

# Will Any/Body Carry That Canoe?

## A Geography of the Body, Ability, and Gender

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper I locate portaging as a site of contradiction where convoluted meanings about the self, ability, gender, and class surface. Disability theory and feminist theory of the body elicit various readings about what sort of identities are being produced in the pedagogical space of adventure learning and the canoe expedition.*

### **Résumé**

*Dans cet article, j'identifie le portage comme un lieu de contradiction duquel émergent des significations complexes sur le soi, les aptitudes, les sexes et les classes. Les théories corporelles proposées par les théories en matière de féminisme et d'incapacité fournissent diverses interprétations quant aux genres d'identités que produit le contexte pédagogique de l'apprentissage d'aventure et de l'expédition en canot.*

*Portage* (n & v) n. 1 / the carrying of boats or goods between two navigable waters or around an unnavigable section of a river. (Barber, 1998, p. 1129)

Every canoeist has a portage story to tell. Most of my stories involve having a canoe poised on aching shoulders, sweat dripping into my eyes as I desperately try to out-run a cloud of blackflies. There are stories of getting lost, of sinking waist-deep in mud. Stories of hiding chocolate along a trail for pack-laden students, of conjuring the patience to coach a teenage girl in her first carry while she repeatedly dropped a canoe on me. Stories of falling like an upturned turtle with a heavy pack on my back, sprawled, alone, and absurdly unable to get up from my landing place. The story I will tell in this paper is about the portage as a site of contested meanings in which the canoeist's body carries specific narratives of gender and ability.

As an educator who guides canoe trips, I have witnessed so clearly how the canoe trip in general, and the portage, in particular, can be a powerful vehicle for learning. I have watched hundreds of students awaken to their own power and possibilities on such expeditions, transcending their own and others' preconceived limitations, and arriving at new knowledge of the self. Hilarity, challenge, accomplishment, and intense cooperative teamwork all figure prominently in the scene of hauling boats and gear through rugged and beautiful terrain. However, I have become suspicious of the notions I/we hold of the ideal of personal power and empowerment, suspicious of the idea that

there can be any transparency of meaning in a pedagogical event, curious about the humanist assumptions embedded in adventure learning, and curious about how it is that we think about knowledge of the self. The portage has a complex ability to divide groups of people into strong/able/male and Other. For example, carrying a canoe often becomes a symbolic display and assertion of masculinity, which then positions female bodies in complicated and contradictory ways when underneath a boat. It is my contention that when we carry a boat, we are also carrying the weight of liberal humanism, dis/ability, gender, class, and race; we carry the weight of Western culture.

Strands of thinking within the fields of adventure education, outdoor education, and environmental education share several parallel concerns with my discussion here: taking up experience as not self-evident, but as discursively constituted (Russell, 1999); thinking through the implications of travel discourses that posit nature as a challenging obstacle (Haluzá-Delay, 1999; Warren, 1996); and theorizing social difference in relation to environment, nature, and pedagogy (Henderson, 1997; Ruffin, 1996). However, I would suggest that the issues I raise are relevant to educators in each of these fields primarily because these fields are not always so neatly separated. A “wilderness” expedition can serve as a space for developing both leadership skills and developing ecological literacy, for example; and environmental philosophy is a central priority on some trips. I take as my location the canoe trip and as my central question, “What sort of bodies and identities are being produced in this pedagogical space?”

