupped in his palm. “That one I made a few years ago.” He blinks at me and squints.

“Really? What was that for?” I ask. I slide my knife into my hip-belt and throw the onions in hot oil. They sizzle and spit. He reaches back and grabs the paddle, holds the butt end and eyes its length.

“I’ve always thought that if I ever lost all my paddles, I’d carve one.” 110 So one summer, it’s a while ago now, this big balsam tree had been knocked down by lightning. I used a piece of that tree and over a period of about four days I made this paddle. We were at a property we used to visit in the valley at the junction of the Amble du Fond River along the old portage between North Tea Lake and Manitou Lake in

109 “That beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there” (Dillard, 1974, p. 8).
110 “Objects and places are centres of values” (Tuan, 1977, p. 18).
Algonquin Park. There’s a falls where you swim. That valley is so steep and it has big hemlock trees in it that were never cut for some reason. Hemlock was always wanted for the tannins in the bark and it was great for wagons and stuff, back in the day. It made for strong, sinewy wood, it wasn’t of sufficient commercial value to cut it that far away from the railway, from the mill. This cabin it is just on the edge of that grove. It is like a natural cathedral; have you ever seen what hemlock does to the light? And the sound?” he asks.

I add a handful of raisins, one can of drained chickpeas, canned tomatoes, two teaspoons of curry powder and the crispy browned onions into the cooking wild rice. I put a lid on it and shake my head.

“It’s pretty spectacular. For two weeks we were self-contained with no plans to travel, but to just be there to catch pollywogs with our son, cook and carry on. My son was about three at the time so amidst the shavings of balsam there were little feet and dirty little hands. So that’s all wrapped up in that.” He pokes his fingernails into the dimples of the paddle’s blade.

“It’s beautifully flawed. The tree had been fallen for quite a while and it’s got termite holes in it or some kind of bug has eaten through. I kinda like that about it. It’s not perfect by any means, but it’s got that sorta combination of rough beauty and an aesthetic as well. I was gonna bring it out and sand it and varnish it and I just thought no, that’s the way it is.” Geoff squints over the lake and watches a heron flap from the opposite shore. Frogs peep in a distant bog. Candice returns in the canoe. Smoke rises from where Khal stretches over the shore rock. Stacey joins George at his boulder and chews green leaves. I stir the pot.  

“So do you use it often?” I ask.

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111 “There is a kind of sanctity in these forests of great trees that makes me think of dim cloisters in old, vast cathedrals in England, and causes the ceremonious pomp and the sonorous insincerities of not a few theosophies to seem cheap and tawdry in comparison” (Owl, 1938, p. 131).

112 “Synaesthesia – the overlap and intertwining of the senses – resulted in a number of experiential analyses directly pertinent to the phenomenon of reading…. this interplay of the different senses is what enables the chiasm between the body and the earth, the reciprocal participation – between one’s own flesh and the encompassing flesh of the world – that we commonly call perception” (Abram, 1996, pp. 124, 128)
“Not really. I only grabbed it last-minute as I was getting ready for this trip. I’ve only really used it a couple times,” he says. “Interestingly, just a couple months ago I was on the Grand River in a North Canoe with it. It was interesting how my first real canoe trip which was down Speed and Grand Rivers came back as I was sitting as a participant with a bunch of young guides hosted by the people at Ashwika, a Six-Nations reserve. It was really neat. I mean, the smell of the water, and the sound of the water, the gulls fishing, and, yeah. It was neat to be back to that although it probably smelled like the solvents they use to make shoes, stuff that happens up-stream, but it’s got a kind of a fresh water smell.”

“I’ve smelled salt water from the middle of the ocean, from shores, from having spent a lot of time in the north of Canada, the smell of ice and snow and northern salt water is a very different smell. Fresh water smells much, much more reassuring because I know that’s where I come from. It’s just where I feel more comfortable.”

“We passed an island on the Grand named after a Mohawk woman who had lived there her entire life. She’s since died, but her son was one of the guides and I ended up chatting to him. I was talking about how the Grand River was just given the international prize for river conservation. I’m unpacking a little bit of my story and about how I feel on the River. I also grew up in a tributary of the Grand and said how proud I was, how neat it was that people from all over the world hold up this river, this dirty little river full of shopping carts and old tires, as an example of how a river can be brought back from the brink of oblivion, how the brown trout fishery has recovered, through the collective efforts of the people who live in the communities along the way,” he says.

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113 “Odors lend character to objects and places, making them distinctive, easier to identify and remember” (Tuan, 1977, p. 11).

114 “What does it mean to be in command of space, to feel at home in it? It means that the objective reference points in space, such as landmarks and the cardinal positions, conform with the intention and the coordinates of the human body” (Tuan, 1977, p. 36).

115 “There is value in any experience that reminds us of our dependency on the soil-plant-animal-man food chain, and of the fundamental organization of the biota” (Leopold, 1966, p. 196).

116 “Connection with the place is enough to inspire the local community to hold on: renewed gold mining and stepped-up logging press in on us. People volunteer to be on committees.... It is hard, unpaid, frustrating work for people who already have to work full time to support their families.... More than logic of self-interest inspires this: a true and selfless love of the land is the source of the undaunted spirit of my neighbours” (Snyder, 1999, pp. 102-103).
“Then he burst into tears. It was just,” Geoff stops and inspects a scar across the paddle blade. Khal sits beside Geoff and munches on a smoked oyster and cracker. He passes the plate to Candice. George and Stacey meander back to the campfire. I open a tin of turkey. Geoff says, “It’s not every day that a fifty-five year old aboriginal guy breaks into tears, a guy who is part Mohawk and who makes his living on the river. His family’s history is from that river. He’s just that connected. He told some stories along the way and our stories kinda overlapped and we had this conversation.” It was a really interesting moment. It was a private moment at the end of the day. The sun had set. So the smell of the water and many of the things I found resonant, clearly he did too.” Stacey smiles and wipes her cheek with her fingertips.

“He has invited me to go back to go fishing,” says Geoff.

“Hey, that’s great,” says George. “What do you fish?” He munches on the pre-dinner snack and passes the plate to Geoff.

“The only fish I ever caught in the Speed River were suckers and chub. Now he tells me they’ve got five-, six-, seven-pound rainbow trout and brown trout. And the piece of river we travelled they claimed that there were eighty species of fish in that part of the river,” he says and munches on a cracker.

“So what does that have to do with anything? I guess it has a lot to do with the echo of two people who are about the same age, who have gone and done very different things but who, in a sense, are way more similar than you would think. Neither one of us thought. At some very fundamental level we are from different cultures, we’ve had different trajectories on education and privilege, I am guessing, I suppose it to be true. But we grew up in the same river valley, the same watershed. In the fullness of time all of those things that maybe we thought defined us as people just kind of fell away.”

117 “Storytelling is a primary form of human speaking, a mode of discourse that continually weds the human community to the land” (Abram, 1996, p. 163).

