crossing boundaries with instinct

by Zabe MacEachren

> The mythtellers understood that the natural world is full of discrete beings, each entity differentiated from the rest of the world. They knew, probably better than we do, that a living thing acquires its energy by means of exchanges across a boundary, so that the living thing remains distinct from its environment, yet interacts continuously with it. The lining surrounds the cell; bark surrounds the tree; skin surrounds the animal. These membranes act in a selectively permeable way, allowing nourishment in, keeping poisons out, expelling wastes or, in the case of the nursing mother, expressing food. Wherever there is an exchange, there is the crossing of a boundary... Boundaries are the magic points where worlds impinge... Boundaries can also be crossed invisibly. They are crossed by words, by thoughts, and spirits. (Kane 1994, 103)

Canoes are made to cross boundaries. They are designed to live at the border between air and water. I have been asking questions of canoes since I was a child and to discover some answers I have travelled to distant shores. My canoe, *Instinct,* has crossed borders both seen and unseen. She has carried me over boundaries just as I have carried her over portages. We need each other to be who we are: citizens of the Northwoods, travellers, at times wounded beings with scars, followers of a flow, entities looking both forward and backwards, seekers of bearings to where we came from and where we are going. My stories of crossing boundaries with Instinct are a written translation from the old oral tradition of crafting, seldom recorded in words or an actual log, but felt by every sinew strand that pulls on a knife carving a paddle. They are passages from a travel journal that was never written, but was felt through the callous hands after the arrival home. We have a kinship, Instinct and I. It is not spoken of through words as much as through the rhythm of paddling strokes and the pleasure of floating on a cloud's reflection. I can best absorb the loon's echo which shimmers across ripples of air when I am seated in the belly of a canoe, nestled between Instinct's ribs.

I do not remember my first time in a canoe, nor the first time I wondered how the canoe came to be, but early on these questions intrigued me. Who made the first canoe? Where did the idea for a canoe originate? How was a canoe birthed into a culture? Such questions guided me into the terrain marked "unknown territory;" a landscape of invisibility, unlike the bold lines on topographical maps that designate country borders down the middle of lakes and give canoeists little bearing as to where they are. Maps made of questions guided me to a way of travelling which did not always depend on one dimensional explanations on paper. I began to find support and guidance only when I absorbed the land and culture from which the canoe emerged. I found my bearings in the beliefs and myths of canoe culture.

crossing cultural boundaries

After a wide variety of canoe tripping experiences, I arrived in an isolated Anishinabe First Nation where no roads connected me to stores and hospital services. Trips to town required a seven day paddle one way or an expensive plane fare. I had often worked alongside Native friends as guides, but in this community I came to be labelled a "teacher," although I often felt more like a student. It was in such a setting that my trickle of questions turned into a flow of pondering. When does a tree cease to be a tree and become a canoe? Did rinsing deer ribs on a shoreline influence canoe makers? Did someone get the idea of making an enlarged basket that one could climb into after watching a blueberry basket float? It was among people whose ancestors' lives were transported through time by canoes that some answers began to appear.

