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Canoe Nation

Nature, Race, and the Making
of a Canadian Icon



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Preface

Canoeing Matters

Among the many controversies that surrounded the G8/G20 summits in Huntsville and Toronto in 2010 was the creation of an indoor lake as part of a multi-million-dollar media centre in downtown Toronto. The lake was built, at a cost of over \$200,000, to give those reporters who were not allowed to attend the smaller G8 meetings in Huntsville's cottage country a taste of the tourist-friendly Canadian wilderness (Paperny 2010). To camouflage the fact that the lake was in fact in a massive exhibition hall, the designers surrounded the lake with a wall of canoes, no doubt to contribute to the authentic feeling of the façade. The fake lake canoes were not the only ones to make the news that weekend, even amongst mass arrests, burning police cars, and over ten thousand protesters. The Council of Canadians led a canoe-based protest toward the summit grounds at the Deerhurst Resort in Huntsville, only to be stopped by Ontario Provincial Police as they approached the security zone (R. Brennan 2010). Their attempt to deliver a letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper was transformed into a press conference in the middle of the lake. On the other side of another security perimeter in downtown Toronto, eight spouses of G8 leaders were treated to a canoe-themed day, where they dined on chocolate paddles and were taught how to cane and rib a canoe seat by an Aboriginal artist (Henry 2010; see Figure 1).

All three of these examples, each of which was no doubt planned in detail, uses the canoe to authenticate a specific vision of the nation – the canoe's



Figure 1 Spouses of G8 leaders sign a commemorative canoe in Toronto during the 2010 G20 meetings in Toronto. Courtesy of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada | Reproduced with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2012.

link to nature naturalizes this vision and lends authority to the performance. Canoe walls signify Muskoka chic, canoe protesters stand in contrast to the overly technical security measures, and traditional canoe crafting signifies wisdom and historical continuity.

It should perhaps be no surprise that canoes were a part of Canada's hosting of such a high-profile international event. The canoe inhabits our daily life in Canada in many ways, as countless writers on the canoe are happy to point out (Benidickson 1997; Daniel Francis 1997; Raffan 1999a). These writers point to the prominence of the boat on a bottle of beer (Maudite); your old sweatshirt (Beaver Canoe); the twenty-dollar bill; ad copy for cigarettes, milk, lotteries, beer, and condos; provincial park logos, restaurant themes (i.e., Canoe, atop the TD Bank Tower, remains one of Toronto's most celebrated restaurants); and U-Haul vans. This list, it is likely, could continue for pages.

This book has arisen out of my obsession with these eruptions of the canoe into the national imagination, in part because I find myself drawn to this symbol as a reminder of my own enjoyment of canoeing. However, as the G20 examples illustrate, canoeing holds significant lessons for how Canada is understood as a nation, how wilderness is produced and governed within the country, and how individual citizens are (differently) incorporated into the fold of that country. These lessons do not speak to a unified

character of the nation, nor to an essential quality of wilderness that finds expression within Canadian politics and culture. Rather, canoeing matters because it can illustrate the mobilization of power and politics through nature, nation, and leisure. The stories told about the canoe, stories related to its iconic status for the nation, need to be understood as moments in the ever-contested field of cultural politics. Thinking critically about the canoe and the stories that made it a national icon can help highlight the significant patterns and features of that field of power.

The central argument of this book is that the canoe does not exist as a natural symbol of the Canadian nation, but rather that the sentimental place of the canoe in Canada is the result of a set of narratives that attempt to legitimize a particular (and dominant) vision of the nation. This vision of Canada builds on moments in the history of the canoe to imagine a nation that can justify a history of colonialism, the industrialization and urbanization of the nation, the ecological crisis, and the place of the nation within a globalizing world. Embedded within this vision is an assumption of the subject at the centre of the nation, and here is the source of the questions that started my investigation. In what way does this vision of Canada authorize particular subject positions to speak authoritatively for the nation? What exclusions are made within this vision? Outlining the history of the canoe as a representative of the nation means we look not just at the path upon which the canoe has travelled in the nation's narration, but also at the consequences of this path for governance, representation, and economy. The canoe has been successful as a site for asserting this vision of Canada precisely because it naturalizes this vision of the nation, both as a boat that has arisen out of nature and as a boat that connects the nation with nature.

Erasing the production of this narrative of a naturalized nation is easily done in the field of leisure, as this is a sphere that is usually assumed to be free of significant political consequences. Dismissed as having little consequence for the “real” life of politics, leisure activities are often treated in discussions of power as merely an afterthought of cultural politics; they exist as a place in which already established relations of power occur. As I hope to show in this book, this is not the case. Leisure habits, like other areas of life, help shape social structures and the relationships of power that surround them. Indeed, the history of capitalism would be an incredibly different story if a large portion of it did not play out through leisure habits; the same could be said of the history of colonialism. For this reason, canoeing matters.