118 Common in polluted rivers, chub are not fish that people generally catch and for food.

119 “Before people can become citizens, they must see themselves as neighbours. It is their attachment to a place, the fact that they all live there and care about it that brings them into relationship with one another, making them neighbours” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 97).
few people see and appreciate when you are walking down the street in whatever you choose to put on that day, it is more or less hidden. But those things are pretty fundamental to defining who you are.”

“Dinner’s ready,” I say and lift the lid on the steaming pot. Khal stands up, rummages through his gear, wrestles out a plate and fork.

“So you stay involved in outdoor education and support this sort of awareness?” he asks and picks over legs and legs toward the canoe-table. The others follow.

“For sure,” he says and places the paddle behind him. “My question is, though, why aren’t we taking kids into the shopping-cart-infested, polluted stream that runs behind the school to help them understand the precepts of nature? It’s that right there in their home neighbourhood. In a sense, my own journey, one of the reasons I found myself going back to where I grew up to paddle the Speed and the Grand Rivers was to make a point of it, to get more connected to it,” says Geoff. He stands and gestures to Stacey to go ahead. I serve her dinner.

“Back in the late sixties, I left home with the river itself as an idea. That physicality of the river comes back when you go back. It turns out that the river as an idea in this geography is something that I have found to be an incredibly important notion to take with me. Knowing that this country is a nation of rivers, it’s the canoe that attaches me to my country.”

120 “The purpose of revisiting the special places of childhood is to gain awareness of the connections we make with the earth, awakening and holding those memories in our consciousness of the present” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 9).

121 “Even though relatively few of us actually live up north, the boreal forest – that seemingly endless scramble of rock, water and scraggy spruce – remains the bedrock of our national experience” (Savage, 2004, p. 101).
The air cools and dew droplets lace trees’ branches, drip from the reeds and jewel the tents. Damp sinks into fleece tops and pants. We tidy away camp, brush our teeth and g’nites bounce back off the lake’s far boulders. Stacey, Candice and I shuffle one at a time into our tent. Stacey yanks on her wool toque and zips herself into her sleeping bag. I thread on a second pair of wool socks and zip myself into my sleeping bag. Candice slides her painted paddle inside the door, wrestles into another thin fleece top and zips herself into her sleeping bag. We mumble about the day’s swim, stories, sights and sounds. Shivers and shuffling slows. I wake myself with a snore and turn onto my side.

“The sun has set on Ajawaan. The moon shines palely down upon the still surface of the water, and in the lonely forest the shadows of the great trees fall big and dark.”  

122 Owl, 1936, p. 281.
Chapter 8
Hellgate Rapids
Candice

The swish-swish and unzip of sleeping bags wakes me. Fat rain taps, splats and patters against our tent. I hear someone roll-over. Stacey sits up, bends forward and sighs. Outside I hear footsteps. Twigs snap, feet shuffle and campfire smoke smell joins the humid human scent of sleep in our little house. I shuffle deeper into my bag.

“Someone’s up already,” groans Candice. “Thank God.” The girls dress and creep out their doors. I stretch, unzip and shudder in the cool, moist air. Voices greet good morning. I put on my last pair of clean, dry wool socks, warm thermal long-johns, wool turtleneck and pink silk neckerchief. I tug my hair into a greasy pony-tail and yank on a blue wool hat. My blue rain pants resist my feet and legs and I wriggle them up to my waist.

“Water’s boiling” says Geoff. I pop out, trot across the mucky wet ground, and join the crew near the fire. Geoff ladles boiled water over the teabag and milk powder in my mug. Islands of clumped white powder swirl. I close my eyes and steam warms my chilly nose. I slurp hot tea, open my eyes and watch the skies. I will serve smoked salmon at lunch today.

“It looks pretty determined,” says George as a gust of wind billows the tarp. It pops against the ropes, water spills skywards and splatters on the ground behind us. The heavy, wet, grey-black skies churn. A pair of ducks hink-hink low over the water.

“Porridge is ready,” says Geoff through the smoke.

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Candice and I paddle past dripping pine trees and beaded spiders’ webs. Dark green leaves of the low-lying bushes glisten in the rain. Rain impacts the river and shussshes with each passing curtain. My exposed wrists and ankles cool in the wet. Drops bounce against my cheeks. Yesterday’s warmth seeps from my skin.

“How much does this look like the French River?” asks Candice. “Very,” I say, “minus the long smooth rocks. But the river itself, the size, the trees, the smell. It’s amazing,” I say. “You know, it also reminds me a bit of Temagami,” I turn around and dip my paddle back into the bouncing water.

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123 “Our place is part of what we are. Yet even a “place” has a kind of fluidity: it passes through space and time” (Snyder, 1999, p. 29).
124 “space can be variously experienced as the relative location of objects or places, as the distances and expanses that separate or link places, and – more abstractly – as the area defined by a network of places” (Tuan, 1977, p. 12).
“Oh, I love Temagami. I want to go to Lake Obabika right now. I really connect to Temagami, but not the people on houseboats and fishermen who destroy, leave garbage and don’t clean up. They have no regard for paddlers. I really struggle with that,” she says. “I take my students there every year. We do this great loop and always hit this one camp site, if it is available.”

“...”

“You come in from Diamond Lake which is one of those big, long lakes. When the sun hits it, it just sparkles, and sparkles and sparkles. There’s a tiny portage off the south-west corner, but it’s not an easy one so you are literally leaping from boulder to boulder to boulder. Glacial out-wash. Last couple times I’ve done it, a couple huge white pine trees had come down right in the middle of the trail so it’s like weaving your canoe. The put-in is on these sheer rocks. There’s this big sign attached to a tree that the aboriginals put up about preserving the land.”

“So you are at what we call Pen Lake, a little puddle you could probably spit across. You paddle the fifty meters to another steeply sloped rock. Another 400-metre portage uphill, across the logging road and the put-in is a swampy, grassy narrows into this meandering river. Very quiet and marshy and puddley. There’s also a bridge where all the boards have been ripped off so all that’s standing now is the tresses. There’s a sign there that says ‘Place a Rock, Save a Tree.’ There’s huge pile of rocks on the road to stop the logging trucks.”

“You continue through and into the north end of Lake Obabika. It’s a pretty big lake so it channels some pretty wild wind storms. There’s a big, wide bay and the campsite is there. Loons often gather in there, hooting and hollering and fishing together. It’s crazy.”

125 “Unfortunately, by the time we arrived in the wilderness, broke and homeless, the story of being made in God’s image, of living in paradise, of naming the animals must have gone to our heads, for while we weren’t the strongest or the fastest or the fiercest creatures on the planet, we were, certainly, as it turned out, the most arrogant” (King, 2003, p. 28).

126 “Fights between indigenous peoples and dominant cultures are symptomatic of a global problem, which is while growth continues in every sector of almost every economy, the total amount of land available for use remains about the same” (Raffan, 1995, p. 128).