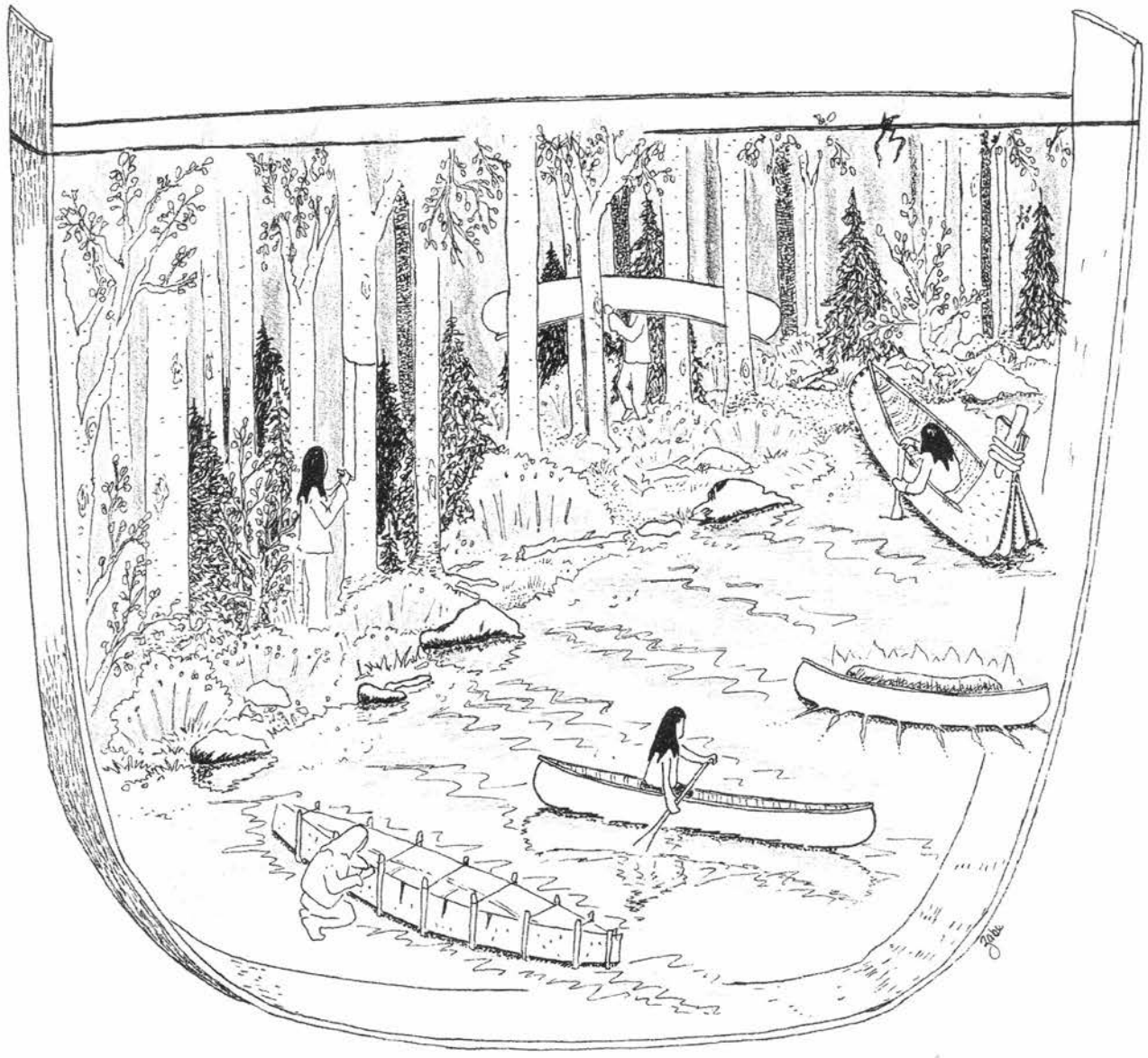
Each spring after break-up, I would begin to mark the opening of canoe season with a small ritual that is common in the Anishinabe culture. A small offering is placed on the water before the first spring paddle. I learned how this ceremony acts as an ancient offering to the spirit world. The more I practiced it, the more it served to gently remind me to be respectful of all that has been given to me whether seen or unseen. It recognizes how winter has been survived and how the flowing waters of springtime will rejuvenate. If I forget this ritual, I never feel complete until I perform it. I have become accustomed to the seasonal transition from frozen water to flowing water, from snowshoe travel to canoe travel, and feel I must formally address this occasion through such a ritual. Such a simple ritual practice allows me to enter the sacred time of the seasonal changes and at the same time to acknowledge my own personal psychological transformations associated with the seasonal cycles that affect my travels.