Canoeing matters not merely as an object of analysis, but also as a place to contest the normalizing of subject positions through leisure. The history of canoeing in Canada holds the path that led to a dominant vision of Canada, but it also holds the multiple ways in which that vision has been challenged, and it is from here that we can begin a democratic dialogue on how nature and nation impact the geographic experience of citizenship and belonging. Central to this possibility is the opening up of what “the nation” is in Canada. Too often, the nation is presumed to already exist within a specific construction of (already existing) citizens and institutions: it is a collection of two or three founding peoples, it is a nation of immigrants, it is a nation built in the wilderness, it is a hockey nation, it is a social democratic nation, it is a conservative nation. When listing all the possibilities, it becomes evident that, if anything, Canada is a nation in a continual process of self-definition. Rather than see this as a weakness, I think it is necessary to keep this sense of conflict front and centre, as it helps to keep the possibility of the nation open to new and productive changes.

The occlusion of the complex history of the canoe, and of the nation that it has become iconic to, is a lesson that is taught very carefully, and in some ways tragically, by the place of indigenous peoples within the myth of the canoe in Canada. Often conceived of as the givers of the canoe to the European nation-to-be, indigenous peoples have always held a complicated (and rarely unified) relationship to the evolving role of the canoe in Canada. However their original position in relation to the Canadian canoe is conceived (it has changed slightly over the years in the stories told), indigenous peoples have always been seen as a “problem” in the production of the Canadian nation, either as objects to be excluded, or subjects to be ingested and subsumed. This tension has two significant consequences. First, it ascribes agency over “Canada” as an entity to those who are already speaking for the nation, not to the indigenous people in question, a circular logic that keeps indigenous people as always, already different than Canada. Clearly this is not accurate, as indigenous people have in many cases been active agents within the production of the nation. Second, it provides an easy baseline from which to judge interventions by the state in relation to indigenous peoples. If one believes, as is the accepted position today, that indigenous peoples are to be incorporated fully into the nation, then attempts to incorporate their stories into the national myths, say by including a picture of Bill Reid’s *Spirit of Haida Gwaii* on the twenty-dollar bill, are beneficial. Yet, as I show in some detail, these interventions have significant

consequences, as even when they are incorporated into the nation, indigenous peoples are often subject to regimes of control more demanding than when they were excluded (residential schools, it should be remembered, were a form of incorporation). This is not to say that indigenous peoples should not have a claim to the Canadian nation; clearly, they should have the authority to make such a claim. Rather, the lessons I suggest we need to heed are about how this authority is established. It is not established by moments of generosity on the part of the nation, but, rather, by moments of resistance and creativity on the part of Aboriginal individuals and groups. And so, once again, canoeing matters because it is one area in which authority over national narratives is continually produced and contested. Indeed, these lessons apply not just to the relationships between “Canada” and Aboriginal groups, but also between other significant groups within the fold of the nation – most specifically, the inclusion of Quebec as a nation within the larger body of Canada. I have focused on the relationship between Canada and indigenous peoples in this book (and consequently speak little of modern issues of Quebec) to illustrate the way in which the narrative of the canoe draws from a colonial history and contrasts rather starkly with the myth of a tolerant national history. An examination of this relationship demonstrates how the leisure vehicle of the canoe contains the authority to rewrite historical encounters in the process of telling a particular story about the nation. In its emphasis on the canoe as a unifying vehicle of the nation, this myth also distorts a complicated story of English and French relations. Rather than attempt to settle this process once and for all, to tell the truth of the history of the canoe, this book sees the canoe as a place in which discussions of cultural politics have productive streams and eddies. Investigating these details offers a generative place to continue the dialogue about the future of the Canadian nation.

The process of writing this book has been a long but entirely enjoyable one, thanks to all of the support I had along the way. Randy Schmidt and Ann Macklem at UBC Press have guided it through the hoops of academic publishing with ease. The book started in the Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES) at York University. The guidance, support, and friendship Cate Sandilands has offered me during my years at FES and beyond have been the foundation upon which this book was written. Ilan Kapoor, Gamal Abdel-Shehid, Liette Gilbert, Patricia Wood, Terry Goldie, and Caroline Desbiens provided feedback and questions on earlier versions of the manuscript that helped me clarify and simplify my argument. FES was also a very

productive place to think about nature and race, and the colleagues who influenced this book are now long-time friends – Joanna Adamiak, Stephanie Rutherford, Lauren Corman, Pablo Bose, Mike Ekers, Jocelyn Thorpe, Jenny Kerber, Nick Garside, Traci Warkentin, Heather McLean, and Jenny Foster. The Department of History at Nipissing University provided an enjoyable place to complete the manuscript.

Dean Bavington, Hilary Earl, and James Murton were especially wonderful in a treasure of a department. Over the years I have had many wonderful paddling partners who have helped shape my thinking around canoes and their place in Canada, and to them I am extremely grateful for their company and conversation. On the shores of Shoal Lake in Manitoba many years ago, Peter Dowd prompted me to think deeper about both the one-handed pry and the historical relationship between Europeans and the canoe. Apparently there is something in the waters of Shoal Lake that enables grand thoughts about canoes and nature.