127 “So while a land conflict may focus on functional issues like timber rights or golf, the fight itself is more likely rooted in the deep-seated emotional bonds that tie people to places” (Raffan, 1995, p. 128).
“The site’s in a red pine stand. Lots of people use it so it’s very cleared out; there are lots of tent spots. But you go back from the clearing and it’s untouched bush. In fact it’s one of Ontario’s last stands of old growth and you can hike the trails up throughout it.”

“That site is a very sacred place for aboriginal people in the area. There’s little tokens and totems around these pine trees you walk past to get up to this long, narrow lake, Shishkong Lake. I think it translates into ‘Spirit Lake’. On one side are super-high cliffs and a sheer drop into the lake. On the other, you’re still up on high cliffs but every once in a while it slopes down to the shoreline and its trails go through the old growth forest. Really beautiful; it’s just such a peaceful place with these beautiful trees everywhere.”

“In the old growth forest there’s a sweat lodge and there’s a sheltered, weedy beach and rocks that slope into the water for a great swimming area. The site is west-facing, there’s two well-established fire-pit areas: one’s a great cooking fire and the other’s kind of on the point so you have the view of the whole lake. The sunsets are unbelievable. You’ve got all of Lake Obabika in front of you. It’s crazy.”

“I think what I really value about this campsite is that while I’ve always been there as a head-guide, it gives the group freedom to come together as a group, to disperse and be an individual, to go see the old growth. This is a stop-over rest day for us ‘cause there’s a lot of safety in the campsite to have your own space to sit down by the rocks, to curl up under a tree, to read a book, to go for a swim, a foot-soak, to journal, to draw pictures, to do what you wanna do. To have conversations. Very important things. People can really explore themselves in that place and really do whatever they fancy. If they just want to sleep all day, they can do that.”

128 “The towering cliffs, the bush, the glow worms, the bend in the stream – these were all elements of a place that came to be sacred in my thinking. Maybe I began to understand a little of how North American Indians may have felt as their sacred places were removed from ready access, and how, as the years passed, many of their special places were decimated by others in search of economic riches” (Knowles, 1992, p. 8).

129 “I heard a Crow elder say something similar: “You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough – even white people – the spirits will begin to speak to them. It’s the power of the spirits coming up from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren’t lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them” (Snyder, 1999, p. 42).

130 “Solitude is a condition for acquiring a sense of immensity. Alone one’s thoughts wander freely over space” (Tuan, 1977, p. 59).
“There is a gentleman who lives on Lake Obabika. He’s a chief, Anishnabe,\textsuperscript{131} Bear clan. He lives off the land still as much as he can and he’s got a cabin on the opposite shore of this lake at the mouth of the Obabika River. So he often comes over just before sunset. We sit around the fire and he tells stories to the kids about his life and the land. Often there are a lot of gatherings that occur at this place. So if you are in tune with it and you want to feel it, you can feel that energy of the campsite.”\textsuperscript{132}

“So it’s kind of a magical place. I often go to that place. It’s kind of like walking through my grandmother’s home. Picturing and smelling. Do you ever get that where you can smell all the campsite? Fresh. Clean. Earthy. There’s so much growing there. It’s such an alive place.”

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“So where do you think we are?” asks George. Rain drums on our gear and splats across the water. Leaves in the forest rustle from its impact. Candice steers our green canoe to the others’. We pass out gorp and gulp filtered water.

“Well, that crazy logjam was here at the large island on the left. That probably took about an hour to get through,” says Stacey. “So we are probably about here,” she says and points to the edge of the topographical map.

“That looks about right,” says Candice. I blow heat into my hands and shivers creep across my shoulders. My arms feel like lead. I lie back across the pack and rest.

“The rapids should be just around the bend, I think,” says Stacey

\textsuperscript{131} First Nations Ojibway

\textsuperscript{132} “In my mind, and in the minds of several students, a sacred place was established. It was the site of a special event, a place, if you will, at which individuals united with the powers of Nature” (Knowles, 1992, p. 8).
Twenty minutes later the river bends towards rushing water. My stomach tightens. We land our canoes at the top and pick our way over, through and across slippery rocks. We scout the run and point at the V’s to hit and the U’s to avoid.

“That ledge is really going to be where you have to push through to the river’s edge,” calls Geoff over the rush and carves the path with his palm through the air. “It’s okay to hit the banking but don’t get caught against those two boulders.” We nod.

Geoff and Khal run the rapids first. They bounce down the ledge, swerve around the boulders, splash a quick right into the middle of the river and haul back left again into the rocky rapids to the bottom. I breathe and smack my lips.

Stacey and George bounce over the ledge and careen into the gravel at the river’s edge. George laughs and Stacey pushes them off into the river again. The blue canoe swoops into the river’s centre and George sweeps his paddle wide, Stacey yelps and the canoe spins like a wide top. Their surprised faces now look up-river at us where we wait at the top of the rapids. George spins around, kneels in the canoe and pushes off from a rock. Stacey turns her back to us and stern paddles. The blue canoe bobbles backwards over the rocky waters.

My stomach turns. I kneel in the canoe and wedge my feet under the seat. The river’s face shifts from this perspective and I peer over the ledge we approach.

“It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness – and often, even, independent of my verbal awareness, as when my hand readily navigates the space between these scribed pages and the coffee cup across the table without my having to think about it, or when my legs, hiking, continually attune and adjust themselves to the varying steepness of the mountain slopes behind this house without my verbal consciousness needing to direct those adjustments. Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on – this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits” (Abram, 1996, pp. 52-53).
“Back paddle” calls Candice over the rapid’s rush. I slow the canoe down. My heart flutters as we pass a sharp point of rock by an inch. Yellow paint sticks to its edge just below the liquid surface. I swallow and my dry tongue sticks to my teeth. I press my cold lips together and bite them closed. My jaw shakes.

“Now!” yells Candice and I draw hard to the left.

“No! Paddlepaddlepaddle,” she shouts over the frothing water.

“Shit,” I spit, as my paddle lodges underwater between submerged rocks. The river sweeps Candice’s tail towards the two dark, green-black boulders that chew the inky water into foam. The boat spins sideways across the current. I yank my paddle free and lean out and dig into the current. I hear a yelp and a crack behind me as I lunge forward. The sound of plastic grinds into the sharp edges of the boulders. My hips shift and I raise my arms to take another stroke. Water behind me gollooms. I dig my paddle into the river again.

Candice yells. I hear a smack, splash and crunch. My shoulders wobble and my knees slip and bash into the gunwales. I look over my shoulder and Candice’s paddle rises from under the water and her head appears and her mouth gasps open. Cold water rises above my thighs and my shoulders fall away from the boulders and cold races over my waist and chest and I gasp. I hear a pop. Searing pain rakes my ankle. My ears fill with gurgling and I open my eyes. Bright yellow plastic packs bump over my head and the current yanks my hair and I crunch under the canoe, reach toward my toes and pull my foot from under the seat. My chest screams and an arm yanks my shoulder strap and the sound of rushing water fills my ears again. I gasp.