Desert regions have their solstice rituals, but the Northwoods has break-up and freeze-up: the two times of year when many seasonal activities are acknowledged through ceremonies. The sound of change is copied from the floating, clinking ice crystals into the swish of the hundreds of jingles on a traditional Anishinabe women's dress. The first jingle dress originated from an ill woman's dream. She described the dream to her husband who then made the unusual dress she saw in her dream, sewing on many jingles from cut metal cans. Despite her illness the woman wore the dress to a pow wow and soon thereafter became well. Other women began to make their own healing dresses each with the sounds of transformation stitched into them. Often ice crystals tinkle and chime on the side of Instinct, when I take her out of the water for the last time in the fall or when I leave an offering on the shoreline in the spring. My resonance with this seasonal cycle of transformation is reenacted when I dance in a jingle dress, listen to ice crystals and make a spring time offering. My offering is placed on a shoreline to celebrate a seasonal border crossing. It floats on the surface of a boundary where a canoe is at home.

crossing into dreams

Immersion in canoe culture is a subtle process that engulfs you like an invisible map of gray mist or dances about you like a campfire shadow. For over seven years I had lived in remote roadless locations, paddled in and out of these communities, aided others in making paddles out of local cedar wood, retraced many routes of the courier des bois, read historical journals and worked as a voyageur interpreter. I listened to yarns from old canoeists, taught the paddle dance to groups across North America and even attempted making a birch bark canoe after learning birch bark basketry. Yet it was only after returning one summer from Maine where I had crafted a canoe with Jerry Stelmok (master canoe builder of the E.M. White cedar canvas canoes), and was completing the final shellacing stages of Instinct that an answer to a long asked question finally appeared.

After years of asking how the canoe first came to be, I awoke one night with an image in my mind of the back of someone with long hair, paddling away from shore in a birch bark vessel that was like a canoe in one end and a folded basket at the other end. Here was my answer of how the canoe came to be: a dream. My campfire chats with Anishinabe elders had informed me that dreams were like messages that came from the



canoe rib-strung and drying

Earth and were to be listened to and lived out like the image of a healing jingle dress. Perhaps in the time of the Blackduck culture or even earlier, a person could have had a similar dream of a form of transportation well adapted to the many water routes of the region. They would have lived out their dream by making such a water craft. They would have created a canoe by turning a dream into reality, their life, their story. The Northwoods spoke to me that night. It allowed me to become atavistic and see the birthing of a canoe as a natural extension of the fit between culture and nature. A canoe as a means of transportation is so well adapted to the Northwoods that explorers readily copied it. Through this dream I experienced how the land of the Northwoods can speak and be heard. To live out such dreams is to acknowledge the transparent boundary between dreamtime and reality; it is to live life as the unfolding of a mythic adventure rooted in place.

crossing by making

Traditionally canoes are born from the earth. They were not plastic, un-recycable, in-organic or potential landfill problems as canoes are today. They were crafted from an indentation in the ground that served as a birthing canal. In order for a canoe to be conceived, care and consent had to be established from its many ancestors. Before store-bought lumber and power tools were readily available, a canoe builder, through the process of making a canoe, became intimate with the land: a region that supported his/her life, what is referred to today by some as a bioregion. James Dina decided to learn about himself and history by building a birch bark canoe using only stone tools. He named his canoe *Ant,* and when discussing his canoe building he writes, "My first concern was finding materials, all from the natural environment. I wanted to act as part of the system, not a detached harvester, and this affected how and where I searched" (Dina 1989: 44). Canoe builders had to know their bioregion in order to be able to birth a canoe from it. The way one travels through the land seeking suitable trees becomes a sort of courtship dance. This region of flexible borders fits Jerry Martina's definition of a bioregion as "the distance you would walk to see a lover" (Martina 1993).

Canoe builders must learn the art of wooing by carefully observing the water conditions of their region so they know which canoe design and canoe material are appropriate for the local aqueous dance floor upon which canoe and paddler will flow and flex together.

