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Thinking about Things in the Postcolonial Classroom

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My father died two years ago, after a year-long illness with colon cancer. The doctors performed some palliative surgery at the time of his diagnosis, but as the cancer grew he could digest less and less of what he ate. So the year was spent, essentially, waiting for him to starve to death. It was a long time to wait. He was a person of great gifts, creative, intellectual, and personal; he played jazz trumpet, and is lauded in histories of Canadian jazz as one of the pioneers of the genre in Canada; he was a corporate lawyer who was committed to giving his clients good service for their money; he was a father who inspired his children to successful careers in the arts and professions, and a person with great capacity for enjoyment as well as for despair. In retirement he had taken up playing the bass guitar, and rode his bike down the Don Valley to the beach several times a week. His illness made him demanding and reflective and distraught in turns, and caused him to rethink many of these pursuits; one of our main comforts, as his children, is our sense that despite the problems of his last few months he at least came to understand that we felt he had no small role in our successes.

His illness affected all his children profoundly, and made me, like him, demanding and reflective and distraught in turns. But it also caused me to rethink who I am as an academic, as well as a daughter, a mother, and a person. I certainly feel, profoundly, that I am his daughter; my drive
to achieve and my intellectual curiosity are a product of his influence, no less than my awkward social sense, my blasted sense of humour, and my crooked baby fingers. Like Morag Gunn, I often hear my father’s words emerge from my mouth, and hear them in the mouths of my daughters. I rarely thought of these things extending back more than one generation, but now I know they must; I feel an incredible sense of loss that I don’t know more about my own family history, and I want to use my skills as an academic to think about that. In a way, I now realize, I have always been exploring that heritage in my academic work: my work on Brantford-born novelist Sara Jeannette Duncan was partly an exploration of the ideas and sly ironies I recognized as typical of my mother’s family, who are descended from pioneer farmers in Flesherton, Ontario; I associate my interest in the left-nationalist politics of the 70s with the historical marker for Montgomery’s Tavern, which my Dad introduced me to on a shopping trip when I was about eight. White, anglophone Canadians, especially those of us who are committed to a progressive politics, do not often celebrate familial and cultural continuity; instead we emphasize diversity, mobility, hybridity, the breaking down of the systems of power that continue to sustain violence and inequality both in our own country and in the world, the family among them. But at some moments, it becomes not only appropriate but necessary to think about what we have inherited from previous generations, and how that inheritance both enables and limits who we can be.

Most of my inheritance is intangible; my memories, my mannerisms, my interests, my vocabulary, are all part of it. It might be misleading to attribute those to my parents; maybe they came from their parents, or even further back—with there is no source, but only a retreating path through genealogy, an unsatisfactory path of repeated bereavement. But after my father’s death, when I resumed my life in Victoria, a life that has no connection to my childhood family, I realized how much inheritance has come to mean tangible things: the rugs and bookshelves I inherited when my Mom moved into an apartment, my Dad’s canoe paddle, which hangs on the wall in my office, and his old fleece jacket that I wear curling. These things survive through time, and their materiality comes to compensate for the way that people disappear, leaving no trace.

Inherited objects are a visible sign of loss; as Ethel Wilson wrote in Swamp Angel, the symbol comes to substitute for the reality. The material
objects I have inherited have become signifiers of my father, and their histories of manufacture, exchange, and use allow them to serve as reminders of the meanings and histories lost with his death. Their function as mnemonics is a stark illustration of the relationship between signs and their referents: the sign is a substitute for the referent, an admission of its absence, an attempt to recall to presence that which we can never recover. Even an accumulation of objects owned by my father can never be more than a Derridean supplement, a fruitless attempt to fill in the gap between their materiality and his. Their very constitution as signifiers of my father is an admission of his material absence: as Peter Schwenger has written, “The death of the thing, then, is the price we pay for the word” (100). The objects themselves, constituted as signs of a reality that can never be recovered, are what remains to be interrogated.