“Fuck! The boat,” yells Candice and she lunges to the bow where I sat just a moment ago. The canoe tipped sideways and water pushes into its belly. Plastic cracks and a fold appears across the hull. I follow her, stumble and my ankle squeezes against the laces and
sides of my water-filled boots. We stand side-by-side hip-deep in strong current. Our legs press against the pull and I reach under the canoe, turn to Candice. Her face pants inches from mine. Dark, wet hair curls into her eyes.

“One, two, three,” she grits her teeth. I grit my teeth. Candice squats and lifts. I squat and lift. Plastic pops. Her hands slip off the canoe and I grapple to hold the gunwales. I stumble forward, brace my foot against a boulder, squat into the water and lift. Pain races into my knee. My ears ring. She squats and lifts again. We push the bow up and out of the water. Candice steps back, grabs the boulder and exhales. The canoe pops again. Khal splashes in behind us, yanks hold of the bow and grunts as he hauls the boat out of the current.

“I’ll walk this down-stream,” he says. Khal looks up and frowns. “Are you okay?” he asks and looks between our faces.

I shake.134 Tears join river water on my cheeks. My leg throbs. I nod. Candice shakes. A thin line of blood joins river water on her cheek. Pink drips from her chin. Her lips press together. She nods. I grab her shoulder, she wraps her arm around my waist and we hobble among the boulders. She halts.

“My paddle,”135 she whispers. I look up.

At the bottom of the river Geoff, Stacey and George collect the floating gear. Stacey holds up the bladeless shaft of Candice’s paddle. She fingers the shards and puts her fingers to her lips.

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134 “What compels us to reflect on experience? Untoward events. In non-technological societies the forces of nature often deem unpredictable: they are the untoward events that intrude on human lives and command attention” (Tuan, 1977, p. 131).

135 “A man is part of his canoe and therefore part of all it knows. The instant he dips a paddle, he flows as it flows.... The paddle is an extension of his arm, his arm is part of his body.... But to the canoeman there is nothing that compares with the joy he knows when a paddle is in his hand” (Olson, 1972, p. 64).
After the spill and recovery the river carries us another four kilometres to Hellgate Rapids. We traipse the 680 metres around the falls to the wide, flat rock floor at its foot. The rain softens. We set up camp and change into dry clothes. I sit beside Candice at the fire and we sip hot tea. Khal moulds falafels. I stir hummus. Candice chops onions.

“Stop apologizing,” says Stacey. She drops an armful of wood. “It’s no one’s fault. That was a really tricky ledge. George and I went backwards,” she smiles. She rubs my back. “At least your lips aren’t blue anymore,” she says. I look over at Candice. Fine scratch marks run along her cheekbone and chin. She smiles and turns her head to the river. Khal dishes out dinner. Smoke rises into the humid air. A crow flaps over the falls and the rain stops.

“How long did you have that paddle?” Khal asks Candice. He passes her dinner.

“Since Grade Twelve when I did an outdoor education course. One of our projects was to make a paddle. So I made this paddle out of ash. Afterwards, I painted a west-coast Haida scene of whales breaching and the cliffs behind and the sunset in vibrant, bright block colours. You can see the top of the totem pole here,” she points to the broken end of the shaft. “Then on the other side was what I call the ‘Free Bird’, that wispy bird that a friend had designed. You need to use your imagination to see the bird but it’s definitely there,” she says. She flutters her hand in a flight pattern through the air upwards to the shaft.

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136 “And the more lively the story – the more vital or stirring the encounters within it – the more readily it will be incorporated” (Abram, 1996, p. 120).

137 “It is a matter of how you see the world, how you perceive the artefacts of everyday life, whether you notice the sky and hear the birds” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 33).
“That paddle goes on every trip with me. Every trip. There’s so many memories and moments. Good trips, and not necessarily perfect weather, calm lakes – that sort’a thing. But just good trips. Good people, things overcome, lots of dialogue, lots of journaling. Good trips.”

She snorts, chomps on a falafel and mumbles, “It was on our mouldy trip from the head of the Dumoine River to the Kippewa River. Camp Temagami had not done this route in years and years and years and years. We were doing some reconnaissance to cover 400 or 500 km in 28 days. It rained every day. You need the background of the kids a little bit too.”

“Two of the three girls had been to camp year after year after year and were expecting white water, were wanting the challenge of white water. The third girl had never been to camp in her life and her mom had sent her to camp to lose weight. This kid had never slept in a tent in her entire life. The one boy, like the two girls, had been to camp year after year, was expecting white water, knew how the camp worked. Camp Temagami is quite traditional with wooden canvas boats, wanigans, lashing your paddles in, solo carries. Its character-building. The other two boys,” she laughs, “were from Barcelona and had never been in a boat before. Any boat. They knew English, though it was limited.”

“So we have three girls, three boys; three paddlers, three non-paddlers; two with fatal allergies to nuts, to bees, to even mustard and aniseed; lactose intolerance; language barriers; three who knew each other, three who didn’t. Just this crazy mix,” Candice says and shakes her head.

“My first thought is you can’t take kids who have never tripped before and do a remote twenty eight-day white water canoe trip,” says Geoff.

Candice lifts her eyebrows, purses her lips and nods. “Anyway, first day we get this great island site, beautiful sun set, fabulous dinner of beef stew and chocolate fondue. Next morning is calm, no wind, sunny, sunny, sunny. Paddle. Have a great day and another really great campsite. It was the perfect start to a canoe trip. The kids were loving it.”
“Third day we come around this point of land and there’s a storm cloud coming in. By the time we hit the 1000 metre portage it started to rain. It did not let up for weeks. It just rained and rained and rained. Our clothing was mouldy. There was mould on us. We pulled over every couple hours each day, putting up a tarp and playing stupid little ridiculous games to warm the kids up.”

“A lot of the portages had been clear-cut so we were in a mud bath up to our waists at times. We were covered. Both our compasses broke so we kept the maps dry and navigated by shoreline and contour lines. We had to really know the maps. Then, of course with water levels rising, the shoreline changed too. It was absolutely insane.” I groan, Stacey shakes her head and Geoff rubs his beard. George asks,

“How were the kids doing?”

“Surprisingly, the kids were holding up really well. That’s what I remember really well about that group. They sang, they laughed, they joked. It was a neat dynamic. The three kids who had never tripped before turned to the other kids for leadership and in that they became leaders themselves. Every morning we’d get on the water and we’d yell ‘How’s it feel to be aliiive?’” Candice’s voice echoes into the trees. Khal removes the cooking rack, adds a log to the fire and moves the plates to the table.

“We had to climb this one long portage around a waterfall. The hill was so steep that the kids couldn’t carry the boats. I carried them all up. In the middle of the carry this wicked thunder-lightening storm hit. Fast, furious, intense, insane. Got the gear to the other side and we were just spent. It was just one of those buckets of rain; couldn’t see the other side of the shore line where we knew that there was the one camp site on this lake.”

