Unpacking the Canoe: Alternative Perspectives on the Canoe as a National Symbol

Susan Knabe

Wendy Pearson

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol23/iss1/18

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Unpacking the Canoe: Alternative Perspectives on the Canoe as a National Symbol

Abstract
The association of the canoe with Canada has a long, if not necessarily exclusive, history. Basic reference guides, such as the Encyclopedia Britannica, tell us that there are 'two main forms of canoe: that open from end to end (the modern recreational or sport Canadian canoe), propelled with a paddle having a single blade; and the kayak' (2: 807). The sport of canoeing was popularised throughout Europe and North America during the mid-nineteenth century, primarily by a British lawyer named John MacGregor, who founded the Royal Canoe Club in London in 1865. Canoeing became an Olympic sport in 1936. Canoe racing is now designated into two categories: the Canadian canoe (nominated as CI or C2 depending on the number of paddlers) and the kayak (K1 or K2), both of which are raced over a variety of distances.2
Unpacking the Canoe: Alternative Perspectives on the Canoe as a National Symbol

A Canadian is someone who knows how to make love in a canoe.

Pierre Berton

**Introduction: The Canadian Canoe**

The association of the canoe with Canada has a long, if not necessarily exclusive, history. Basic reference guides, such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, tell us that there are ‘two main forms of canoe: that open from end to end (the modern recreational or sport Canadian canoe), propelled with a paddle having a single blade; and the kayak’ (2: 807). The sport of canoeing was popularised throughout Europe and North America during the mid-nineteenth century, primarily by a British lawyer named John MacGregor, who founded the Royal Canoe Club in London in 1865. Canoeing became an Olympic sport in 1936. Canoe racing is now designated into two categories: the Canadian canoe (nominated as C1 or C2 depending on the number of paddlers) and the kayak (K1 or K2), both of which are raced over a variety of distances.

Within Canada, the canoe was, of course, originally a Native craft, developed out of geophysical necessity. As Charles Franks notes, in *The Canoe and White Water*, the constraints of geography have determined and still do determine the ways in which travellers move across the land. ‘The Canadian Shield, which is the surface of most of the interior, is covered by muskeg, cliffs, rivers and lakes that make travel by foot almost impossible during the summer months. Yet the terrain is barren and unsuited for agriculture. Living off it demands hunting and fishing over a wide area’ (7). The Native peoples who migrated into the interior of the country created a technology of lightweight portable canoes quite different from both the dugout canoes of the coastal tribes, such as the Haida, and also from the sea-going kayaks of the Inuit. European explorers and colonists soon realised the ideal nature of the canoe, adopting it as the primary mode of transportation both for trade and exploration. In a recent article, ‘The Canadian Canoe Museum and Canada’s National Symbol’, John Jennings, a professor of Canadian and American history at Trent University, takes this historical significance one step further, arguing that ‘Canada exists as it does today because...
of the canoe. In the United States, it was the horse that determined national boundaries; in Canada the canoe' (4). He goes on to add that the ‘essential shape of Canada was determined, above all, by canoe exploration and the fur trade’ (5). While Jennings may be overstating the historical case, his comments are important specifically for the central place he ascribes to the canoe, not merely as a reality, but as a symbol that defines a country.

If the canoe can thus be seen from inside Canada as essential to Canadian history and nation-building, both prior to and after the arrival of the first Europeans, it seems somewhat less obvious that it should also be taken as an icon of what it means to be Canadian or that it should be, in Jennings’ words, ‘Canada’s national symbol’. The canoe is, after all, a type of vessel that can be found in many forms and in many cultures. Australian Aboriginal peoples construct both dugout and bark canoes, while China has its dragon boats and the Polynesian Islanders have several types of canoe, including the outrigger. If any country were to claim the canoe as its national symbol, it might logically be New Zealand, where the canoe is intrinsic to the history of the Maori, whose social organisation has traditionally depended in part upon organisation of clans (hap) into waka, ‘a loose grouping of tribes whose members believed they were descended from ancestors who had travelled on the same migratory canoe’ (Davidson 149). Laurie Barber concludes that ‘Maori concern to trace tribal and individual origins back to the founding canoes is as important as any genealogy of aristocratic descent anywhere’ (Barber 14). That the word waka refers both to the canoe and to the social group associated with it gives some indication of its importance within Maori culture.