I learned to canoe from my family, and for that and much else I am thankful, especially to my mother, Glenna Erickson, who long ago sent me off in a canoe on my own to explore Winnetka Lake. In writing this book, I have often thought about my grandparents, and especially Dan and Louise Mills, whose life story parallels some of the history I tell in this book. Dan was particularly interested to hear that I had spent much of a summer combing through *Rod and gun*, and he was able to teach me which fish were which. My most significant debt is to my partner, Sherri Manko, for her wit and wisdom, and for always having the answer to the questions that stump me.

I would also like to acknowledge the funding of SSHRC and the Canadian Research Chair in Sustainability and Culture, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program, the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation, *Antipode: A radical journal of geography*, and the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies at York University for support in the research and publication of this book. An earlier version of Chapter 3 appeared as “A phantasy in white in a world that is dead’: Grey Owl and the whiteness of surrogacy,” in Laura Cameron, Audrey Kobayashi, and Andrew Baldwin, eds., *Rethinking the great white North: Race, nature, and the historical geographies of whiteness in Canada* (2011) UBC Press. Parts of the conclusion appeared as “‘Fucking close to water’: Queering the production of the nation,” in Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, eds., *Queer ecologies: Sex, nature, politics, desire* (2010) University of Indiana Press.

Canoe Nation

Introduction

Canoes and the Nature of Canada

To suggest that any one canoe could represent the totality of Canadian experience with canoes in general is to deny the spectrum of craft and the significant differences in the ways in which canoe narratives have evolved in the various regions of the country ... The idea of canoe – the canoe as sacred text, perhaps – is a different thing altogether, and a much more pan-Canadian phenomenon. In this respect, the canoe unites Canadians from coast to coast and girds us with the strength of a common heritage ... The canoe grounds us through direct and accessible experience in our home landscape. The canoe is Canada.

– James Raffan, *Bark, skin and cedar:
Exploring the canoe in Canadian experience*

A National Wonder

The story I will be telling throughout this book is the story of the canoe in the Canadian imagination. For some, the canoe exists at the heart of the Canadian experience, one of the key elements of Canada's identity. This belief was confirmed in the summer of 2007, when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), declared that the canoe was one of the Seven Wonders of Canada, identified through a nation-wide media competition using both official judges and public participation to pick wonders valued for their Canadian-ness and their ability to inspire. The final seven

included the Rocky Mountains, the prairie sky, Pier 21 in Halifax, the igloo, Niagara Falls, Old Quebec City, and the canoe. The canoe was praised for its historic economic importance to the country as well as its ubiquity in contemporary Canadian life: “Whether you’re practicing your J-Stroke out on the lake, rooting for your favourite professional soccer team in the national Voyageurs Cup, or simply standing at the corner of Portage and Main in Winnipeg, you are reflecting a bit of Canadian canoeing history” (CBC n.d.). Yet the canoe is not simply a historical vehicle; it also unites citizens under the banner of wilderness. As the CBC describes it, “The canoe continues to play a vital role, allowing access to pristine wilderness areas, and uniting people all over Canada who have a penchant for clear water, dark forest, aching shoulders, cosy sleeping bags, and freeze-dried food” (*ibid.*). In this rendering, the canoe provides both history and future to the nation. A promotional website for the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games placed the canoe at the centre of a simple monologue of the nation: “Canada: I canoe, therefore, I exist” (Destination 2010). James Raffan (1999a, 242) goes so far as to claim, in the conclusion to his book *Bark, skin and cedar: Exploring the canoe in Canadian experience*, that “The canoe is Canada.”

This metaphor of national identity turns on a concrete experience of something tangible about the nation (“direct and accessible” as Raffan puts it). The embodied experience of paddling – of the water, the flies, or the freeze-dried food – manages to bring to life a particular character of the nation. Yet neither the “idea of the canoe” nor the character of the nation are tangible phenomena. For this reason, the story of the canoe in Canada points to the ways our stories help create our experiences as something more than the simple physicality of the activity. The choice of the seven wonders is one episode in this process, as it was not merely a poll of existing opinion, but rather a publicity campaign that necessarily involved producing new meanings for the wonders up for nomination. The production of the canoe as a wonder (a singular entity) points to the production of the myth of the canoe, a process that holds within it questions about the nation, its history, and its relationship to nature. How is it that regional differences (not captured in a simple enumeration of the material differences of canoescapes and regional canoe styles) are accommodated by the myth of the canoe? What is the “home landscape” offered by the idea of the canoe, and how can it connect those from coast to coast? Simply put, if the canoe is Canada, then whose boat is it, and what is delivered in its mythology?