The inherited object with most meaning for me is my father’s canoe paddle. It’s not an old paddle—he received it as a retirement gift from a colleague when he left his law firm, about ten years before his death. This paddle is made from a single piece of hardwood—cherry—not laminated: this makes it more flexible and responsive to the pressure of water. Some people don’t like paddles made this way, because the slight give in the blade leads to a loss of power in the stroke. But I’m not much of a power paddler—I don’t have the upper body strength, for one thing—and I’d rather go someplace at a leisurely pace than wear myself out half a mile from home. I like it, and my Dad liked it, because it’s a beautiful piece of wood, an example of craftsmanship, and its possession marks us as particular kinds of people, who can afford to own and appreciate beautiful things, and particular kinds of paddlers, who stick to the flat water and think of ourselves as sensitive to the natural world. Though it’s a little bit too big for me, I like to use it when I take my kids canoeing.

The last time I saw my Dad use this paddle, I was six months pregnant with my second daughter, and we were going to canoe around the lake a bit, as we often did on vacation. I wasn’t much help getting the canoe into the water, but I could paddle, and the landscape always made much more sense from the water side. This paddle also reminds me of the cottage we had in Haliburton when we were children, and the time we spent there. The first canoe I remember was a canvas and cedar fifteen foot, which we discarded after my brother and my Dad tried chopping down a few trees to improve the view from the deck. They assured my mother that
they knew how to make the tree fall where they wanted; luckily, only the canoe ribs were broken. In that canoe, I learned that I was strong enough to propel myself where I wanted to go; I learned to be still, and to watch for the blue heron that sometimes came to our lake. So besides the memories of my father and my family, this paddle reminds me of important things about myself.

One of the places we used to go in Muskoka was a cottage near Kilworthy, a place where members of my Dad's family used to have a hunting camp in the first decades of the twentieth century. I never knew any of these people: I struggle to make a connection with the picture of my grandfather as a young man with a thin mustache, holding up a lake trout by the gills, and with his mother in a white middy blouse in the background of a photo featuring rifles and a dead deer. My father's interest in canoeing must derive from this history, and so my paddle is inextricably related to these images. This paddle means that members of my family have been vacationing in Muskoka for a hundred years and reminds me that my grandmother and great-grandmother probably had their own paddles.

Thus far this paddle appears to have meaning transparently and naturally, because it is associated with my childhood, my love of canoeing, my father, and his family. But I know that these meanings are an illusion, a product of a process that resulted in what Marx called the fetishism of commodities. Marx argued that the social relations that produce value in objects are obscured in the process of exchange, and value taken to inhere objectively in objects rather than in the social relations that produced them. Thus “productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race” (321). My paddle seems to brim with meaning, connecting me to my father, my mother and siblings, and my father's family, but I know that this life, these meanings, are socially constituted. Things can only be constituted as objects in the social process of identity formation, for when a thing is named “it is also changed. It is assimilated into the terms of the human subject at the same time that it is opposed to it as object, an opposition that is indeed necessary for the subject's separation and definition” (Schwenger 101). Thus “all of our knowledge of the object is only knowledge of its modes of representation—or rather of our modes of representation, the ways in which we set forth the object to the understanding” (Schwenger 101). While objects come into being through
social processes, and their meanings are culturally created, this process is obscured as the meanings projected onto the object are attributed to the object itself. The paddle does not really have any of these meanings in and of itself; it has these meanings because I have externalized the aspects of my identity that I associate with my father and his family, and certain memories of my childhood, and projected them onto the paddle. According to Daniel Miller, in *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, my coming to own the paddle is part of a process whereby I will recognize that these meanings are self-created, and re-incorporate them into my own identity.