### Of Politics and Portaging: A Story for Re-storying

Packing over the portage has a peculiar limiting and brutalizing effect on the mind . . . . After a few hundred yards, your neck muscles begin to shriek in remonstrance, and it is an aid to grasp the two straps on each side of the head and pull them and the load forward . . . . [at the end] you feel curiously light. With a savage exultation you dogtrot back over the trail with feverish impatience for the next load . . . . There are few sweeter words to the man of the North than: “By God there is a man that can pack!” The North is so crushing, it gives away before the ineptitude of man so slightly, its rewards are so withheld, that these small conceits are magnified out of all proportion and are warming wine to the spirit. (P.G. Downes)

Periodic readings often figure prominently within expedition-based pedagogy, and this classic canoeing quote tends to resonate quite strongly with students. In part, it resonates with me; the shrieking of neck muscles, for instance, is something that I can well relate to. I laugh at the sense of the familiar at the same time that I am wary of how the hyperbolic enactments of masculinity and views of harsh, savage wilderness might play out pedagogically. P.G. Downes’ words nicely capture my ambivalence around the curious investments

I make in the discourses of strength, character building through “brutalizing” effort, and “man” in opposition to “crushing North.” Such discourses can be easily critiqued and discarded. But I think a more interesting prospect lies in taking our investments seriously, opening up our contradictions, and exploring what discourses are informing our identities and pedagogies. Accordingly, I begin with a story of contradiction.

Years ago, as a young canoe guide and outdoor educator I was driven to learn to solo flip a canoe so that I might be self-reliant in portaging. Somehow in my mind I needed this skill in order to be an effective educator in the woods. I recall an awkward conversation with a senior instructor during which he insisted that instructors who could not solo flip boats should not be lead instructors. I quietly pointed out that most female instructors, including myself, would then be barred from promotion, that perhaps judgment and experience were more important than brawn. On trip, George created a norm of carrying a canoe with a pack at the same time in order to cover more distance. He tended to choose routes so long that physical travel overshadowed all else. The pedagogical impact that these valuations had on co-instructors and students seemed to go unacknowledged.

I eventually learned and successfully performed the solo flip and then promptly forgot it. While working for many years at an Outward Bound wilderness school I tenuously learned to value my own competence as a wilderness instructor, and learned to value the cultural norm of tandem flipping the canoe, tilting it so that one person might get in position to carry it. It tacitly encouraged teamwork and created a norm that was more accessible. I began in my pedagogy to emphasize the portage as a feat of collaboration (not bravado) in which we were all important and all capable, working to create and value many options and ways of doing things. We may not all be equally strong, I would concede to my students, but we are all strong enough. Personally, I loved portaging, and the gnarlier, the better. I reveled in feeling physical, strong, and dirty.

When I shifted cultures to teaching at another educational institution, many doubts and contradictions resurfaced. During a canoe-based course, the students were taught several techniques for carrying a boat, all of which involved solo flipping (in wider canoe culture, a more common technique than the tandem flip I’d become accustomed to). The norm for this class then became a reasonably difficult manoeuvre, one that I was not able to do (nor were many of my students). Because my pedagogical orientation favoured other methods, I never used the solo flip, and so couldn’t do it. Like all skills, it requires practice, which in this case could be substituted for a strong upper body. The fact that all of the other guides did and taught the solo flip only added to my growing professor imposter anxiety. Furthermore, among these students there seemed to be an excessive and exaggerated sense of rivalry which created a strong competitive subtext to most physical tasks. I wanted to unpack some of our assumptions about the physical, to question our thinking about bodies and accomplishments. The structure of the course left little space for this and further, I felt I was on shaky ground because I couldn’t actually do what it was that I wanted to critique. It is safer to criticize something, I realized, when it is already in your possession.

I was naively surprised by how often portaging was taken up in student trip journals woven together with notions of heroic masculinity. Dave’s journal, in

particular, is lodged in my memory. He wrote extensively about his sense of victory in portaging, deeming that he would have counted himself a failure if he were ever to have rested during a carry. He was clearly proud of his successes, to never have been “soft” and put down a canoe. Yet he was also puzzled by his intense motivation to focus on physical feats since there were no “girls” that he wanted to impress in his immediate tripping group. Reading his journal was an interesting pedagogical exercise; how to respond, which questions to ask, and, more importantly, why was I compelled to respond to his journal differently or more than others?