Birch was referred to as the tree of life among the Anishinabe because its many offerings: food, shelter, transportation and warmth. A sweet sap, lodge coverings, canoe skins, snowshoe frames, firewood and tinder were all gifts from this one tree alone. Suitable canoe trees needed to be located; in the process of searching, many hundreds of trees were considered and each examined for their qualities. Individual trees were sought for their "personalities" (plantalities). Where does a spruce tree stand alone in a bog which will allow for the easy collection of roots for lacing? What markings on a birch tree indicate that it will crack frequently? These will result in many seams requiring sealing pitch, which makes it a very heavy canoe. A crafter must know an area well to be able to birth a canoe into being. Such a sensitivity to the land is desirable in order to reduce the time spent working with wood that does not want to become a canoe and will split or break.

Gathering supplies for a canoe is made easier through a sense of connection with the trees and an understanding of when it comes time to mold the form and bend wood grain. Crafters must extend their sense of kinship into the trees and gently guide the transformation of muscle flex into grain bend. A sense of commonhood with materials, whether of animate or inanimate origin, helps a crafter to feel compassion for the more-than-human world. Such compassion is necessary in the crafting process and is encouraged through acknowledging the kinship with other life forms that can occur through many boundary crossings. Canoe makers seek to know their bioregion so intimately that they can serve as both matchmaker and midwife, birthing canoes from and into the region of the Northwoods culture they are best suited to.

Unless a canoe maker has this intimate understanding of how to seek supplies which are suitable to being transformed into a canoe, wood will crack and split when bent. A crafter intuitively knows how to transfer muscle sinew fiber to plant grain when bending a cedar rib. A knot in a paddle shaft can act like an arthritic pain and interrupt the flow between water and canoe every time a paddle stroke is taken. Bending wood is best accomplished when the tree it is gathered from is believed to have status and rights of comparison to human needs. Status and rights given to a non-human life form acknowledge a sense of deep understanding and relationship in the idea of commonhood. One must enter the cedar's grain and feel its body to ensure it is willing to bend itself into a canoe. Without such extended body awareness or sense of commonhood with the more-than-human world, it is next to impossible to hand carve through hardwood grain or bend cedar ribs.

Talking to a tree before cutting it down is the first attempt that one can make to ensure that a tree's spirit consents to the transformation of boundary crossing: from being of the forest to being of the water's reflection. Kirk Wipper, founder of the Canadian Canoe Museum, states "No wonder in many parts of the world, the people thank the land for allowing its spirit to be transferred to the canoe" (cited in Raffan & Horwood 1989: iv). If you avoid this step you may spend a lot of time trying to bend wood that just will not bend. Approaching trees respectfully is the old timer's first lesson for a crafter. As a Koyukon elder from Alaska explains, "I don't care how smart a guy is, or how much he knows about birch. If he acts the wrong way – if he treats his birch like it's nothing – after that he can walk right by a good tree and wouldn't see it" (cited in Nelson 1989: 55). To understand a canoe is to understand that it is born of the forest, and to treat it with all the respect every forest dweller deserves.

ceremonies of crossing

After completing my canoe I crafted with some white cedar, spruce, ash, and cherry trees. I asked a medicine man to perform a traditional canoe launching ceremony for her. Friends were invited, prayers spoken, and food shared. Offerings were made to the land in recognition and acknowledgment of her role in creating Instinct. I then placed an offerring on the water and put Instinct on the water's surface for the first time. This ceremony marked the transition of tree to canoe. The boundary crossed in this crafting process was acknowledged in a ritual that confirmed the coming together of nature and culture. Bert Horwood writes, "By primitive I mean a state of affairs in which humans know themselves as part of the natural world. Primitive persons see their inventions and creations, their pots, their clothes, their tools and weapons, their stories and dances, not as artifacts, but as natural extensions of the world" (Raffan & Horwood 1989: 128). Similarly, I feel I have reclaimed my primitiveness by making a canoe. I became part of all that Instinct knew as soon as I placed her on the water. I ask, what can represent a land full of lakes and rivers better than a craft that can float on the boundary of water and air, rest at the border between land and water, and be carried across the portage trails that link the borders of a vast network of shorelines?