Thus we are faced with the inevitable fact that the adoption of national symbols is not a logical process. The lion is scarcely indigenous to England, yet it is a symbol recognised in a variety of contexts, from the football (soccer) jersey to the exalted halls of Parliament. Yet this symbolic value within England does not prevent the lion from being similarly iconised by a variety of other countries. When England meets Cameroon on the football pitch, two sets of lions face off against each other. Thus we may accept that the canoe has been taken up by at least some Canadians as a national symbol, although we note that Jennings is unclear as to whether the canoe is actually a national symbol or whether it should be made into one, a question we will return to below. It is clear, however, that the canoe does have some sort of symbolic or iconic value in Canada; like the beaver, the canoe occurs in a variety of aspects of Canadian visual culture. As James Raffan notes,

A canoe still ensures free passage, lockage and camping for paddlers on the Rideau Canal. And it’s not all that long ago that regular fare on any Canadian passenger train included space for a canoe in the baggage car. For years, the image on our highest denomination coin ... was of a European coureur de bois with an Indian bowman in a classical Dogrib or Chipewyan birchbark canoe ... and in advertising — the religion of everyday life — canoes have been used to flog everything from Export A cigarettes
and Canadian Club whiskey to bottled water, fresh air and healthy vacations in the Canadian wild ... [A]nd, of course, there is the ribald definition, often attributed to Pierre Berton, that a Canadian is someone who knows how to make love in a canoe.

Accepting that the canoe is in some sense a national symbol within Canada, the focus of this article then is to ask what it is that is being symbolised by the canoe. What meaning does ‘Canadian’ come to have within the apparently all-embracing gunnels of that ironically narrow vessel? We ask these questions specifically within the ongoing discourse of Canadian national identity, a topic that is always fraught, both by historical circumstances, such as the division between Anglophone and Francophone and the issues of Native identity and self-governance within the Canadian framework, and by contemporary identity politics of all kinds. We ask these questions, moreover, as Canadians, yet noting the particular relationship to the symbolic of the canoe created by our own identity formations, which include issues of class, ethnicity, immigration, gender and sexuality. In doing so, we will inevitably be asking these questions in the context of the personal as much, or more, than in the context of the institutional; when we do so, we will be referring to ourselves by our first names, that is, as Susan and Wendy. Furthermore, as queer Canadians, in particular, and ones with backgrounds outside the mainstream of middle-class Anglo-Canadian culture, our investigation of the iconic status of the canoe must necessarily take into account whether or not the symbolic of the canoe really attains the universality attributed to it by certain writers and critics.

The Place of the Canoe

What little scholarship has been done on the particular cultural phenomenon that locates the canoe as a symbol of Canadian cultural identity has been collected largely within the covers of a recently published anthology called, unsurprisingly, The Canoe in Canadian Cultures. The cover photograph of this anthology is typical of the visual iconography of the canoe in its Canadian context. In the foreground of the cover photograph, a red canoe lies drawn up on the shoreline, empty save for a lifejacket and a single paddle; the background shows the viewer a landscape serene and entirely Canadian: rocks, lake, trees, a hint of early morning mist. One can easily imagine an accompanying soundtrack of rosy-cheeked (but invisible) children singing ‘Land of the silver birch/Home of the beaver ... Blue lake and rocky shore/I will return once more’.

Blue lake, rocky shore, canoe: there is no shortage of these images in Canadian culture, from the cover photograph of The Canoe in Canadian Cultures to the many images of lone canoeists (usually one, occasionally two) which decorate tourist posters and brochures. Tourist information from Canadian Consulates around the world is rife with canoes (along with other Canadian icons: Mounties, bears, maple leaves, skiers and the inevitable phallic upthrust of the CN Tower, notorious for being the world’s tallest freestanding
The composition of these photographs varies so little as to be formulaic: the canoe, which is usually red, is somewhere in the bottom half of the picture, both dwarfed by and separated from the unpeopled landscape it traverses.

