

## *A Home for Our Migrations: The Canoe as Indigenous Methodology*

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It has been told that the great Pinisi or Thunderbird created a large storm, which severed the Toronto Islands from the mainland. The protector of the people, Pinisi is an enemy of the Meeshupishu (Great Water Panther), and they balance out each other's powerful presence. These creatures are part of Anishinaabe relations to place, they create balance in the cosmos and the three different worlds: the sky, land and underneath. These creatures have been a part of Lake Ontario and the great lakes for thousands of years. Their significance for the Toronto Islands is based on the relationship forged with both Indigenous people and later the settlers. This lake has acted as a hub for fishing and trading that spans over a millennia. The late Indigenous historian Rodney Bobiwash argues that the Toronto Islands are and have been important stopping places that are part of healing and spiritual renewal.<sup>1</sup>

The name Toronto carries all the Indigenous nations who once and still continue to occupy the space of the contemporary metropolis. In most translations it means "logs on the water" or "trees on the water," but some sources specifically designate these logs or trees as a "fish weir" and still others call it the "meeting place." These translations are directly related to the story of the sacred shell, better known as the Megis, which prophesies the migration of the Anishinaabe people, ending at the area we now call Toronto, on the shore of Lake Ontario near the islands. The story told by Eddie Benton Benai is as follows,

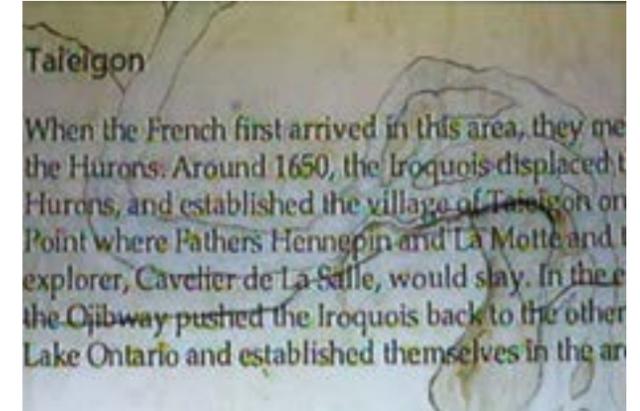
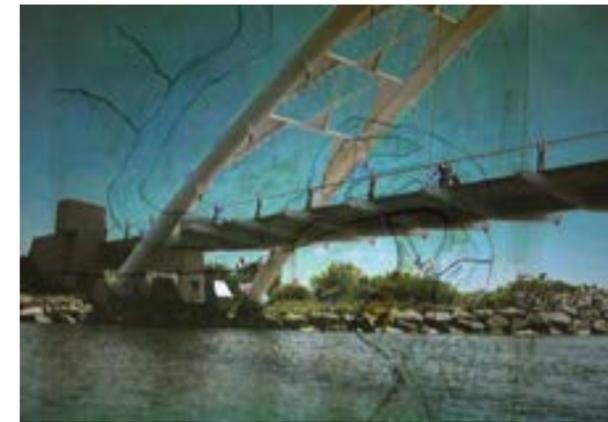
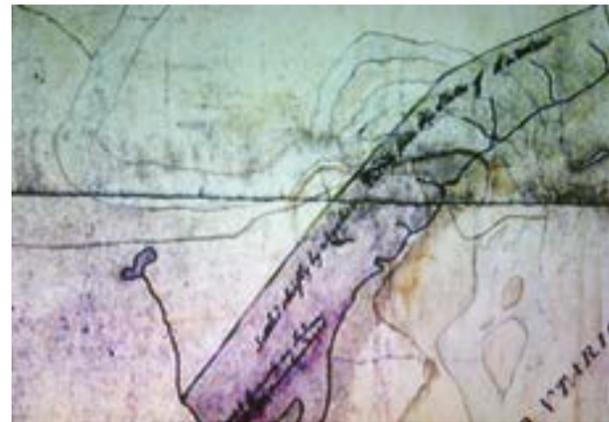
*In the time of the first fire,  
the Anishinabe nation will rise up and follow the Sacred Shell.  
The sacred Megis will lead the way to the chosen ground of the Anishinabe.  
You are to look for a turtle-shaped island that is linked to the purification of the Earth.  
You will find such an island at the beginning and the end of your journey.  
There will be seven stopping places along the way.  
You will know that the chosen ground had been reached when you come to a land  
where food grows on the water.<sup>2</sup>*

In my art practice and research I have engaged with different methodologies in cartography and geography to bring forth different epistemological views. My installation *where white pines lay over the water* (2011) draws on the importance of orality and embodied knowledge in Indigenous theory and praxis. The methods applied in this artwork are inscribed in our human relationship with the canoe. It is the experience of the canoe that teaches about the land and our relationship to it.