A month later while prepping for an Outward Bound course, I was loading trailers with a colleague. She understood my ambivalent feelings about portaging. She didn’t do or teach the solo flip either, for similar reasons. We talked at length about the complicated workings of portaging and pedagogy. On a whim, I stooped to pick up a boat, with my friend standing nearby to guard against the possibility of 70 pounds of aluminum crashing onto my head. The canoe popped onto my shoulders. I was elated. And yet . . . on some level, I found this elation troubling.

Many things immediately surface in this narrative:

- doubt in my competence rooted in self, gender, physical ability, and collegial power relations;
- my simultaneous rejection of and investment in dominant discourses of the strong body; and
- attempts to change/redefine meanings as a political pedagogical strategy, however limited.

Each of these issues is gendered in a particular kind of way, that I will take up throughout. What this narrative is unable to capture is how painful, convoluted, and frustrating these struggles actually are/were, and what it felt like to have competing discourses wrestling for primacy of meaning within my own body. While certainly not all people paddle with a philosophy in which miles are bagged, the North is considered crushing, and putting down a canoe for a few minutes constitutes failure, currents of this thinking does inform some canoe travel and pedagogy.<sup>1</sup>

While embedded in the liberal-humanist assumptions of adventure learning, my narrative, if politicized, could present a challenge to common sense liberal discourse. Learning through challenge is partly predicated on the notion of personal empowerment which is itself entrenched in the “autonomy” and “individualism” of a perceived meritocracy. The adventure education premise of being rewarded with successes and new self-knowledge in exchange for risk-taking reinforces this mythology. Subtle messages expressed implicitly and explicitly through adventure pedagogy are:

- “you have the power within you;”
- “you are the author of your own destiny;” and
- “if you try hard you will succeed.”

Yet gender<sup>2</sup> appears to be a barrier to success in outdoor adventure; we are not always equally rewarded, I have found in my experiences of portaging, for equal efforts. As in everyday life, not everyone will “succeed” if they try hard, and not everyone must try hard in order to “succeed.” In employing physical challenge as a way for learners to discover their own power and competence, there is an assumption that learners do discover their own power, that they leave a trip feeling more capable; this is not always the case.

This mythology of meritocracy serves to present the appearance of a level playing field while specifically serving those who already carry privilege. Those who carry privilege also define the terms of the playing field, and within dominant portage discourse feats of physical endurance have been defined as most valued. Whenever I try to relocate portaging as “feat of collaboration” rather than “individual heroism,” I am attempting a limited counter-narrative on the terrain of dominant discourse which holds the power both to discipline me, and to reinfuse my own desires for physical challenge. Once I stepped outside of a particular subculture within Outward Bound and into a more popular context of travel philosophies, for example, the contradictions of portage pedagogy knocked me over abruptly.

As a teacher, I am deeply ambivalent about portaging. There is nothing inherently wrong with students deciding to physically challenge themselves. They are stretching themselves, learning new skills, and working hard to accomplish something difficult. They are doing exactly what adventure education asks them to do; I have repeatedly witnessed powerful, positive learning arising from encounters with canoe carrying. Yet I have a lingering dis-ease with the heterosexual, masculine inscription in the derision of “softness,” and how physically ambitious travel philosophies might position those who either choose to, or must, rest.

The philosophy of learning through challenge fuels a “discourse of overcoming” (Wendell, 1997) that asserts that just as we overcome the portage, we might also overcome limitations, gender, disability. Women guides and instructors often deal with very gendered outdoor terrain by working to achieve unparalleled competence, in a sense overcoming gender, by becoming “superwomen” (Warren, 1996). I have, in the past, alienated students through appearing too strong, yet at the same time, the circumstances through which I have garnered any strength or competence have not been easy. P.G. Downes didn’t write “By God, there is a *woman* who can pack!” simply because there have existed masculinist discourses of wilderness travel that have had a gendered, raced, and classed influence on, metaphorically, who packs, who is packed along, how packs are packed, and what packing signifies at specific moments in time and history. Whenever we hold up “superwomen” and “disabled heroes” (Wendell, 1997) as role models, we continue to submerge the painful conditions that construct experience in particular ways.