“So we navigate point to point and paddled across. There’s a large group of boys from Camp Tawingo camped there. It was one of those moments where you’re just like ‘ughhh’. What else can we take? What else can we do? The leader with that group, his name was Paul, he came down and met with our group. He was one of those sandy-blond haired guys, weathered, early 20s or so, but really kind, really friendly. Blue eyes.”
“He started looking at our maps and said, ‘You know, I’ve canoed in this area for years and years and years. If you just go up that way a bit on the lake not even a kilometre there’s a flat piece of land there. It is a little bit exposed but it’s a place where you don’t need to work to set up your tents.’ He also showed us some access points where we could get out on if we needed.”

“So we followed all his markings on our map, paddled across to this flat spot. There was a cabin. Unlocked. There are eight of us. Eight beds. Eight chairs around the table. Wood stove. All sorts of wood, reading books. In that moment when we were bone-tired, it’s seven o’clock and dark. So we took it. We needed to be out of the rain. We told the kids to respect this place, to keep it clean. We all sat around a table and ate together. We had a roaring fire going. We were able to dry out our mouldy clothes. We all slept on mattresses that night. It was just such a moment of relief after all this crazy, crazy rain.” Candice sticks the broken point of her paddle into the wet ground and leans on the shaft. She stares into the fire.

“Anyway, we got up early in the morning and thought we would go by and wake up Paul’s group and beat them out on the water. So we paddled by at about six-thirty in the morning. They were gone. Not there at all. Not even a trace of them was there,” she says and noses a rock with her toe. “Two days later I made the phone call out to the camp. We needed to reroute. The camp was very agreeable; they already pulled a group out of the Coulongue River. I gave them the access points that Paul had given us. I also said that they may wanna call down to Camp Tawingo and ask about the trip that Paul’s on to make sure they’re okay.” Candice pauses, looks behind her and up the waterfalls. Khal puts two branches in the fire and cinders fly into the dark.

“When I called back to camp later that day, our camp director said, ‘I’m not sure who you were talking to but Camp Tawingo hasn’t sent a group out to that area in about 20 years. They had a camper die out there. They’ve never been back. They haven’t had someone called Paul on their staff in years and years and years. So I’m not sure who you met or what group, but,’” Candice trails off. George mumbles a long, low ‘geeeez’. The wind falls silent. Stacey rubs her arms and Khal opens his eyes wide. His mouth drops open. I wrap my arms around my torso.

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138 “Keeping myth alive requires a lively appreciation of the depths of metaphor, of ceremony, and the need for stories. Allegorizing and rationalizing myth kills it” (Snyder, 1999, p. 62).
“I mean, he wrote on our maps. The canoes read Camp Tawingo. I knew that logo, I knew the boats. I was surprised that Camp Tawingo would be that far from home. I didn’t think that they did trips like that. And they don’t. They used to. But they haven’t in years. In decades,” she says. She fingers her paddle’s handle. Orange faces peer into the fire.

“So yeah. The conditions weren’t improving and I didn’t want the kids to walk away from a trip and hate it. I want them to like it and appreciate it and come back to it. It wasn’t a hard call to make. It was the smart thing to do. It’s the lives of your kids. All six of those campers came back the following year to trip again. Two of them guide for the company now. We laughed every day. Every day. Nobody was hurt, not one anaphylactic incident, not one Band-Aid used on a cut or a scrape. We were mouldy but we weren’t hurt. It taught me a lot.”

Her thumb rubs the splintered end of her old paddle.

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139 “The etiquette of the wild world requires not only generosity but a good-humored toughness that cheerfully tolerates discomfort, an appreciation of everyone’s fragility, and a certain modesty” (Snyder, 1990, p. 24).

140 “An object of place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind” (Tuan, 1977, p. 18).
Chapter 9
Sandhill Cranes
Reflections

I canoe alone on the river under dim moonlight. Blue-black shadows crowd the banks and reach dark fingers over the racing liquid.

Boulders, sweepers, ledges and logs emerge from the obscured inky waters. I splash left. I splash right. The canoe veers towards another plunge, another rock, another rapid. A fallen tree sweeps across the current, careens towards my head and I lunge sideways and towards the churning river.

I gasp and my eyes pop open. My calf and ankle throb. The sound of Hellgate Rapids fills my ears. I wrestle my sticky sleeping bag, wipe sweat from my neck and breathe deeply. My heart rate slows and goosebumps ripple over my skin and across my shoulders. Pale light filters through the tent’s window. I crawl out and into the cool breeze. A snore erupts from the men’s tent. Sleeping bags rustle and fall silent.

I kindle a small fire. The sky’s eastern edge turns light turquoise. The pot steams. Chickadees chirp, flit and dash in the trees across the river. I clasp my mug, turn and limp towards the lip of the falls. Mist rises. I sit. My pencil waives over lined pages. 141

141 “Characteristic of lyric inquiry and its written works are features such as the following: liminality, ineffability, metaphorical thinking, embodied understanding, personal evocations domestic and local understanding, and an embrace of the eros of language – the desire to honour and experience phenomena through words, ambiguous and inadequate as they might be, and to communicate this experience to others” (Neilsen, 2008, p. 94).
Why do I choose words, in their static, restrictive, structured way,\textsuperscript{142} to enter into my inquiry, my research, my curiosity about stories? Stories, after all, are embodied things; things with texture and smell and song. Stories, after all, affect my physical, emotive self. They are multi-layered, complex experiences larger than this limited written form. Speak to a new mother about birthing a baby and imagine squeezing a story out the tip of your pen.

So why do I write? I taste unspeakable words that will not form though I worry them with my tongue. These words will not issue because they are caught between my teeth, stuck to the roof of my mouth and drip from the edges of my lips.

So why do I write? I hear in my ears a song of complexity and of simplicity. The music of these stories cannot be sung. My throat constricts and my soul bursts through my skin in goosebumps; a knowing that the stories ring true in my mind’s ear.

So why do I write? My flattened fingertips smeared in blue ache in the frantic pace of etching out expression on cool lined pages. My soul bursts across paper to dance, to run, to lift heavy loads, to hear the crack in my shoulder and to feel raindrops slice my skin.

So why do I write? My nose identifies in one breath the unique mix of summer moss, hot pine needles, canvas packs and sun block. Those scents drag me into days with my family, weeks on the water, and times when the worries of the world rested in the patterns of the clouds.

So why do I write? I close my eyes and see a landscape of forest, rock, lake and river; of blue skies, wet skies, black skies, pierced skies. The land opens its gaping yawp and swallows me whole, through its gullet, and then yawns again to spit me back out. Go ahead. Close your eyes. Imagine these things. We are in different places. We are in the same place.