The canoe, for Canadians at least, is the pre-eminent symbol of penetration into the wilderness, a land conceived as a terra incognita untouched by human hand; no matter that it has aboriginal and settler/immigrant inhabitants or that tour groups pass through it with the regularity of a suburban train schedule, the image is always one of the pristine and empty land, its sublimity domesticated just enough not to frighten away the tourists. At the same time, these images function within national borders to interpellate the would-be Canadian into a specific set of cultural values, in which the country can scarcely be differentiated from the landscape. ‘The landscape’, discursively speaking, is not simply a photograph or painting of a part of Canada, but is synonymous with ‘the wilderness’ as represented by the paintings of the Group of Seven, the early twentieth-century painters whose work changed the face of Canadian art from an imitation of European style and subject matter to a particularly Canadian style with a focus on the rocky face of the Canadian shield, with its apparently untouched lakes and wind-blasted pines. Not for we hardy Canadians the domesticity inherent in paintings of Dutch interiors, for example, or the bourgeois portraits of landowners; we are the people of the sublime, an idea which tends to conceal the ways in which the geography of ‘here’ is discursively constituted in Canadian sensibilities ‘as a space in which social constructions are absent’ (Cavell 110).

The canoe is the vessel through which Canadians have navigated the waterways that conjoin our various types of sublime and ‘empty’ geographies. From a postcolonial perspective, this depiction of the canoe and its landscapes is problematic in its own right, both because of its failure to recognise not only the colonial appropriation of Native technologies and because of the erasure of the existing population — a discourse that is a close parallel to the Australian conception of that continent as a ‘terra nullius’ prior to the arrival of Europeans. Even beyond this, we need, perhaps, to recognise that not all of those waterways are undomesticated wilderness, even to the most colonial of imaginations. This can perhaps be most clearly seen through a personal narrative, in terms of how and where Susan taught Wendy to canoe. Wendy immigrated to Canada when she was twelve, managing to skip the unfamiliar business of summer camps and canoe lessons, and learned to canoe as an adult, mostly along the shoreline of Lake Ontario in Toronto. Her canoeing territory, unlike both the artificial lake of Susan’s experience and the more ‘pure’ canoeing experience of those with access to the lakes and rivers of the Canadian ‘wilderness’, was the beach in front of Sunnyside Park, with high-rise buildings on the one hand and the moored yachts of wealthy Torontonians on the other (see Figure 1). This space was neither ‘silent and still’ nor unpopulated. Construction sites and the Neo-Nazi graffiti of the bridge where Lakeshore Drive crosses the Humber River were more common spectacles in
Wendy’s canoeing experience than beaver or loon. Yes, she had the blue lake and rocky shore, but the lake was polluted and the shore was man-made. Like Susan’s, as we shall see — and yet differently — Wendy’s canoeing experience clearly did not match the discourse of the canoe’s place in, and thus symbolism of, a pristine Canadian landscape.

The urban landscape plays little part in most narratives of the canoe. Canoe books of every kind, whether they emphasise practical instruction, history or cultural analysis, are replete with what Robert Fleming calls the ‘mythic romance ... of white settlers and Indigenes brought together in a state of nature’ (online). The canoe is mobilised as a symbol which is able to integrate — and thus by unstated implication to interpellate — not only the traditional settler societies of English and French Canada with the Native population they displaced, but also as a symbol which can bring together Canadians of all sorts of ethnic and immigrant backgrounds.8 To take just one example, John Jennings argues that the canoe is a necessary symbol for a country currently in a state of crisis:

Canadians, today, need things around which to rally.... The canoe reaches deep into our history and extends into our future as the symbol of our stewardship of the land. It conjures images of things that, according to surveys, Canadians collectively hold dear — images of wilderness: of the mystique of the North; of space and tranquillity; of
Jennings suggests that one way that Canadians can counter the 'centrifugal' pressures of 'political devolution, multiculturalism, Native self-government, [and] a stress on regional identity' (9) is to instate the image of the canoe in the Canadian consciousness, beyond even its current iconic value, in the same way that Theodore Roosevelt, along with novelist Owen Wister and sculptor Frederic Remington, 'self-consciously set out to create the image of the cowboy' (Jennings 8). The canoe, is deemed to be a symbol which is accessible to all Canadians 'no matter what their background' (Jennings 9), and can, it would seem, help us to hold together as 'the world's first truly multicultural society ... a model of diverse people living together in relative harmony under a system of tolerance and respect for minority rights, equality before the law, a sense of obligation to the world and, above all, of a pragmatic federalism able to adjust to the occasion' (Jennings 14).