The canoe, we will see, is much more than an aquatic vehicle; it holds significant lessons for how we understand the history and present of Canada. Perhaps the most significant of these relates to the colonial relationship. A central task of this book is to interrogate the colonial imagination, since the production of Canada as a nation is a colonial dream come true. The canoe, as a significant part of the production of an image of Canada, works through this colonial dream in many disparate ways, and my hope is that by tracing some of these paths we can understand the role that objects, specifically objects of leisure like the canoe, play in the production of nation and identity. In particular, the canoe as a national icon is evidence of specific historical and ideological relationships between the land that the state claims, ideas of the ideal citizen (which are always gendered, racialized, and sexualized), and the biopolitical regimes through which Western European settlers asserted authority (though not always successfully) over the land that is now called Canada. Having delivered the land to the European settler population through exploration, the canoe was then drafted to re-inscribe the newly born nation's legitimacy in that land. Thus, the canoe moved from a more specific material-economic role to one that also narrates national identity. Yet, in the archive of the national gaze, the re-inscription of the canoe requires a constant forgetting of the material and symbolic construction of the boat as an item of national status. We are, after all, supposed to think that the wonders were wonders before we made them so.

In this forgetting, in the laundering of the narrative of the canoe into a vehicle of national character and history, the canoe takes on the features of a national fetish; it is valued for its service to particular national myths while other, contradictory, perspectives are left undeveloped. Take, for example, the statement by one of the pre-eminent Canadian canoeists, Bill Mason. Mason, a filmmaker recognized by paddlers for his instructional videos and books, used the canoe to help promote a view of Canada as a wilderness land. A strong Christian, he often claimed that "When you look at the face of Canada, and study the geography carefully, you come away with the feeling that God could have designed the canoe first, and then set about to conceive a land in which it could flourish" (Mason 1984, 2; see also Raffan 1999a, 2). While admittedly presented as parable, there are several features of this allegory that bear analysis. First, it is true that much of Canada is accessible easily by canoe, from the maritime provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia to the northern reaches of Alberta and the Northwest

Territories. It is possible to cross the country by canoe, doing no portage longer than a dozen kilometres, yet, at the same time, much of the country is not easily accessible to the canoe, as any prairie farmer could attest. The Rocky Mountains blocked European advances for decades precisely because they were not easily travelled by canoe. Second, Canada is clearly not the only place where canoes, or boats of similar design, have been used. By fetishizing the canoe, Mason presents the authority of the nation, and of this particular national symbol, through a geographic frame that makes Canada the sum of its geography over anything else.

This privileging of landscape as the handmaiden of the nation has become one of the central features of the canoe's story about Canada, whereby the features of the environment, the lakes, rivers, and forests, are presented as guiding the history of the nation to the inevitable outcome of the current nation. Mason's use of God as the arbiter of this development replicates the inevitability of geography held in the myth of the canoe, naturalizing both the path of history and the inevitability of the nation. The canoe allows the nation to forget specific aspects of its history, even though, when pressed, we know that the canoe is not really the whole story of the nation. It is this expression of myth, this ascription of value to the canoe in ways that are not entirely justified, that qualifies the canoe as a national fetish. Even though, as we will see, the values promoted through the canoe change over time, the operation of this national fetish works ideologically to make a claim for a particular vision of (and authority over) the nation. These claims, while made through the narration of the national story, produce specific material effects on the space and population of Canada.

Understanding the canoe as a national fetish helps makes sense of how the claims about the boat, and its history, mobilize specific discourses surrounding the nation, including wilderness, indigeneity, modernity, and subjectivity. Fetishes prioritize and naturalize these connections in the hopes of remaking the world in the desired image held within the fetish. Thinking through this process in terms of the canoe as a historical presence within Canada, I suggest adopting a genealogical approach to the history of these significations. By following the path of the canoe as both a material object in the nation and a discursive fetish through which people understand their experiences of the nation, we can see the ideological investments that have produced the current stories about the canoe.

First among these is the fact that the canoe is a colonial product, and the nation itself still lays claim to contested land. Thus, throughout any history

of the canoe, as idea or as a particular boat, there is always the question of how colonialism dispossesses land. A second, related, concern is how subjects in the nation are able to identify with Raffan's (1999a, 242) "home landscape" as part of their experience of the nation itself. Nature plays a key role in the naturalization of the nation in this particular landscape, and we need to be cognizant of the production of nature as an innocent space. Third, the success of the nation depends upon how individuals themselves internalize the fetishized stories of the nation, so I am interested in the (often gendered and racialized) identifications made with both the nation and nature.

