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Pathways as Expressions of Cultural Landscape

by Michael O'Flaherty

Cutting the corner (Toronto)

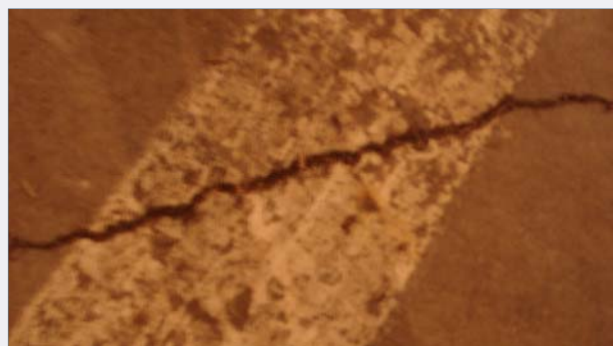
Pathways, the linear lines that mark the passage of beings across the landscape, have always fascinated me. The late Charlie Dunsford, an elder of Pikangikum First Nation, once said to me that when people portage between small lakes, they follow the otter trails, sometimes widening the trail to fit their canoes. The otter had already found the best route so why not learn from the otter? Through time, as larger creatures make their way more frequently on that path, the path becomes wider and deeper, bearing more clearly the imprint of that new traveller; becoming more firmly a part of that traveller's cultural landscape.

Animal trail (Pikangikum)

Pathways, such as portages, trails and roads, are an excellent representation of the ongoing process of accretion of layers of meaning on the land. Cultural landscapes are constantly changing; they are not merely there, lying on the land, waiting to be uncovered. They can only be fixed in time as a "cultural heritage resource" by a sterile imagination or an act of dismissal. Over time, there may be any number of cycles, short-term and long-term, that shape the appearance and meaning of a particular feature of a cultural landscape. Nor are cultural landscapes singular in their meaning; there may be many layers of meaning, constantly shifting in their tangibility, depending on the perspective of who is interpreting the land.

I'll leave it for someone else to discuss the role of other creatures in shaping cultural landscapes. My interest here is to underscore how paths reflect their users' approach to social space. They reflect a society's expectations about how people relate to one another through the land they share. By defining expectations of where people can and should not go, paths act like boundaries; but they can also transect boundaries, cutting through spaces that might otherwise be seen as strictly personal, or perhaps even private, space. People, like any other creature of the land, are by nature builders of paths; hence the need for the emblematic yet comical signs admonishing people to "Stay off the Grass".

Elder George M. Suggashie on snowmobile trail (Pikangikum)


Cracks in the Stop Line (Toronto)

What paths are chosen, and worn down as regular tracks, will reflect tenure relations and, therefore, the social geography of a community. Paths reveal how people relate to the land, and one another; they reveal how people learn about the land and from the land.

Fruit tree in a harvested field with goats grazing (Zimbabwe)

In Gudyanga, Zimbabwe, fruit trees in fields are usually not seen as the property of the field holder but rather a common good that all residents have the right to benefit from. The land is a common good and the field holder only has the right to the fruits of their labours, not the land itself; not the trees that grow there nor the paths that may cross the field — the same thinking does not apply, however, in irigation schemes. By this principle, fruit trees that have been planted are treated as personal property since the tree itself is seen as the fruit of someone's labour (this is only done in people's yards given the need for constant watering). Enclosing the field with a fence provides a measure of protection for the crop but does not establish a right to exclude people from the land, except for the time in which your crop is growing and it is expected that people will not pass through other peoples' fields. Once the agricultural season is over, fields are open to anyone, including their livestock. In fact, livestock are simply not herded after an announced date and allowed to find browse on their own. The paths both people and livestock use to get to fruit trees in fields are part of the commons.

As the photo of the park corner at the top of this essay shows, paths in a commons reflect a desire to take the shortest or easiest route to a destination. In a cultural landscape defined more by the principle of the commons, where the land is not seen as neatly divided into public and private spaces, paths can take you directly through other peoples' "private" lives. Thus, part of what makes a route through someone else's life a more convenient route, is good relations (*i.e.,* social capital — or, sometimes, just thick skin). If you want to avoid seeing someone, or talking to someone, you will just take a longer path.

In Gudyanga, Zimbabwe, I noticed how a well-worn path ran through a widow's yard to a fenced-in borehole (well) so I asked the woman if other people used this path. The answer was yes; people were free to use the path if they wanted. It was a much shorter route than the main path which ran a long way around her yard and was probably a welcome shortcut when carrying a heavy container of water. In Pikangikum, northwestern Ontario, if you want to access the lake you take any path that leads to the lake, whether of not it crosses someone's yard. In both cases, it was understood that it was the Creator, not people, who created the land and so paths reflect this understanding of shared rights to passage; an understanding maintained through the exercise of "commons-sense". Compare that to how you would get out on

Path through a yard to the borehole (virtual-Zimbabwe)

a public lake fronted by a series of private homes or cottages and access is funnelled through specific, legally sanctioned access points (*e.g.,* a public boat launch).

A short-cut to the next street, where you can find a little mulberry tree ... but can you pick fruit from that tree? (Toronto)

Fixed paths planned by a central authority seek to make inter-personal social negotiation unnecessary since the expectations of where you can and should not go are, in theory, neatly laid out before you. In a private property context, most paths are very circumscribed because people are seeking to express a relationship to the land and one another that is rooted in exclusion. On this cultural landscape, to pass through the land upon which other people live is to "trespass" (lit. trans-passer). The cultural landscape, in this case, can be read to say crossing through another person's yard is not merely to "pass over" (without injury) but to "cross the line" of what is acceptable. As a child, for the longest time i thought those signs that said "Trespassers will be prosecuted" meant that if you were caught on the person's land, they could shoot you (*i.e.,* "execute" you). Now at least i know they aren't supposed to do that ... but still, they might.

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