The place selected for this project was the Humber River Valley, which includes Baby Point and Etienne Brûlé Park. Using the canoe as a central metaphor and organizing principal for my research to create this installation, I situate the land as a witness. The land holds significant value, memory, and information about the human and non-human experiences for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. I draw on memories and stories that are situated within the land, maps, archives and testimonies.

The title *where white pines lay over the water* makes reference to both the meaning of Toronto and the village of Teieiagon, which can be translated to mean “the low point in the river where white pines or trees would be laid to cross the water.” The sound project is located in a place that has been a lifeline and meeting place for many Indigenous nations as is connected to intricate water systems and well-used portage routes. Like the canoe, these pathways have facilitated exchanges of knowledge and goods for thousands of years.

The purpose of this installation is to narrate Indigenous stories of place in the City of Toronto. The canoe as a methodology creates the conditions to have a strong sense of self-awareness, forging genuine collaborative efforts in the collection of stories, artifacts, archives and cultural memory provided by elders, artists, historians and archeologists. The canoe circles through time and space, assembling living histories that are linked to the earth, water, creatures and humans. This project is a creative intervention that challenges supposedly factual, linear settler accounts of the area’s history. The canoe understands conquest and settlement but is more resilient. The canoe predates and will outlast any occupation.



my canoe is a place of cultural understanding  
it transports it connects me to the forest and the water and to my spirit  
it conveys it acts as a place of gestation of birthing  
in transit and final worldly threshold for generations milleniations of my  
relations  
if ever there was a home for our migrations  
it is this form this vessel this tree relation  
in that it is shaped through we used fire to shape forest too  
as I was saying before coyote distracted me  
this is not an introduction but not to a beginning  
to a continuation a continuing  
with the transfer of these words from computer screen pencil pen  
thought feeling spirit sound to paper  
the canoe comes from the forest and from place of mind spirit  
memory ancestor  
thanks here are given for the sister/brother cedar's life medicines are burned  
whereafter planks are so carefully eased from the snag's trunk  
with such a delicate surgery you'd think it were an operations  
on a butterfly's broken wing  
though it might seem the canoe and the tree are from a conceptual space  
they are from spirit and heart  
and it is in those places I give thanks kukwstum<sup>3</sup>

—Peter Cole, *Coyote and Raven Go Canoeing*

The canoe, as told by Indigenous theorist Peter Cole, is not simply a rich cultural object but a process and an infinite set of relations. As Cole states, the canoe is linked to the land and is part of the spirit and heart that marks Aboriginal peoples' cultural memory of the past, present and future. I draw on this theory of the canoe to build a uniquely Indigenous methodology for my artwork and research. The canoe as methodology encompasses both metaphor and embodied practice and is strongly tied to Indigenous epistemologies. The crux of this methodology is that the canoe is a living cultural artifact that records, retains and communicates stories from the land, people and creatures that circle through physical and metaphysical realms. The canoe has a connection to physical and metaphysical space, time and place for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The canoe embodies the knowledge of the land while also remaining part of the land itself.

The canoe is a Canadian cultural icon situated within Indigenous identity that has been instrumental in facilitating the progression of generations of people throughout the land. In this practical sense, it has significantly affected every aspect of Aboriginal people's lives here in North America, in particular of what we now know as Canada. Further, as Indigenous people, our identity is bound to the creation and use of this vessel. As an artifact or marker, it embodies Indigenous cultural memory and carries it through time and space. The canoe retains valuable information regarding the protocols of Indigenous practices, relationships and movement throughout the landscape. As the canoe travels, it connects these moments in time and space.

The canoe as methodology builds on existing concepts of Native Space, which can be understood as the network of relationships formed between all of the earth's elements and its creatures. Over time the canoe has acted as a catalyst to facilitate these relationships by navigating over waterways and across land, enabling Indigenous connections to stories of place.