The importance of narratives of lived experience is that they provide more tangled accounts of living contradictions, of what it is to be caught within the

murky workings of desire and collusion. The limitation of accounts of experience is that they can become a sort of fishbowl, from which an essential subject narrates a coherent story, unable to view that story from beyond the confines of the bowl. Experiences are never transparent, but are constructed, read, and understood through sets of social meanings. What we remember and what we tell has everything to do with a particular vision of the self and of the world that we wish to put forth,<sup>3</sup> and with what knowledges we can allow ourselves to know. For example, there is an inscription of whiteness and class privilege underlying my struggles with portaging which would never figure into my understanding of my own experience if I remained unable to view this narrative as constructed through different discourses.

I have begun with this particular “story” in order to lay out my problematic within the discourses of adventure learning and to construct the context for my theorizing, yet I am committed to a certain re-storying of it. Connections to social theory of the body will produce some interesting readings of portaging that tell different stories of the self and the world.

### A Geography of the Body and Identity

The greatest portage a person can make is across the forest of his or her own identity, seeing each tree rooted in one soil. (Bob Fulton)

Theorizing identity ought to be important in a field directly concerned with who a learner comes to *be* through engagements with outdoor experience. I consider the body to be a primary location for exploring identity, that it is “the very stuff of subjectivity” (Grosz, 1994, p. ix). The body is both an instrument of power and constructed by power, mapped and layered with sophisticated meanings; it is “a cultural interweaving and production of nature,” “itself a cultural, *the* cultural, product” (p.18, 23).

When a body carries a canoe, depending on how that body has been performed, and the meanings associated with that body, the action of carrying has very different significances. The reminder here, is that the “human body is always a signified body” (Gatens, 1999, p. 230), and as such, always means more than we think, and says more than we mean. Bodies are read through a host of pre-existing discourses which ultimately impact the experience that body has in the world. Sterning and carrying canoes are very different actions when taken up from different subject positions; there are, for example, discourses of leadership, decision making and physical prowess to contend with, and these discourses are gendered and raced in a particular kind of way.

#### *Reading the Gendered Body*

The female body has a long history of being understood as a weak body, frail, something breakable and easily “damaged,” a body that requires protection.

Interestingly, misogyny in Western culture can be traced to a conceptual separation of mind and body, a separation in which the body is loathed, and coded as female, and the mind, coded as male, is exalted as the seat of reason (Price & Shildrick, 1999). The female body, understood as abnormal, or in Aristotle's view "deviant" and "deformed" (in Garland Thomson, 1997), is also at times cast as filthy, dangerous, simultaneously reviled and desired, a leaky body without boundaries, the abject body (Price & Shildrick, 1999; Young, 1990).

Kristeva describes abjection as the loathing or repulsion projected onto that which is in excess of ourselves or that which is expelled out of the body (e.g., sweat, blood); this repulsion functions to maintain the border between the self and the outside world. A similar process relates to the loathing projected onto and simultaneous fascination with certain other bodies (Young, 1990).<sup>4</sup> At stake for the subject is a need to establish the self as separate from the other by repelling the other, thus securing the fragile boundary of identity between a sealed self and outside/other. When young men are called "girls" when they have difficulty completing a physical task like portaging, they are, in a sense, being temporarily contaminated with the abject, their sense of self and independent, masculine body being threatened.

Both femininity and disability as inscribed in the body are capable of casting a body as deviant and subordinate (Garland Thomson, 1997). Some feminists illustrate how cultures of femininity are themselves "disabling," in that they often remove power from the body. Wearing high heels, for example, can be read as a practice that causes a temporary impairment in walking.