The Canoe as Fetish

It is Columbus who brought the canoe into the European archive, an act that would universalize the Arawak word *canoa* to signify almost all North American indigenous boats. In the diary of his first voyage across the Atlantic, Columbus records that groups of Arawak paddlers approached his boat in dugouts made of tree trunks, some holding as many as forty-five paddlers. He calls these boats *almadias*, using the (Arabic) word for dugouts that were common in North Africa.¹ Later, he adopts *canoa*, having learned from his interactions with the inhabitants the name for their crafts. We know this only from a transcription, edited and paraphrased in parts, made by Bartolomé de Las Casas. The original diary, given to Queen Isabella upon Columbus's return to Spain, was lost, as was a copy made for Columbus prior to his second voyage, so Las Casas's edition is the only surviving copy. Due to a combination of Columbus's imperfect Spanish (growing up in Genoa, he only learned Spanish later in life), Las Casas's brief transcription, and the intricacies of translation, there now exists a telling illustration of the malleability of the meaning of the canoe. Columbus, taking on the air of an anthropologist, injects an adjective to help the European audience grasp the character of these boats – an adjective that provides significantly different interpretations depending on the translation. Early translations interpret this adjective as a short, but decisive, qualification regarding the design of the boats: "They came to the ship in small canoes, made out of the trunk of a tree like a long boat, and all of one piece, and wonderfully worked, *considering the country*" (Markham 1898, 39, emphasis added).² The boats, in this translation, exist as models of primitive craftsmanship from a land inhabited by naked men and women who cut themselves when they

innocently grab Columbus's sword (see also Brooks 1924; Jane 1960). Later translations change the inflection of this qualification, setting the boats up as models of woodcraft: "They came to the ship with dugouts³ that are made from the trunk of one tree, like a long boat, and all of one piece, and worked marvellously in the fashion of the land" (Dunn and Kelley 1989, 68; see also Cohen 1969; Ife 1990).

The interest here is not in what Columbus thought, or wrote down, or tried to convey to his audience, but rather in how the simple description of the canoe as a boat is itself endowed with a particular meaning by these different translations. Accounts of Columbus that aim at a wider readership, like Robert Fuson's (1987) *The log of Christopher Columbus*, still use the canoe as a symbol of primitive work. Fuson embellishes on the diary to make his point: "After sunrise, people from San Salvador again began to come to our ships in boats fashioned in one piece from the trunks of trees. These boats are wonderfully made, considering the country we are in, and every bit as fine as those I have seen in Guinea" (77). The canoe becomes marked here, in a small way, on the battleground of historical interpretation, intimating the role Columbus had in the reign of colonial oppression to come. Note also how easily the canoe is drafted as a marker of primitive life.

The contested meaning of Columbus's text illustrates the operation of the canoe as a fetish of colonial justification. Within cultural studies it is common to approach fetishism in one of two predominant ways: the Freudian and the Marxist, each of which offers insights to the fetish of the canoe. The Freudian psychoanalytic approach sees the fetish as a substitute for a missing object in order to justify a particular delusion. In *Fetishism*, Freud (1927) describes several perversions he has encountered to show how fetish objects act as penis substitutes. The case of a young man with an extraordinary fondness for noses illustrates the process. The nose, Freud speculates, has come to hold sexual value for the man because as a child he displaced his mother's lack of a penis onto her nose in an attempt to placate his fear that his mother had been castrated. As an adult, the man clearly understood the difference between his mother and a castrated man, but he still held on to the value he had attached to noses as a child: "He retains this belief but he also gives it up" (200). This fetish allowed him to hold a contradictory belief, mobilizing the values enshrined in this contradiction to achieve sexual satisfaction. Drawing from Freud's work, fetishes work by overvaluing a substituted object, even as that substitute attempts

to embody a contradictory set of beliefs. That this contradiction is hidden within the establishment of a fetish object illustrates its high value to the subject's perspective on the world.

Perhaps the most contradictory attachment of the canoe is its connection to indigeneity. It is likely that, in part, the changing interpretations of the Columbus diary reflect changing approaches to indigeneity, a pattern which is repeated not only in the understanding of the colonization of the Americas, but also in the changing value of the canoe for Europeans. The most valued aspect of the modern canoe – the recreational pleasure it gives – was only recognized gradually, in part due to the association between the boat and its supposed “primitive” origins. The recognition of the canoe’s value to modern subjects depended upon a negotiation of the indigenous past of the canoe. As Jamie Benidickson (1997, 131) shows, some early modern critiques of the canoe argued that “the canoe had its own legitimate uses and was admittedly ‘highly commendable in its own sphere’”; however, outside of these uses, the canoe was best replaced by more “modern” craft like the sailboat, York boat or skiff. Another way to negotiate this relationship was to replace the primitive canoe with a more modern version:

While it is true that we must credit the redskin with the invention of the thin-skinned craft of America’s inland lakes and streams, as well as with the gut strung snow-shoe – there has been a marked evolution of the former ... The white man, with inherent ingenuity, has devoted time, thought and much money to the work of evolving a substitute for the bark covering, one that would possess its meritorious features, and also add those lacking in the original. (Sangster 1914, 1247)

Developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, Bill Mason’s appreciation of the canoe as a vehicle of beauty designed by God falls far from these less enthusiastic endorsements, yet it still mobilizes the anachronistic quality of the canoe, a prehistoric boat. It is also important to be aware that such anachronistic assessments also postulate a homogeneous culture for the indigenous peoples of the Americas,⁴ such that the term “canoe,” derived from *canoa* from the Arawak language, represents all the boats operated by indigenous groups.