Whether or not one accepts Jennings' valuation of Canada's place in the world, one might still want to ask whether Canadian culture and Canadian values would really be furthered by the deliberate manipulation of the canoe into a Canadian icon to parallel the cowboy. The image of the cowboy is not, in any case, an unproblematic one; while it may indeed represent 'freedom, courage, initiative and a connection with open spaces' (Jennings 8), there is no doubt that it also represents a particular version of heteronormative white masculinity. Various scholars, including most notably Jane Tompkins, have pointed out that the image of the cowboy and the concomitant rise of the Western, in novel, film and eventually television, were ideologically loaded from the very beginning. The cowboy is a repudiation of the female, particularly as it was (and is) associated with the domestic, the urban and the urbane. A related critique is made by Wendell Berry, who points out that the ideological emphasis on movement, on the cowboy as pioneer, restricted the ways in which Americans could relate to the land, thus influencing not only settlement patterns, but also ideologies of agri/culture which involved, in particular, the loss of a notion of husbandry; if you over-farmed the land, there was always more out there. Just go west!

Of course, there are similarities between the construction of the cowboy as an iconic emblem of American masculinism and the ways in which the image of the canoe is deployed in certain forms of Canadian culture. Examining the visual culture of the canoe created by the photographs in *The Canoe in Canadian Cultures*, one can scarcely help but note that the majority of the photographs show men canoeing. While the figures in some of the photographs are indistinct, the visual context of Western society invariably suggests to the reader that these figures must be male; Western visual culture requires specific clues to identify the other, regardless of whether that otherness is to be found in gender, race, class or sexuality. The same effect of visually identifying canoeing as an overwhelmingly male
pursuit is also created by the many photographic illustrations of male paddlers in Bill Mason's famous canoeing manual, *The Path of the Paddle*, even though Mason notes explicitly that his daughter, Becky, is on shore only because she volunteered to take the photographs and not because she's a lesser paddler than his son, Paul (vii). The visual exclusions of these photographs create an effect of normalising the canoeist's masculinity that is quite in opposition to Mason's stated intent and philosophy. Similarly, almost all of the photographs in *The Canoe in Canadian Cultures*, save for the photograph of Madeline Katt of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai nation, appear also to be pictures of white people (and in the case of 'Grey Owl' [Archie Belaney], of white people pretending to be Native). These are rather visually specific illustrations of the unstated ideologies which, in addition to ethnic, racial and class differentiation, do much to demolish the rhetoric which seeks to instate the canoe as a symbol that carries equal valence for all Canadians, just as the image of the cowboy has never been equally accessible in the USA to women, gays, or Afro-Americans — despite the fact that historically there were women, blacks and gays who worked as cowhands on the ranches of the American west.

The image of the canoe is more imbricated with colonial discourses than Canadians would generally like to admit, even though Bill Mason, who was one of the iconic figures of Canadian canoe culture, noted in *The Path of the Paddle*, that as 'the white man took over their land, the native people would regret the generosity with which they shared their amazing mode of travel' (2). At the same time, like most dominant discourses, it is complicated by the resistances that inevitably arise, as Judith Butler suggests, alongside any attempt at interpellation. The more masculinist and heteronormative the canoe or the cowboy seems, the more disturbed it is by the shadow image it seeks to suppress. To go back to the example of the cowboy, one hardly needs even to resort to Leslie Fiedler's classic chapter on homoerotic attachments in *Love and Death in the American Novel* to point out that the masculinist heteronormativity of the cowboy is always already compromised by the spectre of homoeroticism that haunts virtually every all-male endeavour. In the attempt to repudiate the female, the image of the cowboy carries its shadow self within it, the *unheimlich* figure of alternative possibilities all too easily accessible in the predominantly masculine world of the West. To quote the rather caustic liner notes from queerpunk band Pansy Division's cover of Ned Sublette's 'Cowboys are Frequently Secretly Fond of Each Other', '[t]he Old West equation of ten men for every woman makes for easy math. You add it up'. The heteronormativity of the cowboy is further compromised, at least within popular culture, by the association of the phrase 'Go West' with the Village People's 1979 album of that title. As Alan Sinfield has noted, there is some interesting subcultural work taking place when a gay male anthem can appropriate for itself the 'imperial motif' of American expansionism, so that the 'trappings of “manly” pioneering [became] part of the fantasy paraphernalia of the gay leatherman',
especially at a time when many American gay men really were migrating west to San Francisco (2).