crossing from past to future

In the middle of Canada, as measured by canoe travel only, lies what is considered by paddlers to be a distinguishing portage. In the time of the fur trade brigades and the Great Rendezvous, this portage marked those travellers who had spent at least one winter in the interior. The interior was the land which remained civilized by wildness; it rested beyond the developed territory of Eastern villages or the gates of Fort William and Grand Portage. There were actually two portages that, if crossed, entitled you to *winterer* status. The first was the long enduring nine-mile grunt of Grand Portage and the second was the physically demanding climb of Kakabeka Falls. Although I had spent many of my previous winters west of this mark I never felt like I was truly part of the Northwoods culture; I needed to properly claim the right to be a winterer by crossing this trail which my Northwoods ancestors had also traversed and marked in the narrations of their journeys.

At the age of 33, with sweat on my back and Instinct above me, I crossed the boundary marker and became a true "winterer". A cedar bough dipped with fresh water was laid upon each shoulder by a friend and in true Northwoods fashion I was knighted into the world of the winterer. I had crossed the divide of historical time and enacted the old ritual which would allow me to live out another myth of the old-timers. I was truly an initiated winterer now, I had taken another step into Northwoods reality by claiming to be part of a continuing canoe myth. I had embarked on a journey into a land of metaphor. The canoe marked how both my inner world and invisible spiritual realm would relate to the Northwoods through the culture of the canoe. The canoe became a metonymy for the Northwoods and my being.

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boundaries dissolve

On the shores of Lake Superior, Instinct and I rest. We watch clouds of white float by like the froth and spray of waves and water crashing on the rocks nearby. I have heard Instinct's voice when she has danced on such waves. Her wooden ribs will flex like lungs expanding for a breath of air as her belly rubs and frolics upon this incredible expanse of blue beneath her. Waves crest just inches from her gunwales as she dances and pivots with such wild aqueous partners. The temperature of the water dictates whether we go out to dance. Today, Instinct rests safely under spruce boughs, her grey colour well blended with the tones of the Canadian Shield.

Instinct was painted the colour of mist and fog on purpose. Northwood guides often painted their canoes grey because they sometimes had to poach to support their families and were aware grey was an easy colour to hide in the Canadian Shield country. Tom Thompson painted his canoe many times to obtain the particular colour of gray he desired. I too paint my canoe grey because there is nothing so tantalizing to me as being part of the ebbing and moving of the mist on a fall morning. At such times when I travel I feel camouflaged in this "grey area," as if I could easily slip between the world of darkness and light, or between the border of life and death. Such times seem dense with superstition and alive with unpredictability. They need to be respected. Instinct's grey reminds me to travel with respect for the boundaries and what lies beyond the boundary in the world of the invisible.

On those misty mornings I travel with Instinct sneaking in and out of visibility. My bow and stern are not distinguishable. I can paddle either forward or backwards into the mist and travel to the center of my being or a peripheral border. Within the ebbing mist I feel safe, nestled between cedar ribs and canvas skin. Paddle, canoe and I move as one in a world that penetrates beyond my vision. I do not always see where I go, but I relish this feeling of groundlessness. Air, water, Instinct and I all become gray nebulous flowing movement.

On sunny days, the water reflects the clouds and Instinct stretches this surface membrane. The canoe becomes part of my body as my shoulders absorb the flex of a paddle, transfer it through my arm down into my back, belly, then out into the canoe. We all move together, selfless and as one. Perhaps it is because the Northwoods is so full of biting bugs whose itchy welts interrupt my blade's rhythm and make me conscious of my whole body while paddling. I see them as miniscule immunization shots against the asphalt plodding disease which afflicts me in the urban world.