The female body is disciplined to be less physically capable; diet regimes, clunky footwear, and an obsessive focus on surface appearance hardly encourage the development of a strong body. The notion of weakness becomes imprinted on the female body in both discursive and material terms through a kind of performative feedback loop. "Female" is not "naturally" weak, but is repeatedly both read and performed as weak(er). And, ironically, the cultural practices that produce feminine disablement simultaneously produce feminine social enablement (Garland Thomson, 1997).

In one view, the physicality and inevitable muddiness of paddling, flipping, and hauling boats may be one route for women to resist such an inscription of weakness, re-disciplining the body in more powerful terms. Yet, educator Martha Bell (1993) asks, "How is a strong woman raft guide any different from a strong man raft guide? Despite the rhetoric of liberal individualism, her experiences of being strong in her body are very different" (p. 39). Her strong body will be read differently and invested in a host of different meanings than a man's strong body. If a female body shows itself to be a strong body, then displays of heterosexual attractiveness are often demanded in order to reassert some normalcy in relations of power (Newbery, 2000). The recent pop-culture representations of physically strong white women found in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Xena the Warrior Princess," and



“Lara Croft” express the degree to which strength, as a transgression of white, female gender, must be offset by accentuating these characters’ roles as objects of a gaze.

In performing portage, we are enacting a particular masculinized performance of gender. Outdoorswomen may be in drag as men when we carry boats! We at times face sanction for this gender infraction (see Newbery, 2000), or, alternatively, are exonerated from our gender, viewed as “superwomen” or “one of the guys.” Transgressions of gender usually cause deeply troubled reactions. On a cool fall day, a passerby called me an Amazon under his breath while I was portaging a canoe just moments before I was stopped by the local reporter for photographs. The anxiety that produced the comment may have arisen out of the emasculating possibilities my action held for other bodies, rather than the defeminizing impact it had on my own. If female is not weak, then how can male be strong, and, indeed, what then signifies male?

In North America in the 1800s, social prohibitions developed against effeminacy which was thought to be a product of overly luxurious living. A hard, strong body is a physical representation of male power and too much easy living led to a softness which was problematic for maintaining male hegemony. This fed the drive for upper class men to take to outdoor adventure as a form of recreation in order to counteract the effeminizing influences of civilization (Cronon, 1995). The P.G. Downes quote cited earlier in this paper is an apt indication of the kinds of masculinizing possibilities the canoe trip holds within certain tripping philosophies.

A canoe hoisted onto shoulders is a signifier for power and masculinity and a sight of conflict for many women who work in the outdoors. Portaging is a physically difficult task and it’s important to acknowledge that, bodily inscription aside, a 200 pound man will likely have an easier time of it than a 130 pound woman. Carrying gear also carries physical capital and social value, and it is easy for both guides and students to find that value and external validation alluring. Accomplishments are hierarchized and placed on either side of a constructed gender binary, so that it is more probable that a pinnacle experience on a trip involved carrying a canoe than it did cooking an exceptional meal. It is this mapping of meanings and values onto accomplishments that lures us to invest in the portage. Who doesn’t want to see themselves as strong? It remains for us to interrogate how that strength is constituted and also how it excludes.

### *Reading the Classed Body*

Bourdieu’s (1986) analysis of embodied capital is useful in understanding how the bodily inscription and body discipline of the canoe expedition have material consequences that play into a larger economic system. The body, in his view, is a bearer of symbolic value, an entity that is commodified due to



its capacity to produce labour and its imprintation with status, manners, and tastes, all of which are exchangeable for other resources. While a strong, male working class body may be exchanged for economic capital through manual labour, dominant classes will produce a bodily form that has a higher currency. This upper class body has a higher symbolic value; it may function to attract the right spouse, open the right doors, or emphasize the development of a well reasoned and mannered mind (Bourdieu, 1986; Shilling, 1993). A person possessing economic resources may yet be barred from social and political power if they do not correctly embody class privilege.

While strong, fit bodies have come, in general in North America, to be valued by all classes, I believe they are nonetheless valued and developed differently. The physical labour that develops a strong body is not typically done by those in positions of power. An upper class body most likely becomes fit through “recreation.”