The masculinism of the canoe gets repeated in all sorts of ways in Canadian culture, most recently in the assertion that photographs of former Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, in a cedarstrip canoe make him more of a ‘real man’ than do equivalent photographs of would-be Prime Minister Stockwell Day in a motorboat,\textsuperscript{10} while the heteronormativity of the canoe is — probably unintentionally — ensured by the endless repetition of the quotation traditionally attributed to the journalist and popular historian, Pierre Berton: ‘A Canadian is someone who knows how to make love in a canoe’. While there is nothing in the quotation per se that disallows the vision of two lesbians or gay men making love in a canoe, the heteronormativity of the public imagination, in concert with the largely unspoken heterocentrism of our discourses of Canadian nationalism, combine to make it most unlikely that the ‘average’ Canadian is imagining anything other than two white people of opposite sexes in that now legendary canoe. That the man and woman making love are young, fit and probably fair-haired is yet another inevitable consequence of the larger cultural discourses within which virtually all Western cultures have been interpellated.

\textbf{Canoeing 101, or, Learning To Be Canadian}

In 1973, at the age of 11, Susan first went to summer camp and learned to canoe. It was not really an auspicious beginning, and though it did much to develop an affection, even passion, for the joys of canoeing, it seemed to do little to inscribe her within the socio-cultural framework of the ideology of the canoe. Or did it? The camp Susan attended was a local one on a man-made lake in southern Ontario. It was run by the YMCA, staffed by turned-on and dropped-out counterculture ‘wannabes’ and primarily frequented by the children of working class immigrant families. In its locations — geographical, geological and social — therefore, it stood in stark contrast to the gracious, smartly painted, well-equipped summer camps dotting the lakes of the Canadian Shield in Muskoka and Haliburton, just as its rag-bag counsellors and campers stood in contrast to the sons and daughters of upper-middle-class Anglo-Ontario inhabiting these bastions of canoe culture. In spite of this, Camp Belwood instilled in both Susan and her brother a profound respect for canoes and an appreciation for the environment canoeing made uniquely accessible. The canoeing ethos of Camp Belwood was, nevertheless, still heavily steeped in the mystique of the north woods and the appropriateness of the canoe as a vehicle in which to explore the otherwise inaccessible lakes, rivers and streams of the Canadian Shield. The Camp taught, perhaps inadvertently, that same attitude which the Canadian Prime Minister of the time, Pierre Trudeau, referred to when he wrote of paddling in the Canadian wilderness with the words ‘I do not just mean “canoeing”’ and went on to distinguish between canoeing as a pastime and canoeing as a means of interpellation into the Natural, which was also the Canadian:
What sets a canoeing expedition apart is that it purifies you more rapidly and inescapably than any other. Travel a thousand miles by train and you are a brute; pedal five hundred on a bicycle and you remain basically a bourgeois; paddle a hundred in a canoe, and you are already a child of nature. (2000, 40)

In the same work, Trudeau also wrote that ‘I know a man whose school could never teach him patriotism, but who acquired that virtue when he felt in his bones the vastness of the land, and the greatness of those who founded it’ (41). To be truly Canadian then involves more than just an afternoon’s pleasant paddle along a lake or river; it involves a vision of the canoe as a means of entrée into the sublime of the country, the nation as landscape. Susan and Andy thus came away from their two week summer camp with the desire and skill to paddle and portage a canoe and an understanding of the places where the canoe really belonged. They soon attempted to transfer those skills to what they saw as their more ‘appropriate’ or ‘natural’ location, the lakes of the Canadian Shield, and, in particular, of Algonquin Park.