The slow acceptance of indigeneity as a model for ingenuity and beauty, qualities that have been incorporated into the celebration of the canoe, is,

of course, a result of the anxious relationship between white Canada and aboriginal North America. Thus, there is a constant concern within the myth of the canoe to establish a particular logic of difference between indigenous peoples and the European nation that came after. It is no surprise that Pierre Trudeau, who is identified strongly with the canoe, was the leader of the government that proposed (although did not pass) the most anxious policy concerning Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the notorious 1969 white paper on Indian policy. In the modern myth, the canoe holds a connection to indigeneity even as it is haunted by this primitive connection. It is worth remembering, as Ann McClintock (1995, 184) does, that “fetishes can be seen as the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot resolve at a personal level. These contradictions originate as social contradictions but are lived with profound intensity in the imagination and the flesh.” The canoe provides a concrete location for the resolution of this crisis, the national equivalent of saying “I’m not racist; look, I have Native friends.” As an icon, the canoe offers much promise for understanding the complex relations between indigeneity and the Canadian nation (and the state), but this will only be realized through an analysis of the contradictions embedded within the celebration of the boat, not through a repetition of standard myths of nationhood.

The second approach to fetishism follows Marx’s explanation of the commodity form and finds the key to the fetish in the *form* of substitution. Like Freud’s fetish, Marx’s commodity form has a twofold nature (Marx [1867] 1967). One side features what Marx calls the use-value, where the value of an object is given by its particular use fulfilling a human want. The other side is the abstracted exchange-value, in which the commodity is valued in relation to other commodities. While the use-value is what gives the commodity value to individuals, capitalism raises the exchange-value, the monetary cost of the commodity, to become the inherent worth of the product. This, Marx argues, is a fetish because capitalism (and the commodity form) raises the abstract worth of a product above the actual use-value of the product; the commodity becomes a thing larger than the social interactions that produced it. Marx’s argument points to two particularly important features of the fetish. First, this relationship of value does not exist simply at the level of objects, in that we fetishize shoes (or, in the world of outdoor leisure, we fetishize Gore-Tex trail-running shoes with Vibram soles and a GPS-enabled pedometer that syncs with an iPod). Rather, the structure of the commodity through exchange-value ensures that *all* commodities are

embedded with misplaced value. Second, the eclipsing of use-value by exchange-value ignores the legacy of specific social circumstances – including the actual labour – that is involved in the production of the commodity.

Once again, Mason's description of the canoe in Canada follows this fetishistic format by according the canoe value beyond its actual use-value. This is not uncommon, nor particularly problematic – we live quite happily interacting with the commodity fetish every day. Yet these values eclipse their production, making social value an inherent worth. Mason's celebration of the canoe is a form of geographical determinism about Canada's production. That the canoe was born of the lakes and rivers of North America is not an unreasonable claim (although, again, we must remember that "canoe" is itself an abstraction; there were hundreds of variations in design of the boats that were used to travel throughout the continent); but to extend this claim, as James Raffan (1999a, 242) does in the epigraph to this chapter, to suggest that this vehicle, a product of landscape, holds the values of the nation in it, is much more problematic. First, the canoe, despite the diversity of its uses, designs, and forms of production (something Raffan readily admits), is associated with a set of values that are supposed to have been derived not from social relationships – the myths we tell of the canoe – but from the canoe as an inherent, unmediated connection between land and nation. Paddlers become the carriers of the correct national image. Second, Raffan ignores the process of producing the canoe as a national experience and myth. His book documents these encounters between nation and boat, but it naturalizes the myths rather than interrogating their production. The labour involved in the production of the national myth is hidden. Raffan unknowingly follows what Žižek (1989, 18) calls the classic formula of the fetish: "I know very well, but still." Raffan, in effect, argues, "I know that the canoe, as a specific object, cannot be Canada ... but still, in these specific canoes, I find Canada." In doing so, Raffan points to what Žižek would call the sublime object of the canoe, that which moves beyond its material body and avoids the potential corruption of the physical canoe. The sublime canoe, the canoe as fetish, does not have to deal with the varied uses, the changing modes of production (from artisanal craft of bark and cedar to factory-produced plastic reproductions), because it embodies at once all and none of these crafts. The fetishized object can hold contradictory meanings, but to understand the operation, and consequences, of the fetish, we have to grasp how meaning is delivered by the myth of the canoe.