So why do I write? I write because I always have. I make up words and mix them together in ways that play with each other; I am a wordchemist. Play is a vital part of my being. Play is learning and learning is playing until the stern glares over half-moon glasses teach us that knowing and playing belong in separate drawers. So I write for fun and for exploration. I open both drawers at the same time and throw things out, and jumble them together on the floor, on this page. I move them around, pull them apart and splice them together.

\textsuperscript{142} “Words are used as signs, as stand-ins, arbitrary and temporary, even as language reflects (and informs) the shifting values of the peoples whose minds it inhabits and glides through” (Snyder, 1990, p. 8).
Here is my playground, a space, a time and a place of play.

I slow my brain down, create a writing ritual

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and allow my thoughts out to play.

When I slow my thoughts, feelings, sensory experiences, memories, I slow the world around me and spend time with a suspended subject, let’s say, your cup of tea. I imagine it hot and steaming, the colour of stained oak, in my favourite brown ceramic mug. Yes, that one that fits your hand just so. I remember my first cup of tea, the long history of tea in my family. I think of tea times of celebration and devastation. I dream of tea times to still be had with friends, with family and with a pen-in-hand, curled up with my cool lined pages in contemplation.

And so I write. I write to squeeze out from the tip of my pen the deep, sweet, bitter juices of what I see, hear, smell, remember, feel, think, taste. I write these limited words to reach, to pierce, to absorb slowly and contemplatively into the phylo-sized layers of an experience.

So I write.

My late, great music teacher, Mr. Wyshniowsky, said that the loudest sound in music is no sound at all. A tangible silence. A pause. It rests between note and note, between subject and words, between you and me. I write to make the leap a bit shorter, but never to reach a finite truth or understanding. I write to bring myself and perhaps you close to that juicy, powerful, silencing gap. That is where an inner voice breathes deep, lunges and leaps the space between words and subject.143

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143 Personal reflection. October 14, 2007. “The freedom to construct meaning playfully and artistically can be drawn into a human dialogue with a reflexive ethical subject who ponders the consequences of her actions and her art” (de Freitas, 2004, p. 263).
I unpack the food barrels. Pancake mix and water goops in the bowl. I heat the frying pan. Butter browns and bubbles. Tents unzip. Mist-shrouded bodies amble through the trees and towards the fire. Coffee boils. My friends groan gratitude and line their mugs along the spine of the canoe. Thick batter splotts into the sizzling pan and we warm by the fire.

We pack camp, load our canoes and slip into the Mississaugi River. Shortly the sound of dancing water reaches our boat and my stomach flips. Stacey turns around and smiles wide at me.

“You ready there, Partner?” she asks and nods.

“As ready as I will ever be,” I say from the back of the green canoe. We edge sideways towards the rapids. A long, smooth liquid tongue rolls through the narrows. Trees stand witness. I sweep an arced C through the water, hold my blade under the surface, through the currents and Stacey back paddles. We splosh over the lip of the rapid. I taste metal and hold my breath. Stacey whu-hoos a long call through our bouncing descent. I exhale.

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144 “A good hobby may be a solitary revolt against the common-place, or it may be the joint conspiracy of a congenial group” (Leopold, 1966, p. 174).
145 “True learning is an act of courage. It involves risk. The courage that “encourages” true learning comes from the experience of being supported in relationship with another person, or in being part of a community” (Beech, 2005, p. 87).
146 “Language and culture emerge from our biological-social natural existence, animals that we were/are. Language is a mind-body system that coevolved with our needs and nerves. Like imagination and the body, language rises unbidden” (Snyder, 1990, p. 18).
The river shallows and slows. Three canoes snake through the wide, high marshy banks and we paddle through grass-and-mud channels north-west. The close smell of muddy water and algae fills the air. The clouds shift and cast fast shadows over our shoulders. At each loop we surprise the same flock of young Canada geese and we herd them ahead. They hink and honk in protest of our pursuit, waddle up the river's edge, and their fat brown bodies and slim black necks melt into the long rustling grasses. We pass sunning turtles, bobbing birds and blinking frogs. Stacey greets a water snake rippling just below the surface. It pauses, raises its head and watches us.

Khal and George stop at a bend, hold forefingers to lips as Geoff and Candice, Stacey and I glide towards them. A martin races along the mudflats; its long body reminds me of a snake with feet. The chestnut fur gleams in the pale sunlight and it wiggles into the dense alder bushes. Cools and Wows mumble between bites of raisins, dried fruits, nuts and chocolate chunks. Mosquitoes whine over our heads. Water laps the bodies of our boats. Sun lotion, sweaty canvas and warm pine scent wash over me. My skin feels vibrant, dirty, sore, alive. I swallow the tight lump in my throat and inhale again. Red glows through my eyelids.

The mud banks wear layers and striations of water levels, ice levels, grazing lines and pollen wash. Tiny travelled trails enter and exit the river’s sides.147 We lose our path in northern bayous and false waterways. We retrace our way and find the next bend in the marshes. Ahead the land rises over the reeds. Fresh air lifts hair from my ponytail and drops it against my neck.

147 “The stratigraphy of rocks, layers of pollen in a swamp, the outward expanding circles in the trunk of a tree, can be seen as texts. The calligraphy of rivers winding back and forth over the land leaving layer upon layer of traces of previous riverbeds is text” (Snyder, 1990, p. 71).
“Well, there’s the cabin,” says Khal and we peer to the right. Black-brown wood shingles top black-brown wood walls. One window and one door propped open grace the cabin’s face. A wobbly, weather-beaten walkway leads through the point of land, parts the green but does not reach the water. “I guess it was built before they drained the river,” he says. We pass the cabin. Its cobwebs catch dust and flies.

“Can you hear that?” asks Stacey. I pause, lift my paddle and wait for the drip, drip, drip, drip, drips to stop. Trickling water emerges from bare rock back in the woods. Another stream joins the Mississaugi River. Further ahead the Abinette River joins the flow and creates a swirl of debris. Its bubbling currents deposit flotsam on the south shore. We paddle south-west, through a voluminous swift and around the bend near the deep river’s edge. Another log jam rises fifteen feet above our heads. Chainsaw marks scribe the trees’ flat ends. We lift our boats over the embedded logs and line them through the folded deadwood.

“This is really eerie,” says Candice and bonks her plastic replacement paddle off a murky, submerged, slimy brown-green tree trunk. Leeches ripple around the old stumps, disturbed by the vortexes we create. Another trunk looms the belly of our canoe and Stacey adjusts quickly to avoid a ripple created by another.

“This was forest and river once. They cut the trees around the river for the dam lower down,” says George. We pass five kilometres of watery spectres. 148

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148 “As each dam went up, the river rose behind it, drowning its natural banks. Sandbars, islands, trees and farms went under” (Raban, 2008, p. 71).
The breeze strengthens where the Mississaugi opens. We push past sandy, mucky shallows and aim for the campsite where the Mississaugi feeds Rocky Island Lake, a large body of water that can easily whip up large waves from the west fetch. The site sits high above the water and faces west. The horizon opens up. We set our tents back from the windy ledge and Candice prepares palm-sized scone-biscuits, chilli and cheese.