The ideology of the canoe was constructed for the campers through narratives of the canoe circulating throughout the summer camp. There was a nostalgic reverence paid to the few wooden canoes at the camp (most were made of more durable fibreglass or aluminium) based on the notion that wood was a ‘natural’, and therefore ‘authentic’, material. Paddling giant ‘freighter’ canoes, an homage to the historical canot du maître, or Montréal Canoe, was framed in historical terms as a type of re-enactment, as was camping on an uninhabited island out of sight from the main camp, just like, the counsellors said, the voyageurs did. Certainly the young Knabes and their camp-mates were and are not alone in this veneration of the historical freighter canoe. For instance, Peter Labor, in an article discussing historical voyage re-enactments, notes that these canoes were used to transport large volumes of furs out of central Canada and that each was paddled by as many as twelve paddlers. Moreover, Labor acknowledges the ideological legacy of the canot du maître by noting ‘it symbolises a vast land of rock and water and an era of adventure and growth ... [and] exemplifies one of the most culturally defining periods in Canadian history’ (93). These camp canoe narratives, however, also served more specifically to spell out the ways in which the particular experience of canoeing offered at the camp was measured against, and fell well short of, the gold standard of canoeing experiences: the mythical canoe trips along the uninhabited rivers and lakes of ‘the North’, which were liberally illustrated by the counsellors’ colourful, and no doubt apocryphal, anecdotes of narrowly avoided waterfalls and the running of legendary rapids. These narratives wove the strands of history, geography, nature, sport, and adolescent hero-worship into a powerful tapestry of Canadian national identity; moreover, the canoe was able to be seen as the vehicle through which this identity was made tangible. Thus Susan and her brother came away with an indoctrination into the ideology of the canoe which, however incomplete, contingent and contested, nevertheless dictated
how they positioned themselves and were positioned within specific discourses of Canadian identity.

Moreover, as subsequent Knabe family canoe trips to Algonquin Park demonstrated, living up to the ideology of the canoe was not simply a matter of geographical location. The broad-beamed aluminium Sportspal canoe, complete with fake birch bark paint, oarlocks, and black foam flotation bumpers, purchased specifically because it was 'safe', was as far from the sleek slender wooden canoes of their adolescent fantasies as the shallow river running past the Knabe farm was from the deep, cool lakes of the Pre-Cambrian Shield. The canoeing cachet of the once yearly trips to Algonquin was further compromised by the necessary inclusion of their mother, who took up residence in the middle of the boat (Figure 2). Thus, even as Susan and Andy occupied the geographical space of canoe culture, they were subtly and surely displaced from its ideological space.

The canoe as an index of national belonging was mapped out not simply in terms of the activity and the place; rather it was also the product of a complex and contingent amalgam of unspoken markers of class and ethnicity which located Susan and Andy outside the ideological mainstream of Canadian culture. Christl
Verduyn, who was at that time Chair of Canadian Studies at Trent University, gives a very similar account, in Charles Foran’s ‘Different Strokes’, of her family’s attempt to use the canoe as a way to fit into the culture of their adopted Canadian town. Verduyn notes that she ‘finally woke up to the class dimension of canoeing.... It wasn’t about getting out into nature. It was about where you sent your kids to summer camp. It was about which lake your cottage was on’ (67). The experiences of those othered by their ethnic or racial heritage or class background reveal both the functioning of the interpellative discourse of the canoe and its very real failure, as a universalising symbol, to demolish the barriers that have historically prevented those more marginalised inhabitants of Canada from becoming the ‘proper’ subjects of these discourses. The implicit rhetoric of what one might call ‘canoeism’, the metaphorical tap of the paddle on the shoulder, as it were, which suggests that the canoe is a ‘uniquely’ Canadian, although universalised, symbol to which all segments of Canadian society should be able to relate, thus functions as one means by which Canadians are differentially constituted as national subjects.

However, it is also important to realise that this sense of displacement, specifically with respect to canoe culture, but also, by extension, to a certain type of Canadian identity, was not ever complete or uncomplicated. For instance, in spite of a sense of alienation, both Susan and Andy spent substantial parts of their adolescence and early adulthood paddling, portaging and camping. Andy went on to make many canoe and raft trips north of Lake Superior and in the Yukon, while Susan taught her partner, Wendy, how to canoe in Toronto in the mid 1980s, in essence renegotiating her relationship with canoeing culture. Christl Verduyn also speaks about this process of renegotiation, noting that she too has an ‘inner canoe.... Mine just happens to be the wobbly, cheap thing my immigrant parents bought’ (67).