The meaning of the word “canoe” changes through space and time like any other signifier. In our case, the contradictory claims about the original description of canoes by Columbus show that both the object (the boats we imagine on the water) and the signifier (*almadía*, *canoa*, canoe) are subject to multiple interpretations. Thus, any meaningful discourse, lest it get swept away, needs to have discursive anchoring points, nodal points, or *points de capiton* (“upholstery buttons,” see Žižek 1989, 87), to provide a relatively stable link between signifiers.⁵ A *point de capiton* settles meaning within a discursive chain by connecting different layers together through a specific signifier. Understanding what we mean by “canoe” depends upon these anchors, as the word variously refers to tangible boats, the immaterial national symbol, an online entertainment and news site (www.canoe.ca), or a restaurant in Toronto. Even within these different meanings, nodal points give signifiers reference points for the discussion, precisely what is at stake in the differing translations of Columbus’s diary. Language, and the relation between signifiers, is not simply about understanding one another, but about the possibilities of such understandings and their consequence. It is about material-discursive power. The signifying chains that surround the canoe impact how the canoe is perceived in different spaces, and (given the power of the canoe in Canada) these meanings have consequences for what happens within these spaces, including limiting who can and can’t use the space and for what purposes. While these chains may change, anchor points tend to leave trace meanings behind, such that one could, with effort, reconstruct their anchoring. And as Žižek (88) reminds us, the ideological struggle turns on “which of the ‘nodal points,’ *points de capiton*, will totalize.” The consequences are not merely academic, because they affect the way individuals are able to represent themselves. Indeed, this process is one of interpellation; “the *point de capiton* is the point through which the subject is ‘sewn’ to the signifier, and at the same time the point which interpellates individual into subject by addressing it with the call of a certain master-signifier (‘Communism,’ ‘God,’ ‘Freedom,’ ‘America’)” (101). The master-signifier, as that point to which all nodal points link back, structures the modes of identification provided to the subject.

In presenting the conditions that produced the canoe as an icon in Canada, this book investigates the different discursive anchoring points that have been mobilized in understanding the canoe. We have seen that the canoe has been anchored by its relationship to indigeneity, but it has also been quilted by the fields of wilderness, masculinity, leisure, and, of course,

colonialism. Linked through these nodal points, the canoe has become a sublime vehicle of the nation – with Canada as a master-signifier – serving to produce subjects, icons, spaces, and narratives of the nation that rely in some way on the connection between these points and the word “canoe.” The task of the fetish, in this case, is to resolve the colonial legacy of stolen land, delivering Canada to its subjects despite the anxieties that come from the establishment of colonial rule. One particularly telling theme within the fetish is that of origin, which both Mason and Raffan speak to. The canoe as a connection to the space of the nation, and as a timeless vehicle, provides a link beyond colonial history. This is perhaps the most powerful myth of national heritage, for it provides the nation with what it cannot find in the rational tomes of historical fact – an origin, a place of beginning.

Yet the fact is, bringing the word “canoe” into the European discourse was not the only colonial act of Columbus. The incorporation of America into the sphere of European representation was only one consequence of the voyage of 1492, which spawned other exercises in conquest, from trading and cartography to slavery and geographic dispossession. Tracing European use of the canoe illustrates the colonial practices that preceded, validated, and promoted the production of European nationhood on native soil. Three centuries after Columbus’s first voyage, the canoe was still purveying North America to Europeans through the physical acts of exploration and settlement. With its use by fur traders, missionaries, and surveyors, the canoe was written materially and semiotically into the landscape of what would become Canada.

Colonialism is never simply a matter of domination. Rather, it is a set of interdependent practices that flow from the self-interest of both the colonial nation and the colonists themselves. Mapping out the history of colonial practices, and the production of contemporary colonial states, of which Canada is one, requires an understanding of competing claims to land and resources, as well as an understanding of material practices that were paired with these claims. A desire for capital accumulation provided a continuing momentum for European activities in North America from the time of Columbus to the establishment and development of the Canadian state. This desire networked in different ways with indigenous groups. At times it was directly opposed (in particular when slaves and agricultural land were desired); at other times it involved indigenous cooperation at varying levels. The expansion of colonial interests relied upon an infrastructure of colonization to occupy the land. This was largely state-directed and

relied upon physical force to establish a presence within the new country. The expansion of the fur trade, the passage of surveyors, and the establishment of settlements were all underwritten, by example or by possibility, with military strength (see C. Harris 2004).

It could be said that the canoe is neither here nor there within this history of colonialism; it was perhaps just an accidental tourist in the development of a European presence in North America. The use of canoes as specific tools of colonialism – in the fur trade, by government agents, or as a military vehicle – has long since passed, and in all cases the canoe was replaced by a craft of European origin. The productive colonial power of the canoe lasted from Samuel de Champlain into the nineteenth century, when the boats were gradually replaced by York boats, railways, and roadways. Today the canoe is almost entirely used for leisure and recreation. But the role of the canoe as a national fetish is both broader and longer lasting. After being materially useful in the exploration and establishment of the parameters of the nation, the canoe became discursively useful in legitimizing the new nation. By narrating national identity through a relationship with the land, the canoe projected Canada as a naturalized nation with which subjects could identify through the (recreational) act of canoeing.