An analysis of this kind affords different sorts of satisfaction. By thinking about my father's paddle, I express my longing for his presence; I also construct characteristics of my own identity, my self-reliance, my love of the natural world, my occasional stillness, by attributing those associations to the paddle. The paddle acts as a souvenir, literally, reminding me of who I am as a daughter, as a scholar, a person. I have a whole collection of these souvenirs of myself: the brooch my mother gave me when I graduated from high school, the desk I bought when I moved to Victoria, first editions of Sara Jeannette Duncan's novels. Each one is a souvenir of some aspect of myself, a reminder of episodes in my personal history. But these personal histories are not the only meanings I associate with my father's canoe paddle. Even as a child, I knew that the canoe was the means whereby Canada "became a nation": it facilitated exploration and the fur trade, those two east-west movements which eventually united the nation "a mari usque ad mare." The canoe occupies a unique place in the nationalist discourse I study: as Pierre Trudeau wrote in his famous essay, "Exhaustion and Fulfillment," it was the means whereby Canadians could learn a patriotism that was "felt in the bones." The canoe is still an important means by which urban Canadians like myself claim a first-hand experience of the landscape, and a sense of themselves in relation to it. My canoe paddle is also the means by which I identify myself with the larger political community and with the aims of the Canadian state, an identification that seems fully compatible with my family, who as third-generation Ontarians have always been disparaging of anything "American," and suspicious of anything Brit. Because my paddle is a material object that I have used and inherited, that identification seems "natural."
Roland Barthes gives an account of the way that material objects can operate as *myth*, making historically contingent concepts like nationality seem to have the validity of objective science. In Barthes' account, myths offer an artificial resolution to cultural contradictions by referencing two levels of signification that he calls first and second orders. Similarly, Susan Pearce in *Museums, Objects and Collections* suggests that objects function like myth to naturalize cultural hegemony by resolving metonymic and symbolic values. Both theorists suggest that the materiality of objects allows them to function as evidence or “proof” of the cultural values they seem to symbolize. Taking my canoe paddle as an example: I invest the paddle as signifier with the signifieds of my family history of paddling, and thereby objectify the paddle as a signifier of me-in-relation-to-my-family. The relationship between the paddle and its signification is not arbitrary—because it was my father's, and now is mine, because both he and I have used it to paddle, it is metonymically a part of the family activity of paddling, and to that extent seems to be a *natural* or intrinsic sign of this activity; in addition, because the paddle endures in time, and has indeed outlived my father, it carries into the present the memories associated with him in a material form. But the paddle-as-sign of me-in-relation-to-my-family also operates as signifier in a secondary system, in which it mythically or symbolically represents a second signified—the metanarrative of Canadian nationality constructed around exploration, the fur trade, and, more recently, wilderness camping and environmental protection. In this system, the paddle is emptied of its metonymic significance—that is, its status as a real part of my family history—and is available to be filled up with symbolic meaning as a signifier of a particular version of the history of Canada. Because the paddle can function alternately as sign (paddle as natural sign of me) and as signifier (paddle as historically constructed symbol of the nation) it works to insert me into the narrative of nationality.

The materiality of the paddle is an important aspect of the way it functions in this system. Material objects are perceived first through what theorists of material culture call their presentational qualities; that is, their weight, solidity, colour, texture, dimensions, aesthetic, and sensual appeal. My paddle is demonstrably *real*; it's also beautiful and valuable, and for that reason I will keep it, allowing it to “carry forward” its history of manufacture, use, and exchange. Because the paddle has weight and solid-
ity, it can serve as material evidence to prove the validity of the narratives within which it is an important signifier. Beyond this, the paddle is materially in my possession: because it is materially a part of my relationship to my father and my canoeing memories, and because it is old enough to have survived my father, it can serve as “proof” of my narrative of self, and of the interrelationship between my personal narrative and the larger cultural narrative, as “proof” of my Canadianness. As Daniel Miller writes, “The artefact . . . tends to imply a certain innocence of facticity; it seems to offer the clarity of realism, an assertion of certainty against the buffeting of debate, an end or resting point which resolves the disorder of uncertain perspectives” (Miller 106). Its materiality is instrumental to the stability of the larger cultural myth it comes to represent.