The sense of alienation Susan felt but could not articulate during those early canoeing years reappeared when, in 1996, she entered the Canadian Heritage and Development Studies Program at Trent University to study for an MA. Several times during her tenure in the Program, Susan mentioned to faculty members that she had canoed as a young person and that she enjoyed this pastime. This was an admission which was motivated, in part, by a desire to indicate that she was perhaps not so far removed from the Program’s defining institutional culture, which was most clearly reflected in the annual retreat at Temagami, ‘a four-day wilderness quest through the lakes and rivers of northern Ontario’ (Foran 67), as might initially be assumed on the basis of her project’s subject matter. Even though her work was urban, theoretical, and queer in its focus, she wished to indicate that she could still ‘fit in’ to the Program. Yet each time, her assertions were met with surprise, which itself was an indication of an assumption about ‘who canoes’ based on, possibly, gender, sexuality, and body habitus. What was more striking, however, was that in each case it was the same faculty member, a person firmly committed to an inclusive vision for the Program, who found Susan’s canoeing
past surprising. Moreover, this exchange was repeated at least two or three times a year over the three years of her degree: not only did he find her canoeing past surprising, but he also apparently subconsciously suppressed his knowledge of this fact. One possible explanation, and one which demonstrates the insidious ways in which the ideology of the canoe is deployed to differentially inscribe individuals within discourses of the nation, is that it was impossible, on some fundamental level, for this man to imagine a ‘queer’ woman in a canoe: so impossible, in fact, that he had actively to forget that she was ever there in the first place. If this is the case, and we strongly suggest that it is, then the rhetoric of the canoe as a nation-building and nation-strengthening symbol is anything but unproblematic; if there is no room for queer bodies in the canoe, is there similarly no room for queer bodies in Canada?

**Conclusion: Queering the Canoe?**

Is there then, or can there be, someone queer in the canoe? Or, to paraphrase Peter Dickinson, himself paraphrasing Northrop Frye, can here be queer? (3). In the contemporary discourses of the canoe, the answer is perhaps ‘No’; and yet the canoe might yet be taken as a heterotopian, rather than a simplistically utopian, symbol.11 Alternatively, one might rather agree with Christl Verduyn’s assessment that we would all be happier if ‘the canoe could just be brought down to the level of, say, a nice paddle along the Otonabee’ (Foran 67). While it is unlikely that the symbolic meanings of the canoe can at present be evacuated to that extent — a strategy that is the pragmatic opposite of Jennings’ desire to interpellate all Canadians within a universalised symbolic — there are still opportunities to celebrate the canoe outside of the hegemonically white and heterocentrically masculinist discourse that has usurped it for so long. Let us finish with one attempt to decentre and reappropriate the canoe, from Mohawk writer Beth Brant’s essay, ‘Physical Prayers’:

My partner and I have a small cottage on Walpole Island in Ontario. Walpole Island is held by a confederacy known as the Council of Three Fires — Potawatomi, Ottawa, Ojibwa, and since it comprises several islands, there are numerous canals and tiny channels of water where only a canoe can get through. Denise and I canoe every chance we get .... On this one day, we found a small patch of dry land with a black willow growing straight out of the earth. There was a noisy Red-wing flying in and out of the branches .... We talked, ate our lunch, breathed the air, then lay under the willow and touched each other, kissed, made love between us. As I felt the first tremors of orgasm take hold of me, a Blue Heron entered my body and I became her. (60–61)

Brant makes crystal clear the connection between what she calls ‘orenda, a Mohawk description of what cannot be explained but is accepted as the natural order of life’ (61) and the ‘physical prayer’ that is encompassed both in sex and in (becoming) the heron. At the same time, she connects the learned self-hatred of many lesbians and Native people to the homophobia and misogyny which
Europeans brought with them to Canada and which were not previously a part of Native culture. In doing so, she seeks nothing as grandiose as the creation of a symbol for all Canadians, but rather attempts to speak to what it means to be a lesbian, a mother, a grandmother, a lover, a Mohawk. At the same time, Brant’s account of canoeing with her same-sex partner reiterates the infamous quotation about Canadians being those who know how to make love in a canoe in a context that defuses the quotation’s presumptive heteronormativity and reinstates those who have been excluded — the Native, the queer, the female, and the working class — as potential canoeists in their own right. Furthermore, Brant’s description of taking the canoe through a known and loved landscape reclaims a sense of Canada as a place that is local, specific and familiar, rather than the uninhabited sublime which initiates the young canoeist into the landscape as nation and the canoe as the instrument of its penetration and creation.

It is perhaps in connections like this that Canadians can find a way to unpack the baggage threatening to swamp the canoe. Postcolonial theory and practice can perhaps teach us why it is problematic to assert that the canoe is ‘one of the greatest gifts of the First Peoples to all those who came after’ (Jennings 1), just as feminist and queer theory can reveal the hidden masculinism and heteronormativity that underlie its recent uses as an interpellative strategy for young Canadians. Being a symbol is perhaps not the best fate for the canoe, in any case. After all, the most vehement celebration of being Canadian the country has seen in many years was inspired by a commercial in March 2000 for Molson’s Canadian beer. Despite Trudeau, the canoe makes a better pastime than it does an ideology.