Concepts of Native Space are marked and mapped by multiple nations of Indigenous people, who have and continue to occupy and share the land. This concept is in direct contrast to traditional western cartography that primarily focuses on mapping practices that divide and

create borders. Indigenous theorist Lisa Brooks illustrates the networks that define Native Space with the common pot, which "feeds and nourishes"<sup>4</sup>:

*Women are the caretakers of the pot and it is "Made from the flesh of birch trees or the clay of the earth. It can carry or hold; it can be carried or reconstructed; it can withstand fire and water, and, in fact, it uses these elements to transform that which it contains. The pot is Sky Woman's body, the network of relations that much nourish and reproduce itself."*<sup>5</sup>

Additional examples of relationships that are part of Native Space include Wampum Belts, Convent Chains, the Great Tree of Peace, the Great Law Confederacy, and the practice of intermarriage. Each Indigenous nation forges a particular relationship with the land. What is important to understand in concepts of Native Space is Indigenous people's connections to and networks with the natural environment. These connections are ecological, spiritual and kinship based. Each Indigenous nation has different symbols to communicate these relations, however the overarching theme is consistent across Indigenous nations and that is the strong relationship to land.

When you are inside a canoe you work with your paddle; it moves, swooshes, clunks and glides though the liquid glass that mirrors your reflection back at you. When you sit in the canoe and look down at the reflection in the water, you are invited to be aware of yourself and your actions.

Cultural and post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha distinguishes two trajectories of identity in the colonial context. The philosophical traditions are "the process of self-reflection in the mirror of (human) nature; and the anthropological view of the difference of human identity as located in the division of Nature/Culture."<sup>6</sup> The difficulty for the colonial subject is the disruption of the "space of representation"<sup>7</sup> because colonial subjectivity is absent in this discourse of identity. Therefore it is impossible to see the colonial subject<sup>8</sup> through any gaze other than the mirrored reflection of the Other, both of whom are seen as less than human. The canoe bypasses these divisions and areas of invisibility because it encompasses both culture and nature, and is able to

represent the Native as visible. It continually marks Indigenous people into the landscape, and places Indigenous people at the forefront of the larger North American narrative.

The canoe is non-totalizing because it can only be in one place at a given time, dutifully moving through space, recording and bearing witness to all of the interactions between human and non-human relations. It carefully gathers data as it glides through each geographic region, amassing a huge body of knowledge across geographies, cultures and millennia. Upon initial inspection, the canoe presents itself as non-biased because it is seen as an object, impartial to the information it gathers. In fact, it is part of the natural environment and therefore integrated into Indigenous epistemologies. Neither the knowledge nor the relationships it produces are truly objective. Observing all the earth's creatures is a daunting job; holding all this information is a tremendous responsibility. If humans do not take the canoe seriously much of this knowledge may be lost, cultures may disappear or be assimilated into mainstream western ideologies.

Each knot in the wood or bark of the canoe has the capacity to create a specific kind of memory, locked into fluid notions of time and space. The canoe is a shapeshifter that can mutate and transform into the thing it needs to be for a particular creature at any given moment. As a methodology, the canoe is flexible, adjusting to new needs and circumstances just as it glides through new waters.

The canoe has social protocols built into it. When you build or operate a canoe, you must consult community experts, collaborate, learn by doing, creatively intervene and tell stories. According to Indigenous scholars Leanne Simpson<sup>9</sup> and Margaret Kovack<sup>10</sup>, the above interactions are all part of Indigenous methods. There are specific steps, protocols and stages to follow and if they are skipped, the canoe might take a different shape, resulting in an unusual or altogether different outcome.

In practice, the canoe embodies diversity through different construction materials and methods—aluminum or birch bark, wood or fiberglass, rivets or sinew, industrial glue or spruce resin. Ultimately, selection will depend on the desired route. The canoe's ability to navigate through rough water depends on its materials and the skill set of its

maker, and whether a relationship of respect was formed with the materials. One must pay respect to the natural elements and materials in the creation of a canoe because this will impact the realized results for the builder, or the creature who navigates it later. The construction and the relationship with the canoe during this process greatly impact the broader epistemologies, ontology and methods that come into play once the canoe is in the water.

While the canoe's genesis is in Indigenous protocols, it can be a middle ground for multiple dialogues and transformative actions. The canoe's ability to maneuver through the water is impacted by the direction of the paddles in the water and the paddler's ability to communicate and synchronize their movements with the vessel. It facilitates a sense of cultural understanding by forging a connection between itself and the diverse entities it interacts with. The canoe is significant for dominant settler narratives as well because it was involved in colonizing space through mapping and surveying of the land. The conflicting narratives embodied by the canoe also mark out a potential meeting place.