That cultural myth of Canadian nationality became the subject of much of my work as a scholar. I was trained at graduate school in the 70s, when the focus of Canadian literary studies was the definition and elaboration of the nation in literary works. I never doubted that a Canadian identity existed, as the question was posed in those days: I knew what it was, and it was mine. I knew what it was because I had a personal, and multi-generational, attachment to a particular place that was in Canada; I knew it because I connected my personal history and my family history to the history of Canada that extended beyond my lifetime; I knew it because I had paddled. The “ideology of the canoe,” as Daniel Francis calls it, allows Canadians like me to construct an identity in which subjectivity and nationality form a seamless whole, and each seems to both confirm and contribute a satisfying depth to the other.

But because my paddle is material, and because material objects can “bear perpetual symbolic reinterpretation” (Pearce 27), it can also represent radically different and even contradictory identities and values. The interpretation of my paddle-as-sign-of-me elides many alternative interpretations which challenge the stable integrated “Canadian” identity I’ve constructed for myself, and of which I’ve become increasingly aware, especially since I’ve moved to the other end of the country. At least one of these must be the paddle as an intrinsic or natural sign of the technologies and material possessions our culture appropriated from First Nations. Birch-bark canoes are unique to northern North America; while other cultures built frames and covered them with skins or bark, Cree people and Mi’kmaq and Anishnabe built frames inside pieces of birch-bark, and
propelled them with paddles carved by hand out of single pieces of wood, rather like my paddle. Europeans adopted this technology, "improved it" with the techniques of mass production, and used it to try to make money out of the land inhabited by the canoe-makers. Out here in British Columbia, this happened without even the treaties imposed in some other parts of the country. My paddle has come to be a reminder that my "Canadianness" also implicates me in the theft of the land that comprises Canada. In this system of signification, the paddle-as-sign-of-me, and of my most intimate memories of a happy and materially comfortable childhood, is tied directly to my status as a beneficiary of White privilege, and the complicity of my forebears in cultural genocide and theft.

From this point of view, my paddle no longer resolves the issues raised by my longing for my father; instead, the personal identity objectified in my paddle, which I experienced as a vital, natural, and self-defining connection between me and the geographical spaces of my childhood and my family history, is undermined and destabilized. Indeed, any reading of my paddle must acknowledge that it signifies at least two incompatible systems of meanings, meanings that work to contradict each other and that cannot be reconciled into a single system. The feeling of being at home, of "topophilia" (Tuan) or love of place that is the effect of its physicality, and of the link that I construct between it and my family, is contaminated. Minnie Bruce Pratt, a lesbian from a Southern US White family, recounts a similar recognition in her essay "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," when she concludes that her childhood home was built on "the grave of the people [her] kin had killed, and [her] foundation, [her] birth culture, was mortared with blood" (35). Pratt's nostalgia is undone by her recognition of the racism that underpins it, her understanding that "home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even in oneself" (Martin and Mohanty 196). Rather than resolving differences like these into a comfortable sentimentalism, my paddle becomes their repository, and the means of constructing a link between my personal identity and the history of colonialism that shapes it.

Newly constructed as a sign of contradiction and instability, my paddle begins to suggest the way that objects can function in the postcolonial classroom. For the meanings I create when I take things as objects are elements in a discourse in which subjectivity overlaps with metanarratives
of nationality and imperial power. The meanings that my paddle seems to signify emerge from a discourse of colonialism, and the introduction of my paddle into the classroom provides an opportunity to analyze this discourse. This sort of analysis can be extended to the objects taken as self-defining by communities and nations, that is, museum objects, heritage sites, and buildings. Just as I take my paddle as object to represent aspects of my constructed self, so cultural collectivities, institutions, and states take museum objects to represent aspects of their constructed histories, identities, and unities. As those histories and identities shift and change through public discourse, collections are augmented and objects discarded, heritage sites acquired and displays modified and rebuilt, with the articulated goal of reflecting identity through material objects. Such objects often figure in public discourse as an inheritance held in common by all members of the group, and a trust for future generations; taken together, they represent a cultural collectivity supposedly comprised of all persons of Canadian nationality. Their realness, their incontestable physicality and their aesthetic appeal, function to stabilize and reproduce the cultural identities they supposedly represent, to “naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression” (Bhabha 143).