Once while paddling I had a vision that I was just like a small microorganism living on the skin of the earth. My world was all that was before me. Trees became like long hairs that I needed to crawl around. I enjoyed the way this vision extended my mind into the land, so I now practice it regularly while paddling. It was like a canoeist's meditation toward an ego-less self. It allows me to live more fully in my body, and even to extend my body out into the canoe ribs and to all beyond. I humble myself down into this microscopic creature that crawls along the surface of another living form – Gaia. The water, land, and portage trails become the skin upon which I travel and my skin acts as the membrane through which I sense things. The belly of the canoe picks up each tiny undulation, and my mind floats away as I become transformed into a sentient insect that is fully aware of its own membrane and the skin it depends upon. This is my practice, to extend my skin into the canoe's, and out into the world we are part of so that I feel compassion for the world that includes the humblest of creatures.

final crossings

I have had enjoyable conversations with others about appropriate ceremonies for the occasion of making the final boundary crossing. What is the most fitting manner to make the "final river crossing," as death is sometimes called? I like the ideas involved in a Norse-like funeral service when acknowledging a crossing over into the shadow world. According to custom, one's body was placed in a boat that they had built in their life time and then set adrift. From shore all your friends and family members shot burning arrows onto the craft until it caught fire and cremated your last remains at sea. Except for the uncertainty of my friends' and family's aim with a bow and arrow, or the likelihood of a fire ban during canoe season, this funeral service has merit and appealing quality. A final trip in a canoe as coffin. Old Fort William actually has a canoe graveyard where old birch bark crafts rest until they return in their own organic time frame back to the land they were born from.

> While it is true that, to the aborigines, the canoe and its various adaptations were considered "an extension of their home," their perception of being at one with the environment would include the canoe as an extension of oneself, a link to the natural world. As such there was an attendant spiritual connotation. This was particularly highlighted among cultures which used the canoe to transfer their dead to the burial ground, or as a coffin on the premise that, in death, "a spirit canoe" would carry them into another life. Thus to the many indigenous peoples of northern Canada, the canoe or kayak was identified more with individuals or families rather than with the physical environment (Raffan & Horwood 1989: 9).

I want my body to rest in the land which nurtured it, and likewise I want Instinct to rest in the land which gave her life, not a leaching landfill site. We must not be cut off and removed like a clear-cut log. I want us to be allowed to grey and rot like the remnant of an old tree in a forest. My body needs to be returned deep inside the Earth. I wish the same for the body and spirit of any canoe that has travelled with me.

My body has taken so much pleasure from canoeing, my spirit has been fed so much by canoe culture, that I can not think of a traditional canoe like Instinct as inanimate. In the Anishinabe language, a language sprung from the land of the Northwoods, many things normally considered inanimate are termed alive. A drum has a heartbeat, a stone breathes in a sweatlodge, and a guitar sings. To me a canoe swims like a fish, floats like a duck, has ribs and skin like a person, and has grain like a tree. When I cross the boundary of believing that canoes are alive I also extend my concept of self. Instinct is my travelling companion and dancing partner. I ask her questions and she responds in a language that is as old as the Northwoods. For this reason, I am guided by her ability to teach me how to move on both ripples and waves. I treat her with respect, I want her to journey with me my whole life. Canoes are the true Northwood's guide;

frolics upon this incredible expanse of blue beneath her

I hold my paddle, I sit in the lap of a canoe and I float in an amniotic fluid that supports my life. When I am intensely aware of this participation I feel a centre of energy in me that identifies with this image as Nature. Symbolically it's a form of intercourse: The paddle serves as a phallic symbol, the canoe as Northwood's goddess which carries in her belly the offerings of the hunt and gathering, all that I need to survive on my journey. Power and strength are supplied with each blade stroke, sustenance and shelter are offered within canoe ribs. I, the paddler, create the bridge between the two which allows them to move and dance. We all travel as one. Only when united can canoe and I travel through such boundaries, leaving only ripples and our journey's narrations. This is how it should be when travelling throughout the rituals and ceremonies of the Northwoods, through divisions, over boundaries, across territories.

they show us how to travel across divisions and eliminate boundaries between wilderness and culture. Canoes are like family members who act as guides to our discovery of the Northwoods which lie within us, as well as beyond our paddling arm.

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