“Stadium seating,” calls Geoff from the other side of the campsite. He crouches and captures the gold-topped trees and rippling water. We swim and the river sparkles.

At night we settle into the curved rock, spoon chilli onto warm thick biscuits, discuss highlights and lowlights as the sun sets over the river. It feels like the end of summer for me. Lists elbow their way into my mind. My throat closes and I fight back tears in the fading light. In the distance the “Sandhill Cranes make a ruckus. They sound a lot like a car engine trying to turn over on a cold winter morning.”⁴⁹ I stand and wander to the water’s edge. The voices of my friends echo across the river and into the forest behind me. My bare feet soak in the last of the day’s warmth. A crow flies across the black treetops. I crouch and breathe in the river’s air. My fingers rest on a smooth pebble by my heel. The pebble’s warm weight presses my calloused fingertips as I brush sand from the smooth, dark grey surface. I peer over the calm water. The pebble slides into my pocket.⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ Callan, 1999, p. 97.
⁵⁰ “The challenge is to experience ecological identity everywhere” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 179).
“People look back for various reasons, but shared by all is the need to acquire a sense of self and of identity. I am more than what the thin present defines.”

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151 Tuan, 1977, p. 186.
After work on a Wednesday night in July I bike uphill and homewards through sticky summer rain in Toronto, Ontario. Humid air, exhaust fumes, sweat and construction dust stick to my face and arms. Two raccoons waddle across the alleyway and I smell warm grass and fried onions. Laughter bellows out of an open window. I wheel under a dim graffitied railroad bridge and a service van rumbles by. Hot mist shrouds the glossy road.

I drop my damp backpack in the front hall and yank off my sweaty jacket. Beads of rain sprinkle across the wood floor. I breathe deeply, cough and mumble that I have to tidy away the last of the tripping gear. I pad down the beige vinyl-covered stairs into my cool, dim basement. Rain taps against the windows. Camping gear huddles against the wall. I hang up the packs, fluff out my sleeping bag, unroll the Thermarest and sort out the washing. I grab my red PFD. It rattles. I finger through the front pocket and grasp a white plastic cigar tip. The taste of sweet, smoky tobacco and smell of fresh river water and sound of laughter and herons’ flight and moist, grey boulders and bubbling water and bluberried pancakes and heavy rain and wintergreen and crows’ caw and shoulders’ ache flood back. I smile.

I close my eyes, read the river and try to choose the line I will run. I hop from river rock to slippery river rock. I attend to the features: boulders, sweepers, ledges, falls, rock gardens, submerged dangers and long Vs tongues. When I select one run, I deselect all others.

My curiosity about experiences of canoe trips as a unique place of learning inspired me to write this work. The powerful stories shared on canoe trips and the embodied, emotive aspects of artefact grew. As a result of these and my reflexive writing, my readings and the profoundly moving conversations with participants, I choose to unfold the unique experiences of place that we canoeists are privileged to encounter. While this story and these narratives we share contain so many more currents of thought, theory and pedagogy, I select Sense of Place as the
focus of this research. As canoeists we are a part of, “an oral culture, [where] experienced events remain rooted in the particular soils, the particular ecologies, the particular places that give rise to them.”

I believe sense of place informs the choices these ecologically attentive and community-minded individuals make. Yi-Fu Tuan’s work in particular significantly affected my thinking and understanding of experiences of Place:

“Spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being free....The physically vital – children and athletes – enjoy a sense of special expansiveness little known to office-bound workers, who listen to tales of physical prowess with a mixture of admiration and envy.”

“Place is a special kind of object. It is a concentration of value, though not a valued thing that can be handled or carried about easily; it is an object in which one can dwell.”

“The ideas ‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.”

Through our conversations, the participants identified places of comfort or ‘home’ places on canoe trips. We named bioregions, views from the canoe, types of waterway, the canoe, specific camp sites, places within a site, a certain time during trips, a physical and internal sense of well-being and any combination of these. The fluidity of these answers got me to thinking about how we develop that sense of place on a trip. Certainly the community/group bond, the intense experiences, the change from the work-a-day life, the personal challenges make significant impacts. After hours of transcription, I noticed that these participants, in particular, are listeners as much as they are story-tellers. They

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152 Abram, 1996, p. 164
153 Tuan, 1977, p. 52
154 Tuan, 1977, p. 12
155 Tuan, 1977, p. 6
demonstrated attentiveness to our conversations. When I shared my experiences and places, each person became more animated and engaged; that while I may not have the same trip experiences, our narratives still connect. I found that the artefacts and resulting story-telling we carry within us embodied memories of many places, canoe trips and otherwise. When we share these places as the context of our stories, we connect places together. I discovered that canoe trips are places of places.

In addition to the personal places that travel through stories on the river, I think about how canoeists transform space into place. After hours of paddling and portaging, we have to find a place to set up camp, build a fire, share a meal, talk and rest. The particularities of this sort of place are unique, often beautiful, and sometimes challenging (and therefore memorable). When we erect a tent, build a kitchen area, find a place to hang the food packs, and discover the best swimming (and where the leeches swim), we create a spacial orientation to what was once just a point of land that could have been passed-by. Canoeists’ experiences respond to context, circumstances, groups and the inner reflexive world. Time spent and memories made in sites, like those mentioned in Temagami, Gun Lake, the camp at Minaki and the Mississaugi River, ascribe emotional, sensory, healing, spiritual, learning and relational qualities to the place. These activities change what was once a part of space into the physical orientation of place; our camp site.

Each morning we pack away our homes, and leave the campsite. As we push out into the lake, we detach from place. The average paddling speed can reach about six kilometres per hour, although I based this trip on a much more leisurely strolling pace of about four kilometres per hour. On narrow lakes and wide, slow rivers, canoeists come into closer contact with the environment and have greater opportunity to observe the surroundings. Smells are stronger, sounds more distinct, and we pass the forests, rocks and any unsuspecting creatures much more slowly. This makes it easier to absorb these experiences and associate them with pre-existing experiences.

River travel can also form place attachments. When we choose a particularly technical line through the rapids, as the one on the Mississaugi River in Chapter 8, the face of the river shifts. We land our canoes and scout. This act in itself provides a unique perspective when we read waterway for ledges, boulders, bankings, fallen trees, rocky shallows, standing waves, eddies, Us and Vs. Scouting stops the forward momentum of swift river travel and forces attention to where we place our feet, what boulders are place holders within a space. The sensorial experiences of smelling air-borne water, grasping to branches and scoping the curve of a landscape, create attachments to place. These
features – the riverscape, the sensory experiences, and heightened excitement/danger – become place holders (or place-avoiders). In this way rapids turn into a place that commands attention.