Like my paddle, objects in museums are often held to be repositories of meaning in themselves, of stories: these stories conventionally include the histories of their use and manufacture, ownership, exchange, and preservation. Such stories, like the history of my father’s paddle and my memories of him using it, have a metonymic relationship to objects: the object is literally a part of these stories, and therefore seems to be a natural or intrinsic sign of its own history. Individual objects, however, often appear in museum displays as signifiers of a larger metanarrative—of nationality, progress, scientific mastery. As in the case of the canoe paddle, the materiality of the object, its metonymic signification as a true part of real history, acts to elide the contradictory meanings that might challenge the metanarrative. The object as sign of its own use and manufacture becomes a signifier in a secondary system, which is much more open to contestatory readings. Thus a classroom practice that would engage with objects should have two goals: to show the way that the materiality of objects is mobilized to legitimate larger metanarratives; and to demonstrate the way that research into their metonymic significance, their particular and individual histories of use, manufacture, ownership, and
exchange, might suggest other, and contradictory, meanings. These two practices might be formulated as two kinds of reading, one which reveals the way the object works within the systems of signification that the museum display constructs for it, and one which reads against those systems to reveal their elisions and omissions.

There is a fragment of brick on display in the British Columbia Maritime Museum. It’s about three inches by five, the longer side broken off irregularly: brick-coloured, mottled with lighter, sandy tones, obviously old. It’s mounted on the wall in a Plexiglas box, at about eye level. The label provides the information that suggests its metonymic meanings: it came from an oven built at the Spanish Fort San Miguel in Nootka Sound, circa 1789. Not a building, an oven: an oven for baking loaves of yeast-leavened bread, a sign of European culture if there ever was one. This brick is positioned at the physical beginning of a narrative display representing the history of navigation in the waters off the coast of “British Columbia” as physical evidence in the diplomatic dispute between Britain and Spain, known as the “Nootka controversy,” which resulted in the British government’s military assertion of sovereignty over the Nu-Chaa-Nulth territory. This is the moment, in most conventional histories, that created the territory of the Nu-Chaa-Nulth people as British Columbia; as part of a dispute between Britain and Spain, the land mass of the west coast of North America is re-conceived as an imperial possession, and the claims of the First Nations elided. Thus the brick inaugurates a narrative retold sequentially in the Maritime Museum as the history of European people on the central and northern coasts of North America. Positioned as it is in the display, its first order signification as part of a historical event is appropriated to legitimize a larger metanarrative, as evidence of the historical reality of British Columbia.

My second-year cultural studies students practise this sort of reading in the Modern History Gallery of the Royal BC Museum. The display consists of a two-storey hall filled with life-size reproductions of the exteriors of buildings representing a late nineteenth-century British Columbia town, which serve as a context for historical artifacts displayed “realistically” in cases representing shop windows. Rather than consuming
this display in a prescribed order, visitors simply “step into the past,” experiencing sound effects such as horses’ hooves and even smells. However, the elements included in “Old Town” suggest an implicit narrative structuring. “Old Town” includes a railway station and a hotel, as well as the various services that a regional “metropolis” might offer its surrounding “hinterland.” The visitor exits “Old Town” into displays that focus on resource industries, including logging, mining, farming, and fishing. As this account suggests, the display is structured by the “Frontier and Metropolis” thesis articulated by historian J.M.S. Careless, who asserted that although “Canada took shape through the successive occupation of frontiers” (8), the development of frontiers was vitally dependent upon regional metropolitan centres. The organization of the Modern History Gallery, which requires the visitor to pass through “Old Town” and then into the hinterland of resource industries, thus represents Careless’s idea that “the very people who took up the forward margins often came there through outside direction and provision” (19); they were essentially “metropolitan outrunners in the primeval forest” (15).

