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## Paddle to the sea

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### Introducing 'Paddle'



Figure 1: Paddle and his maker (Ide, 2009)

"You will go with the water and you will have adventures that I would like to have. But I cannot go with you because I have to help my father with the traps" (Holling, 1941, chapter 2).

In response to the accelerated speed of hypermodernity, we too felt trapped, constrained by work ties and the constant stream of emails. With this motivation we began to plan our own 'Paddle-to-the-Sea' inspired by Hollings' (1941) children's adventure book in which a carved model canoe was created by a First Nation boy. It is notable that, despite some longing, the boy is not able to travel himself, he can't journey, but we can. As outdoor

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education practitioners we were intrigued by the concept of 'tempo giusto' (Honore, 2005); finding the 'right' speed.

There is an ethical side to our ability to journey where many do not have economic and social access. We acknowledge a degree of privilege in this and recognise the inherent contradiction associated with going on such a journey made possible through the products of hypermodernity itself. Significant though this is, to explore it further is beyond the scope of this particular study.

Despite feeling a sense of entrapment, we also felt that as animate beings with a degree of agency we might expect to have some control over both the decisions surrounding where, when and how we might journey. In contrast to 'Paddle's' four-year journey through the Great Lakes to the sea, ours would see us travel from Kirkstone Pass in the heart of the English Lake District to the Solway Firth on its northern border. As a wooden model 'Paddle' would be animated along his journey by the ebbs and flows of the river in addition to chance encounters with the human and other-than-human. In response to our ability to exercise the two key aspects of human agency "choice and discretion" (Pickering, 1995, p. 116) while doors must always be opened for Paddle we will sometimes open them for ourselves. On our journey how far might this dualist perspective hold true? To what extent might we find ourselves under or above the influence of the other-than-human in a 'dance of agency'? (Pickering, 1995) as we search for "a rhythm that allows us both to move with the ongoing flows of...sense-making" (Brummans, 2012, p. 162).

## **Methodology**

Rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre, 1992/2004) was adopted to explore the experience of a three-day narrative inspired canoe journey from the Kirkstone Pass in the Lake District to the Solway coast, from source to sea, along a series of rivers and two lakes. Using three modified canoes the journey involved road transportation on trolleys, lake travel under sail as well as the customary paddling. All equipment and food was carried and campsites were within a short distance of the water.

Lefebvre (1992/2004) introduced us to a tool of analysis which afforded an opportunity to “...listen to a house, a street, a town as one listens to a symphony” (Lefebvre, 1992/2004 p.xii). Accordingly, could we listen to a canoe, a river and a paddle? What might we hear if we listen to this ‘song’? Mason (1988) similarly explores the significance of hearing the ‘song’ in the context of a canoe journey, a rhythm perhaps? There is a growing movement exploring concepts around the term ‘slow’ captured by the term “tempo giusto” (Honore, 2005, p. 273) where musicians seek to find the ‘right’ speed and ‘eigenkosten’ (Perks, 2013) where every task has a minimum cost and we need to invest sufficiently to avoid a disservice.

Rhythm (Lefebvre, 1992/2004) emphasises both the biological and philosophical relationships between the senses, society and the environment – our ‘sense world’. We were interested in our personal rhythms and their interaction with one another’s and the rhythms of our wider environment, an assemblage (Deleuz & Guattari, 1987 in Yu, 2013) if you will. Lefebvre’s (1992/2004) work accordingly offered the suggestion that these rhythms can be used as a method of Rhythmanalysis for both ‘Paddle’s’ and our own journey.

Data collection involved personal note taking, regular reflective discussions, video and still photography. Additional discussions involved a local poet who met the canoeists before, during and after the journey to share our reflections. The poet synthesised these reflections to produce a poem which was adopted by a filmmaker as the theme for a short film which included video content and supplementary footage.

## Findings

**Table 1: Paddle-to-the-Sea**

<p>Her</p> <p><a href="https://vimeo.com/223439792">https://vimeo.com/223439792</a></p>
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(Gilson, 2017)

We became more aware of a multiplicity of rhythms that shape or ‘haunt’ (Trelfa, 2017) experience. Lefebvre refers to this as polyrhythmia, in which “...there is interaction

between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy...” (Lefebvre, 1992/2004 p. xv) and exists in assemblages where distinctions blur such as the horse and rider becoming a rhythmic assemblage that might be described as a ‘horse-person-thing’ (Evans & Franklin, 2010 in Ingold, 2011). In our context this concept was usefully extended to include more of the animating assemblage. As presented in Gilson’s (Table 1) short film a solo canoe and paddler was better understood as a ‘canoe-person-paddle-water-wind thing’ where the interactions between wind against the canoe, river flowing past the paddle, canoeists’ grip on the paddle and pressure against the canoe self-organise into a constellation of fluid, topological rhythms.

**Table 2: Poems for ‘Paddle to the Sea’**

**Trolleying**

Carrying three canoes, a clunking beginning, middle and end. The pantomime horse is shuttling along a bank by a beck which is still too shallow after a dry spring. Low water crosses the bed-stones in reels of white bubbles that gain voice in the falling rain.

**Setting off**

Into the squiggles of a downpour. You check the dry suits around your necks. There is a short scraping of canoes, a wobble, then off.

**Afloat**

Everything the canoe is, takes form: tail, fin, and bow. Meeting this with arms and hands the paddler dips and draws. The separation between them dissolves into being afloat, into moving on water.

**Ullswater**

Heavy drops open into saucepans of rings on the lake. Splatters bounce on the water’s black film. At a lower acoustic, the paddles follow the lead of the rain. Call and response settles into playful riddles, the pull of the cross-wind, a part of the puzzle. Paddle-rhythms form by breaking the surface, creating a space, the swirl left behind, the re-filling, then a push forward.