Not all rapids are run-able. So we portage. Not all lakes connect. So we portage. Similar to what happened in Chapter 3, I find that portages contain both place and space. The unique landscape and the associated features require attentiveness. On a hike through the forest or over rock, the details that would otherwise be paddled-by become a focus. I have the embodied experience of carrying heavy loads, which embeds the memories into my body-memory. I pay attention to the path as I navigate my feet and my load from one end to the other. I also find that on particularly long or challenging portages, my mind turns inwards as I focus on breathing, balance and search for the conviction that I will make it to the other end. Hiking alone provides opportunities to reflect, to sense the inner thoughts/feelings and a chance to quietly think. This, too, is a sense of freedom from my regular routine of life and to have space to think.

Part of the enjoyment of canoe tripping is not just finding a special place or time on a trip that feels comfortable. The adventure of travel and the excitement of the unknown also inspires me back into these places. River travel is generally associated with the adrenaline-induced experiences of quick, technically challenging, rushing travel through distance and time. They are places of space where canoeists experience freedom and expansiveness, racing through a place, feeling alive and in the moment – a ‘whu-hoo’ moment of exhilaration, of feeling fleetingly detached from place.

I once told a friend, “something happens around the third day,” and he asked, “What?” I couldn’t respond at the time. As I think about it now, waterways with fewer distinguishable markings lack place-holders and definition drops into the horizon. When I paddle wide lakes, especially against strong winds or under heavy rain, I tend to paddle quietly. As a result, the external journey of repetitive paddling translates into an internal space where the identities of place slip away and I am alone in my thoughts. What I experience, as a result, is another form of being present in the layered thoughts, feelings, places, experiences. Place becomes more than the external world; it becomes an internal state of being. In this way, paddling becomes a place full of sensation - rocking, sound, smell, sights, (e)motion - where the porous place of inner and outer world join together. I find that the meditative act of paddling brings me (in)to place through attentiveness and reflection. I paddle in
place, a liminal space, opened through this contemplative activity, in physical, emotional, intuitive, creative engagement/discomfort and in quiet wanderment. As I travel the outer journey, so I find my inner journey follows.

Space and place, according to Tuan, are both sought-after and necessarily depend on each other to exist as experiences and concepts. I believe that space and place are brought closer together through the act of canoeing. I move forward and into space by padding through the water and pulling. I remove the paddle from the water and water drips rapidly from the tip. I move my paddle forward and the drips slow. The canoe slows. I turn my head over my shoulder and prepare for the next canoe stroke. I observe the environment I travel through. Then I propel us forward again by taking another stroke. Space re-enters my experience and place fades behind me. The canoe paddle, as an extension of self within the natural environment and as a method of self propulsion, responds to the tension between space and place. This repetitive action of space and place, pull and pause, place and space repeats over and over. And this place, this space is held tenuously at the tip of the paddle in the

Drip drip drip drip... drip drip drip... drip.

Every participant identified this particular sound as one of their favourites. This attentiveness to the sensation of canoeing and to the many and varied experiences of space and place develops strong sensory, emotional, mental and spiritual bonds with place. This attachment and these experiences unfold into a variety of ways of understanding our place in the world. This understanding develops a, “land ethic [that] simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively, the land.”

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156 Leopold, 1966, p. 219
At the end of our trips, the group I travel with talks over the highlights and low points. What would I do differently? What worked well? Then, of course, where are we going next?

The methodological approach into the research and the final representation of this work are two of my highlights. I found that the entry into conversations using artefact immensely powerful, very effective and provided a lot of safety. The participants’ voices are the life-force to this work. Embedding their personal artefacts and narratives within this story was vital to the final representation and to honouring this important role in this research. Working within arts-informed research allowed me to create a space to move closer to understanding the individual and collective experiences of place on canoe trips.

I had originally hoped to conduct this research as a canoe trip with all the participants. Due to a number of professional and personal circumstances I was unable to do so. My advice to anyone considering this approach is to book early, plan every detail and take into consideration the participants’ busy lives. Also consider the technological challenges that would emerge within the context of wilderness travel; rain, wind, loss of gear, physical dangers, tiredness on behalf of the researcher and the participants. There would have been great opportunity had I conducted my research within the real context of the research. Instead I conducted one-on-one interviews and find that by choosing another path, I still ended up travelling the same route, if somewhat differently.

So where are we going next? Like a burr, this research connects with a large range of topics and attaches to a number of possible future projects. First, the methodology within the arts-informed research approach was exciting and scary. It opened up a number of opportunities and possibilities that I had not initially considered when I began my program. I would like to further explore the possibilities of narrative, of artefact and of installation art as means to knowledge-building, a way to critically reflect on experiences and understandings.

Second, I entered into this with a keen interest in experiential learning. There is a great volume of work produced on this topic and I see great potential in better understanding reflexivity, contemplation, activity and artistic engagement as ways into understanding how adults make meaning and learn from their experiences.
Third, during my reading of Thomashow (1995, pp. 56-57) I came across his synopsis of ecofeminism:

Women create an ecospirituality based on their experiences of the earth, their connections to the land, their ability to identify their bodies with the whole planet – developing metaphors of cyclic renewal, regeneration, and fertility.... Ecofeminism provides some people with an academic and experiential home, a way for them to comprehend their experience both as environmentalists and as women or men. The interface of feminism and environmentalism allows people to assess this experience, offering a framework for the exploration of personal identity.

As tempted as I was, I did not delve into a discussion around this topic. I believe that in order to honour this body of work and the far-reaching implications of this theory, I would be very interested in doing a lot more reading, reflection and research on ecofeminism, what the possible connections would be between this and my current research, and the creative possibilities of combining this theory with arts-informed research.

Fourth, during my conversations with participants, we discussed the ineffability of the spiritual aspects of canoe tripping, of place and of the internal world of canoeists. Based on my own experiences and those I have heard from fellow paddlers, I would like to further explore idea is geopiety, the attachment of spirituality with place (Tuan, 1974, 1977; Knowles, 1992). How would I hold, without grasping, to show without telling, the transformative, spiritual aspects of canoe tripping? I recognize that there is an inherent danger in naming this experience. By creating respectful space perhaps that is where geopiety could exist, in the unnameable (Abram, 1996).

Finally, I found the texts by Tuan about Sense of Place, the works of Thomashow, Abram, Snyder, Berry and Leopold very moving. Suzanne Thomas, Lori Neilsen and Sharon Sbrocchi have recently written on Sense of Place. I would love to further explore the power of women’s voices in Sense of Place theory. I wish to add my voice to those before me who have explored the complexity of experiences and how they inform sense of place, identity, thought, feelings, intuition, senses and actions.
I lob the cigar filter at the garbage. It rattles into the bin.
I reach again into my PFD pocket. A cool, smooth grey-black pebble slips from the pocket and into my palm.

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“The events belong, as it were, to the place, and to tell the story of these events is to let the place speak for itself through the telling”157
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Bibliography


Looking beyond the bottom line. (2005, April 20). *Toronto Star*.


Appendix A
Topographical Map of the Mississaugi River