Outdoor recreation as currently practiced in Canada is exemplary of a set of activities steeped in cultural capital. In these spaces, social contacts are made and specific ideologies are circulated and reproduced. Bourdieu (1978) himself notes that activities such as mountaineering and walking are favoured by a professional class of teachers and professors because they combine a “sense of mastery of one’s own body” with the “free and exclusive appropriation of scenery inaccessible to the vulgar” (p. 839). The development of a strong body (through carrying a canoe) and the appreciation/appropriation of scenery (during the walk back) are not themselves inherently unjust or insidious activities. We ought to recognize, however, how these activities are positioned and also position the subject within a wider social field quite differently than other outdoor endeavours, such as farming or mineral exploration. If hardship or physical labour on the land is a daily reality, then the conceptual leap between physical outdoor activities and leisure may be difficult to make. The privilege being enacted in outdoor activities relates to the material conditions of one’s life, and to the discourses differentially available to make meaning out of such activities (Newbery, 2000).

### *Reading the Abled Body*

My own embodied experience of the portage can be related to the work of disability theorists who assert that it is not impairment but living in a disabling culture that is most difficult for them. For me, it’s not the portaging, hauling, and lifting that is tiring or even frustrating, it is dealing with people who don’t want to let me carry my own stuff. In general, we tend to divide people into strong and weak, big-heartedly compensating for “the weak” rather than understanding all of us as, in some way, *strong enough*. The constructs of female and weak are only intelligible against a back-drop of male and strong. Similarly, disability is only intelligible against an able-bodied norm. A conceptual focus on the social construction of normalcy is productive in its

interrogation of a system in which all, both marked and unmarked, are implicated in and regulated by the hegemony of normalcy (Davis, 1995). What counts as strong and able-bodied is always under negotiation.

The “able bodied” actually requires a “disabled other” because meaning is only generated in the difference between the two. In order to secure and maintain this difference, the boundaries between Self and Other require rigid policing. Racism, ableism, and sexism aid significantly in this conceptual work. Prejudice is rooted in “a refusal to identify with a person’s reality” (Morris, 1996, p. 6), in a desire to construct and keep the Other at a distance. Wendell (1997) proposes that disidentifying with people with disabilities occurs because bodily suffering, and an inability to control the body are despised, pitied and feared. Again, what we each fear most in ourselves, whether that be effeminacy, weakness, a loss of control, or association with other animals is what we most project onto Others, as a way of establishing the Self as separate and unmarked. Yet the trap here is that we are all marked and defined by the sets of meanings that mark some bodies and not others. Within an ideological regime of “normalcy,” disability informs us all.

Keeping in mind that normalcy signifies more than meanings of ability and impairment, but also signifies positioning in gender, class, race, and sexuality discourses, how normalcy surfaces in different bodies has vastly different dynamics. While the body, as associated with “gross unthinking physicality” is relegated as Other, and further associated with women, black people, and working class people (Price & Shildrick, 1999), how devalued meanings surface in these bodies differs enormously. For example, black bodies, situated in a history of racism and slavery, have been largely valued for their strength, for their ability to perform manual labour. Revaluing the strength of a black female body, a working class body, and a white female body may mean very different things, some of which imply power and resistance and some of which may further reinscribe dominant racist and classist discourse.

Building on Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of embodied capital, I suggest that gender, race, ability, age, and sexuality all influence the *quantity* and *form* of currency that a body carries. A colleague of mine mused one evening about how she often downplays her strength and role models “asking for help” while on trail, and yet she chooses to spend physical capital while instructing adolescent male groups in order to procure the respect not always afforded women instructors in the outdoors. The currency available and how we spend it shifts with shifts in social contexts.