**Gorge**

Inside, it is its own world. Walls of ridged sandstone stand silent as the passage

deepens. The rage of a desert storm, now static has become a Dipper's favoured rock. Scoops of water fall from the vegetation above and land on the canoes with a primal 'plop'.

### **Through town**

Overgrown, the willows buffer the city sounds. Trees welcome us with bows that scrape the surface. On this wide brown stretch of the Eden, gurgles of water rise suggesting the breath of beasts below. Reeds travel as if parting for eels and back currents swirl. It is a passage of the unseen, a broad slowing down of mud and tangle, a call to attention. In urban waters, the stories will be told underneath.

### **Estuary**

Flicked from the edge of a paddle, droplets touch your lips and announce the first taste of salt. Dipping into the brackish film of river and sea, tidal voices enter the interface. Pock-marked folds of red mud warn of changing flows, the dens of sea trout. A village church moves past, tucked in on its wedge of sandstone, slowly being eaten by tributaries. The head wind empties your arms and tells of the line where journeys become voyages. The land recedes and the blank horizon expands.

As a wooden model canoe 'Paddle's' path is determined by the current lines, flows of water and wind but, as an inanimate object he does not appear to actively choose which to follow and as a result sometimes spends weeks washed on a beach and days circling in eddies. As canoeists we took pride in our ability to choose pathways but can our underlying habits, bias and preference cause us to miss out? By the very nature of the title 'Paddle to the Sea' we found we had inadvertently determined our rhythm for the trip. We were tied to a destination, to transport home and work the next day. In response we found ourselves choosing progression onward over circling in an eddy. This was evidenced when we became conscious of inadvertently 'herding' wildlife down the river before us and that although there were large mammals around we did not see any. Had we circled in an eddy for a few hours might we have found a more harmonious alliance or eurhythmia (Lefebvre, 1992/2004) with our surroundings allowing nature to come to us and enriching our experience?

Exploring the concept of Naming Noorani (2013) argues that the process of naming leads to objectification, endowing an object with the power to ‘object’ (p.1) or push back. How far might our earlier perception of ‘herding’ wildlife before us have been an example of the birds ‘objecting’ in a double dance of agency (Pickering 1995 in Noorani, 2013)? While we acted on the birds they acted back, driving us across the river and onward in a bid to outpace them so, in our minds at least, we might allow *them* to rest.

Paddle (Hollins, 1941) is not constrained by concerns about ‘what might be’ but by simply ‘being there’ he becomes a resting place for a snake, a child’s play thing and an object of popular fascination. In contrast during the final few miles of the journey passing through the lower reaches of the River Eden ‘when the head wind had emptied our arms’ (Fossey, 2017); Lefebvre’s (1992/2004) concept of arrhythmia, the dissonance experienced when rhythms conflict, was in stark evidence and one of the group experimented with what it might be like to journey with the flow (Table 3).

**Table 3: Diary Extract A**

*How long can you keep pulling with ALL your effort? Each paddle pull involved an immense exertion and yet I still fell behind the other canoes. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a two-foot long log floating past, with no apparent effort this log had kept up with us all day and now it was overtaking me. I wanted to journey with ‘Paddle’ so I lay in the bow of the canoe with my paddle dug deeply into the river flow. With little effort I began to move with the log and found I was nearly keeping up with the other canoeists. Now I felt in harmony with the river but the slight difference in boat speed meant that I gradually fell behind the other paddlers. Why don’t you do this! I called but my voice was lost in wind.*

The dissonance associated with arrhythmia can create decision-making space where issues might become problematised or clarified and solutions explored (Pollard, 2015). Disruption to the linear rhythm associated with the dip and swing of paddling a canoe was provided by rapids, portages and deciding where to camp which put us through ‘alliance, conflict and back again’. We experienced an attraction to the challenge associated with finding the most elegant journey solutions where the disruptive influence of arrhythmia problematized the

mundane causing the mind to become more focused on the here and now. In this way arrhythmia is not to be avoided but perhaps sought after as a catalyst for growth.

## Conclusions

A source of arrhythmia arose in our case from the title of our journey, Paddle to the Sea creating a strong destination focus perhaps leading to ‘summit fever’ (Fader, 2013) which may have become detrimental to group cohesion or lead to taking ill-judged risks. Each journey will have its own rhythms as a result of the unique combination of people, places and tasks involved. Watts (2016) argues that life is best understood as a dance, how could we have framed our journey as a dance? How could we as outdoor practitioners who facilitate the journeys we lead to allow space to ‘dance’ in eddy circles alongside Paddle? At the same time, we were surprised to find ourselves attracted to arrhythmia where a desire to resolve areas of discomfort created by arrhythmia acted to push us while we were, at once, also drawn forward to find new rhythmic patterns with their potential for Eurhythmia. In this way disruptions to existing norms may be seen as offering opportunities to explore new norms, an insight that may help us, as practitioners, reframe the way we facilitate outdoor journeys.

It may be suggested that Hollings’ (1941) naming and the consequential objectification (Noorani, 2013) of ‘Paddle’ also empowered him to push back, disrupting our work patterns stimulating a journey and along the way directing our gaze toward logs floating in the water and causing us to wonder. Extending the ‘canoe-person-paddle-water-wind thing’ assemblage to include ‘Paddle’ himself dancing together in one continuous flow acting and being acted upon. This causes us to wonder to what extent our actions were under or above (Brummans, 2012) each element in the assemblage or perhaps a less hierarchical view would offer a fresh perspective. Instead of seeking to understand which elements were under or above we could consider how far each aspect of the assemblage might have been trying to understand the other in a topological dance of agency and sense-making (Brummans, 2012, p. 164)?

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