Genealogy, History and the Canoe

Nations exist as geographic regions, but they require narrative strategies in order to imagine a unity to these regions (Anderson 1991). In the classic sense, nations are an assemblage of people who share a common history and culture; yet, as Homi Bhabha (2004, 292; see also Anderson 1991) shows, the production of these nations does not draw from a simple recollection of historical sequence but, rather, comes together through a narrative use of “cultural identification and discursive address” that reifies the national body in spite of a history of conflict and inequality. Many groups of people with shared cultural histories claim political standing in Canada (e.g., Quebecois, Cree, Inuit); this book deals with the production of the “Canadian” nation intimately connected to the state – those narratives of the Canadian nation tied to the authority of the Canadian state over the geographic territory of “Canada.” This authority is created, in part, through the narration of a story of the nation that at once historicizes “the people” as a group with a shared history (as we will see in Chapter 1) and essentializes the bond they share (“Canada”) as a timeless entity. As the claim to

multiculturalism suggests, the overarching nation in Canada attempts not to alienate minority claims to group identity (Quebecois, Cree, Inuit, etc.), but to envelop them within the narrative of the nation, a strategy that is not without its problems (Day 2002; Mackey 2002).

This production of the nation depends upon two different narratives, or stories, of national experience. For Bhabha, the first narrative presents the origin of the nation in a linear form. Looking backward, this horizontal view attempts to create an identity that hearkens back to a founding event. The second narrative is constituted by the temporal performance of the nation in the daily lives of its people. This narrative is continually recited and made different, producing the “instability of cultural signification” (Bhabha 2004, 303) that makes the horizontal view unrecognizable. This dissonance, while producing the modern narrative of the nation, also allows minority discourses to slip into the narrative and continue to disrupt the nation’s homogeneous narrative.⁶ The writing of the nation takes place through the production of this ambivalence at the site of the everyday life of the nation. “The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpolates a growing circle of national subjects” (297). The canoe, as a vehicle taken from the daily lives (or leisured days, as the case may be) of some Canadians, is commandeered to authorize a specific performance of identity. While it includes an acceptance of diversity, pairing well with the aims of multicultural policy, the canoe also inhabits the linear history of the state (event → idea), finding the founding event of Canada in the encounter between European explorers and the vast (already) Canadian wilderness. This tale, as Bhabha predicts, also inhabits the instability of signification, letting us examine it for the cracks within.

The history of the canoe, as it has been written to date, does little to illustrate the disjuncture between the symbol of the canoe as a vehicle of the nation and the experience of those subjected to the nation. Because of its claim to iconic status, there have been several histories of the canoe’s role in North America. Notable among these are Jamie Benidickson’s (1997) *Idleness, water, and a canoe: Reflections on paddling for pleasure*, John Jennings’s (2002a) edited volume *The canoe: A living tradition*, and, for their focus on Canada, James Raffan’s (1999a) *Bark, skin and cedar: Exploring the canoe in Canadian experience* and the collection *The canoe in Canadian cultures* (Jennings, Hodgins, and Small 1999). These books give insight into the canoe as a vehicle of significance for the production of a Canadian identity, as they

highlight the dominant modes of understanding and experiencing canoes in Canada. For example, Benidickson gathered an impressive collection of sources on the role of the canoe as a recreational vehicle in Canada (which excludes its role in colonialism), but did little to connect discourses surrounding the canoe to larger phenomena in national narratives. Jennings's collection and Raffan's book approach the canoe historically, but remain committed to a nostalgic perspective that assumes a stable meaning of both vehicle and nation in their writing. In these histories, Canada as a nation was waiting to be discovered by European canoeists: the nation itself was an object waiting to be delivered. In approaching the history of the canoe in Canada, there is danger in assuming that the canoe was always a canoe – that is to say, that it always meant the same to the paddlers within. Contexts change, as do the material and ideological relationships between the paddler and the canoe (and between the canoe and the nation). Holding tight to accepted notions of the canoe in Canada, these texts link nation, land, and vehicle in ways that seem to flow unquestioningly from Bill Mason's belief that Canada was designed for the canoe (Mason 1984; see also Raffan, 1999a, 2). The relationship between nation and vehicle is seen as a natural part of modern evolution. The actors chronicled by these books are simply enhancing an already-existing connection between a future nation and the land from which it was born. These texts posit an unbroken connection between the vision we currently have of the canoe and historical uses of canoes in Canada (Benidickson's is the exception). We need to recognize that this connection relies upon more than just a sense of historical inevitability: it also rests on a construction of the conditions of possibility for the canoe to represent national subjects and the occupied land, sewing the nation together with an ideological thread. In describing the canoe, these histories merely take the pedagogical nation as the outcome of the performance of history and fail to illustrate the larger modes of production that make this discourse possible.

The metamorphosis of the boat from indigenous craft, through economic vehicle, to leisured symbol of nation (for some) depends on the interaction of national economies, colonial interests, European and indigenous identities, and romantic images of wilderness (among other things). The long history of the canoe (or boats of similar construction) throughout the world illustrates clearly that the canoe itself, in its material form, was not inherently designed and created as a symbol of nationhood; rather, it is the historical moments, or accidents, as Foucault (1984) would call them, that have

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