### *Reading the Portaging Body*

Theorizing abjection, normalcy, and capital in relation to the canoe trip is valuable because I believe that portaging and other physical challenges can often be identity work in a way quite different than the adventure education

literature proposes. I am asking, rather, what sort of “sense of self” does a learner find on a portage and how does that self relate to others? This theorizing produces some interesting readings of the desire not to be “soft” through resting, of the importance placed on physical challenge, and of the complexities of embodied gender identity that demand that we think beyond redefining female as strong or revaluing feminine bodies.

The portage effectively performs what I will call “border work.” Contrary to popular uses of this term that indicate the ability to cross, to work across borders, or to collaborate in “border spaces,” I rather see the portage as policing the border, performing the discursive work of separating and marking people. It is a means by which we can re-confirm our position as “able” and “strong,” expelling our weakness. As guides, we often help people cross that border, finding their own sense of power and joining the ranks of the strong (rather than doing the more difficult work of questioning how strength/weakness are constituted). Displays of physical heroism may have at their heart a refusal to acknowledge the Self as weak in any way, and a desire to set the Self apart from the Other, particularly when the Other is constructed as female, weak, and disabled. This begs the question of what our lives might be like if we didn’t invest difference with meaning at every turn, if we didn’t work so hard to hold up the discursive boundary between Self and Other.

Part of my desire for the portage may lie in its very ability to cast a person as strong, to both gain a sense of self-esteem in liberal terms, and also a sense of Self, as in the sense of being unmarked. It is an act through which women, in a liberal feminist project, can challenge male supremacy by displaying themselves as capable. Under the surface, the portage figures as a symbolic enactment of a struggle between effeminacy and masculinity, weakness and strength, powerlessness and powerfulness. This all occurs on the terrain of whiteness; through a complicated colonial history, canoeing in Canada has become an elite sporting event imbued with the cultural capital of middle-class white culture.

## Conclusion

At birth we emerge from dream soup. At death we sink back into dream soup.  
In between, there is a crossing of dry land. Life is a portage. (author unknown)

Life *is* a portage, a long journey throughout which we carry burdens, joys, children, laughter, doubts, desires, discourses. The fundamental question to ask after this discussion of the underbelly of the canoe and canoe culture is, “How might we carry on differently?”

One common strategy has been to contest the meanings that inscribe some bodies and accomplishments with more value than others. Any project that attempts to revalue bodies or to rewrite discourses of gender, race,

and ability needs to at the same time understand the workings of the desire that lures us to invest in and collude with that which we might intellectually reject. Desire and identity are inextricably bound, and one cannot invest identity with a sense of agency without also taking into account how identity is constituted through desire.

We might, as educators, continue asking ourselves some simple questions:

- What might be learned given the route chosen?
- Do we assume that we should “compensate” for “weaker” paddlers by pairing them with “stronger” paddlers when a boat “lags behind”?
- What is performed in the act of assuming?
- What other ways might we also think about the journey and the paddlers?
- What learning outcomes do our actions value?
- How do we think about learning and the self?

I resist the genre of conclusion that asks that I answer the questions I’ve posed or provide a list of concrete suggestions. The importance lies in the asking of the questions. Thinking, itself, is a productive action. Pedagogy changes through thinking; perhaps our pedagogy is mostly about how we think. My own thinking has cultivated an ongoing wariness of the comfortable narratives that construct canoeing experiences and the canoeist’s identity. It is important in this work, though, to surface the difficult and painful aspects of canoe culture without also losing the discursive space of pleasure in a long day’s paddle.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The deep ecology, ecopsychology, and ecofeminist literatures, for example, would all propose very different relationships to land and to travel.
- <sup>2</sup> And other factors of difference such as age, ability, health, and body size.
- <sup>3</sup> Thanks to Naomi Norquay for this insight.
- <sup>4</sup> Bodies are not “naturally” abject, but are constructed as such. The theory of abjection helps to account for the violence or repulsion show towards some bodies, such as the seemingly irrational intensity of homophobic hate. The more permeable the boundary, the more intense the repulsion (Young, 1990).

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## Notes on Contributor

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