NOTES
1  This very famous quotation has invariably been attributed to Pierre Berton although, when asked, Berton noted that he has no clear memory of having originated it. See *The Canoe in Canadian Cultures* 255, fn. 5.
2  These facts can be found in a variety of sources. One of the most succinct is the entry on canoeing in *Collier’s Encyclopaedia*, vol. 5, 357–58.
3  These are lyrics from the traditional folksong ‘Land of the Silver Birch’, which is familiar to most Canadian children from either (or both) school or summer camp, and is particularly egregious for the imitation Native drum of the chorus: ‘Blue lake and rocky shore/I will return once more/Boom didi boom boom/Boom didi boom boom/Boo-oo-oo-oo-oom’.
4  The CN (Canadian National) Tower is one of Toronto’s prime tourist attractions.
5  For a discussion of the invisibility of the indigenous inhabitants of the Canadian Shield in the work of the Group of Seven, see Jonathan Bordo’s ‘Jack Pine — Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape’. *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Spring 1992). The Group of Seven consisted of Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, J.E.H. MacDonald, Arthur Lismer, Frederick Varley, Franklin Carmichael and A.J. Casson. Tom Thomson, one of the artists associated with group members, drowned — ironically at Canoe Lake — shortly before the group was formed.
6  In 1973. Northrop Frye. Canada’s most famous literary critic, asked the question; ‘Where is here?’, a question which still has resonance today for work on issues of
Canadian national identity. Like Margaret Atwood, Frye conceived of Canadians as being first and foremost concerned with the struggle to survive against the indifference of nature. The country’s very disinterest in human affairs is intrinsic to our sense of the sublimity of the Canadian landscape, which is to be found in the serene distance of unhindered views, rather than in the propinquity of mosquitoes and bogs. To quote Atwood, ‘Nature the Sublime can be approached but never reached’ (Survival 51).

Last line of the fourth and final verse of ‘Land of the Silver Birch’.

Witness the very different responses to Bill Reid’s sculpture, ‘The Spirit of Haida Gwaii’, which represents the inhabitants of the canoe both through Haida mythology and contemporary references, in John Jennings’ ‘The Canoe Museum and Canada’s National Symbol’ and Richard Cavell’s in ‘Where is Frye? Or, Theorising Postcolonial Space’.

Because of the seriousness with which some aspects of middle-class mostly Anglo-Canadian culture take the canoe’s symbolic value, it is also available as a subject for satire. Due South, a recent Canadian TV show whose subject was primarily Canada-US relations and which spent a lot of time satirising both how Americans see Canadians and how we see ourselves, used a canoe exactly once. In an episode called ‘Manhunt’, Due South takes the symbol of access to the pristine wilderness and sends it down a Chicago sewer, manned by two Mounties and a Chicago cop. It’s hard to take one’s national symbols (whether Mountie or canoe) all that seriously when they’re being, as the cop complains, ‘humiliated by rats’.

The last federal election, which took place in November 2000, featured this curious argument about whether Stockwell Day, leader of the very right-wing Alliance Party, who was being consistently contrasted with incumbent Prime Minister, Jean Chretien, in terms of his youth, fitness and All-American good looks, was more or less masculine than the late Pierre Trudeau. Trudeau, of course, was notorious for his devotion to the canoe, both as a means of exploration and as a tool for teaching Canadian nationalism; photos and documentaries of Trudeau, both during and after his tenure as Prime Minister, placed him time after time alone in a cedarstrip canoe.

Michel Foucault describes the heterotopia thus: ‘There are ... probably in every culture, in every civilisation, real places — places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias’ (24).

The desire to use the canoe as a means for transforming young Canadians into good citizens is quite explicitly expressed by Kurt Wipper, in the foreword to The Canoe in Canadian Cultures, when he writes about the “‘Flame of Hope’ [which] is for urban youth who, through this program may paddle with police, firefighters, ambulance workers and emergency task force members. This program contributes to a much better understanding and appreciation of other community members’ (ii).

WORKS CITED