The canoe as methodology comes from a model of relationships that has affected every aspect of Aboriginal people's lives in North America, particularly in Canada, it writes Indigenous people into the story. The canoe acts as a metaphor and at the same time it has lived, or embodied, consequences. The canoe has the ability to hold memory and to connect physical and metaphysical concepts surrounding bodies both past and present.

The canoe moves in a circular motion between past, present and future because it is the continuation of an ancient story, not the beginning.<sup>11</sup> This same story will persevere and evolve for thousands of years. The canoe transports and connects people to the cultural memories that exist in different moments in time.

Allowing the canoe to move us in this way is working with the canoe's methodology. It is the only way we can bring back to the surface the buried, colonized and hidden knowledges that lie beneath the cityscape. Through this process we will continue the story with an understanding of temporality that is circular and flexible, gliding through moments and spaces that are connected but not linearly constructed.

Applying the Indigenous methodology of the canoe opens up the potential to arrange specific events out of chronological and linear order. The canoe presents an alternative framework within stories of place that can be understood as temporal being, with the past, present and future all intricately connected. The landscape becomes a vital source of information regarding all of these unique dimensions of time.

The methodology of the canoe is grounded in a particular ability to see the layers of knowledge buried in the land and to hear the environment, which sings the song of the transformation of time, space and memory. The land has the ability to retain memories of significant value as it has born witness spanning millennia to the individual events and occurrences that have shaped our surroundings.

The Indigenous archeologist Margaret Bruchac states, "For concrete evidence of the past, and the traces of the ancestors, one need only to look to the landscape, to see the work of those mythical beings whose actions are recalled in story."<sup>12</sup> The landscape has been an active participant within the stories and bodies that cover the geographic space we call home and much of this memory is preserved in the formations and elements of the land. Bruchac explains, The Algonkian stories that have survived resonate with, and record, historical presence, and provide the background, frame, stage, and context for the material world. Some of the oldest oral traditions describe how ancient beings left physical traces, by marking the landscape with their footprints, reshaping natural earth formations, carving out rivers, doing battle with superhuman elementals and molding giant megafauna down to their present size.<sup>13</sup>

The extent to which we can mobilize the methods embodied by the canoe will dictate our ability to survive in the harsh climate of the backcountry or the bush. There are no maps or navigational tools that will aid us in our travels. The only tools we will be able to bring on this trip are the ability to listen, to learn by doing, a creative imagination and a strong sense of intuition. This is part of the experience of the canoe, because it carries our memories that mark different moments in time. The canoe has been used as a vehicle to navigate and colonize space but in the same breath the canoe embodies the knowledge of the land; it is part of the geography of land.

It has a connection to physical and metaphysical space, time and place for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The canoe as a methodology bestows us access to Indigenous wisdom. The awareness of this knowledge of our stories enables us to assert that Indigenous people's narratives carry with them the physical, conceptual and creative geographies of place that are missing within the dominant Canadian narrative.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rodney A Bobiwash, "The History of Native People in the Toronto Area: An Overview," *The Meeting Place Aboriginal Life in Toronto* (Toronto: The Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1997) 5.

<sup>2</sup> Eddie Benton Benai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Indian Country Press, 1979), 89.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Cole, *Coyote and Raven Go Canoeing* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2006), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>9</sup> Simpson, Leanne. "Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing" *Aboriginal Health, Identity and Resources*. Winnipeg: Native Studies Press, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Kovach, Margaret. "Emerging from the Margins: Indigenous Methodologies." *Research as Resistance*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Bruchac, "Earthshapers and Placemakers: Algonkian Indian Stories and the landscape," *Indigenous Archaeologies Decolonizing Theory and Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005) 57.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 62.

Cette rivière sort du lac Tenouche  
dans le lac Huron.  
LAC DE  
FRONTENAC

Anglais et aux Hollandois

Chemin par où les Français vont aux Indes  
qu'ils servoient : mais les Français & les Hollandois.  
A la fort de frontenac nous est le fort sur leur route.

Villages des Français dont quantité d'habitants de ce costé depuis  
Teyougon Anabixiagon

LAC ONTARIO  
OU  
DE FRONTENAC



Isles  
dans le  
lac