While the visitor’s experience of “Old Town” is non-linear and the representation is synchronous, the display works to reify the ideological categories that govern it by suggesting its completeness and its adequacy as a representation. Indeed, the structure of the “Old Town” itself, with its sound effects and scents, suggests that evocation of cultural context in its materiality and completeness was a major goal of the exhibit. However, this sense of completeness, or closure, is itself dictated by the way that visitors and curators prefigure the historical field; as Pearce points out, this process involves the acceptance that the ideological categories that organize the display “have an external reality” and that they are part of the physical world. These categories are reproduced in the display through the concept of completion: one must have already decided what a “complete” representation of the past would be, in order to judge whether it has been achieved, and this decision is based upon the “fiction” (Pearce 85) that categories of classification are “real.” The exhibit reproduces the very ideological categories which it is supposed to merely display. The organization of the Modern History Gallery assumes that the operations of capital are the determining element in the settlement of British Columbia; that these kinds of work, work done by men, and especially by White men, are appropriate organizing categories for historical representation; that gender
and race are “special interests,” which are appropriately represented as additions to the main display; that First Nations are not part of “Modern History.”

A similar kind of reading might be performed on a slightly larger “object,” that is, the heritage site at Hell’s Gate, a rock formation in the Fraser River Canyon just south of Lytton. At Hell’s Gate the perpendicular stone cliffs that rise from the waters of the Fraser River create an opening barely 100 feet wide. The narrow channel is filled with whirlpools, barely visible from above, that circle ceaselessly from the bottom to the surface of the water, from rock faces to the boulders. Such rapids upset Simon Fraser’s canoes and almost killed several of the voyageurs travelling with him—they lost paddles, lots of them, over the course of their journey to the Pacific. Fraser determined to travel around the rapids by scaling the sheer rock walls, an experience described in his “Journal”: “we had to pass where no human being should venture” (Fraser 327). This quotation is the theme of interpretation at the current heritage site, which includes a restaurant, gift shop, and “fudge factory,” as well as a heritage marker. Access to the site is provided by the Hell’s Gate Airtram, a commercially operated cable car suspended over the river.

Fraser’s statement emphasizes the danger faced by humans trying to navigate the waters of Hell’s Gate; this theme also governs the interpretation of the more recent history of the site as “an obstacle to transportation” on the heritage marker. The CPR and Highway One both cling to the sides of the canyon in what is surely an engineering marvel; the famous “fishways” completed in the 1960s help the salmon to overcome the force of the turbulent waters on the way up the Fraser to spawn. The Airtram offers a close-up look at the turbulent waters, and is itself a topic for historical interpretation in a display dedicated to its construction. Thus the meaning of the site, from the heritage marker to the federal fisheries display to the commercial businesses, is constructed as part of a single narrative, that of Western technology overcoming nature. The site elicits this already formed cultural narrative within the context of the metanarrative of nation-building, by which state-sponsored enterprise built the nation by overcoming the obstacles posed by its geography, and private enterprise keeps it going.

However, historical research on Hell’s Gate can reveal the possibility of various counter-narratives that situate the site quite differently. While current interpretation focuses on the building of the fishways as an engi-
neering marvel, a different metanarrative might focus on the reason why they were necessary in the first place: blasting for the building of the CPR in 1913 caused the channel at Hell's Gate to narrow even further, and eliminated the eddies that provided a haven for the salmon as they travelled up the Fraser. The ladders were necessary to restore the salmon run that the engineers had destroyed. The “engineering marvel” is diminished when it is repositioned as part of a different metanarrative, an account of the environmental consequences of the North American will to technique. Similarly, a counter-narrative to the construction of the canyon as a geographical barrier overcome by Canadian technology is revealed by revisiting the famous quotation, “where no human being should venture.” When placed in its context in Fraser's journal, this fragment of text points in quite another direction. Fraser persisted in attempting to travel down the river despite repeated warnings from the local people that the river was dangerous and could not be navigated. The Nlaka'pamux people were obliged to offer to guide him along the existing trail they had established for themselves. Fraser's commentary continues:

We had to pass where no human being should venture. Yet in those places there is a regular footpath impressed, or rather indented, by frequent travelling upon the very rocks. And besides this, steps which are formed like a ladder, or the shrouds of a ship, by poles hanging to one another and crossed at certain distances with twigs and withes, suspended from the top to the foot of precipices, and fastened at both ends to stones and trees, furnished a safe and convenient passage to the natives. (327)

Clearly, there is a counter-narrative here, of the history of the Nlaka'pamux people and the materialization of their relationship with the land, which completely undermines the interpretation of the site as evidence of the successful expansion of the nation by way of superior Canadian technology.

I'm not suggesting that these counter-narratives should supplant the previous ones; I am suggesting that the meanings of objects are constructed in discourse, and are therefore open to the same kinds of readings we perform on other kinds of cultural texts. A classroom practice that problematizes the seemingly “natural” meaning of objects and heritage sites can be a useful way to introduce basic concepts like the structure of signs and the function of signifiers as well as more advanced ideas like the
narrativization of the historical past and the interpellation of subjects by ideology. More importantly, it can demonstrate the way that the fetishizing of objects and places compensates for the absence and uncertainty of the referent, whether that referent be the nation, the self, or even the father.

Thinking about my canoe paddle has helped me to understand how inherited objects can work to stabilize and reproduce subjectivity. As the sign of my absent parent and the repository of projected aspects of my self, my canoe paddle is a signifier of myself, a reminder of who I think I am. Museum objects perform the same kinds of functions in a more collective context, by stabilizing the shifting and changing self-representations of cultural collectivities, states, communities, and classes. Objects can do this because they are material: the seeming transparency and obviousness of their metonymic meanings is mobilized to provide “proof” of the larger metanarratives of cultural history and therefore a seeming resolution to the cultural contradictions they pose. And because this resolution is only seeming, investigation of the ways that objects function in personal and cultural narratives can open up possibilities and provide for the rethinking of cultural categories like subjectivity, nationality, race, and community.

Deborah Root has written that White North American culture often “seems so bankrupt and uninteresting” as to be “emptied of meaning,” composed of nothing but strip malls and television. She argues that the inability of White anglophone Canadians to rethink our own tradition, to oppose the “destructive soulless ethos” of capitalism, prevents us from being able to act in solidarity with First Nations or truly understand what a racially diverse and equal society would be like. “Rather than seeking authenticity elsewhere, we need to transform how we look at our histories and traditions and find ways to unravel these from all the racist versions to which we have been subjected” (232). I would suggest that thinking about things in the postcolonial classroom is a good way to rediscover the continuity between the personal and the cultural, and to tease out our personal investments in the cultural discourses of colonialism. But it might also be a way to oppose the paralysis that a burgeoning postcolonial awareness can provoke in people, and to investigate what might have been inherited from within Western culture that can help to
address the inequities that have resulted from those discourses. In this way my canoe paddle can still represent the familial and cultural continuity I want to preserve. I can use my inheritance of self-reliance, and stillness, and good memories, and commitment to place, to change the way I think of Canada and my place in it.

NOTE

1. My use of the word *metonymic* will have several resonances for readers. One of these will be Roman Jakobsen’s use of the word in contradistinction to *metaphoric* in “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances.” Jakobsen distinguishes between metaphoric language, which relates words on the basis of similarity and substitutability, and metonymic language, which relates words together by contiguity and contextuality. My paddle (like Jakobsen’s word) is metonymically related to a group of objects defined by their status as constituting the material context of my childhood. For Jakobsen, synecdoche is a kind of metonymy, because in both cases part is related to whole by contiguity. Pearce discusses Jakobsen’s terms metonymy and metaphor, Barthes’s first and second order signification, and her own terms intrinsic sign and metaphoric symbol (38) as slightly different but parallel concepts.

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