

The Past I Breathe

A light breeze floats in from the west, bringing with it the promise of afternoon heat. On this late June morning, I crouch over a perfectly square hole, trowel in hand, breathing in ancient soil. The first thing that hits you about the soil is the smell. A sharp richness, steeped in the depths of time, rises from the newly disturbed earth under my trowel. I catch a glint of something buried in the dirt, a flash of blue that is almost absurdly out of place in the myriad of brown and gray tones of the soil. My breath catches with a thrill of excitement as I painstakingly scrape at the surrounding matrix. A tiny blue glass bead emerges, exposed to the light for the first time in the one hundred and fifty years since it was first lost.

I close my eyes and a scene emerges in the speckled darkness behind them.

I am standing on a low hilltop, overlooking the crowded settlement just below. Cabins, three or four to a cluster, are spread out in dozens of groups between me and the not-to-distant lakeshore. A light snow lays on the ground, trampled into paths by multiple moccasined feet, large and small, with the overlaying tracks of dogs, horses, and oxen. The cabins are mostly simple, single-room log constructions designed only to last the season, but from afar they appear snug and cozy, enwrapped in a dense layer of muddy clay that keeps out the worst of the winter chill. Each is adorned with a chimney cheerily emitting smoke from the fireplace below, creating localized columns of gray reaching toward the bright blue sky. I breathe in the brisk winter air, my lungs contracting with the cold, and can almost taste the air, laden with a cacophony of smell. Mud, smoke, and a light undercurrent of human are most prominent, with a dash of wet animal fur, meat, and waste as an aftertaste.

The sounds are as chaotic and comforting; the wail of a tired child, a woman's boisterous laugh, the bark of a dog fighting for food, a distant tuning of a fiddle turning into a full-fledged reel. The thud of an axe chopping wood for the ever-present fire reverberates through the cleaning. A man calls to his brother, the language distinct but vaguely French, vaguely Cree. The response is playful, teasing, as they gather supplies for the coming hunt. Out of a cabin, a woman emerges, dressed soberly in a dark dress and fur robe, with a mere flash of blue and white on her feet as she walks down the packed snow path. She speaks to the man, handing him a new pair of beaded moccasins. Unknown to her, one of the beads caught in the folds of her dress as she painstakingly beaded the moccasins in the darkness of the small cabin tumbles down into the snow, lost, forgotten.

My moment of contemplation is broken by an insistent voice, bringing me back into the present moment, the warm sun, the blue bead, the soil.

Archaeology is part imagination, part science, part storytelling. We are time travellers, using the material minutiae of lived experience to understand the past, weaving back together tapestries of existence with a fraction of the threads. We try to breathe life into those who came before us, to tell stories that are otherwise unspoken. For me, archaeology is also deeply personal, an act of reclaiming and resistance, of resonance with myself and my ancestors. It is not breathing new life so much as listening to their breath, recognizing that their lives and stories were never fully lost, although many have forgotten how to hear. If not for my own journey home, I may have been among them.

In 1953, ten years before what would come to be known as the Sixties Scoop, my 19-year-old Métis grandmother gave birth to my father in a Catholic hospital in

Edmonton. Young, unmarried, and Indigenous, my grandmother had no chance to raise her first-born son. When she left the hospital, it was the last time in her life that she would see my father. For two years, my father lived in an orphanage, with no family and no one to love him. After that came foster care, bouncing from family to family until finally landing in a home with some stability with a French-Canadian farming household. Never adopted, my father left his homeland behind after spending two unfulfilling and alienating years as an undergraduate at the University of Alberta. He built a tipi that summer, occupying land that wasn't legally his in a way that harkened back to many of our road-allowance kin, before striking out for the west coast.

The landscapes of our childhood are formative ones, powerful in their impact, imbued with fragments of memory. I was born and raised away from my ancestral homeland, my childhood spent exploring amidst the towering cedar trees and fragrantly damp mosses of the temperate rainforest and swimming in the cool briny ocean. The smell of cedar or a damply salty ocean breeze can immediately transport me back to when I was little girl, climbing trees, building forts, and generally running amok in the deeply impractical tutu and jelly sandals I insisted on wearing everywhere. My childhood was disjointed in many ways, but the forest and ocean were anchors in a constantly changing and untethered existence, the lands and waters my permanent companions and friends. My parents, ever experimenters, tried many ways of living when we were young, creating an itinerant and marginal existence that was only tenuously tied to the way everyone else lived. On the boundaries of society, outside of the mainstream, I was protected from some of the worst vagaries of prejudice and discrimination, although they inevitably seeped in. It was not until I was a young teenager, thrust back into the world of public education and popular culture through the gauntlet of eighth grade, that I realized my family was different, not only because of my parent's choices, but also because I did not share a skin tone

with my father and sister. I recall being baffled at why someone would care about the colour of my father's skin, although looking back, I should not have been so shocked. People had long associated my sister with my father and me with my British-Canadian mother, but it wasn't until I was older that I realized why.

The questions began over the next few years, usually directed toward my sister rather than me.

“What are you? Spanish? Jewish? Where are you from?”

It was clear that “you” was not “us” and that people couldn't put my sister into a box that made them comfortable. I was more easily categorized, receiving less attention than my sister or father, but I began to wonder. Who were we? If we weren't them, who were our people? I vaguely knew my father's story and that we were at least part “native”, but what did that mean?

I came to Edmonton once, not knowing its true significance to my family, piled into a large bus with thirty other junior high band mates. I had joined band on a whim because of the way a boy's hair fell across his forehead and framed his liquid brown eyes. Unable to sleep in any sort of upright position, a trait which plagues my well-travelled self today, I arrived at West Edmonton Mall, thirteen and delirious. Already a surreal place, it was made all the stranger viewed through my exhausted teenage eyes. My memories of my first trip to my father's birthplace are therefore like a troubled dream. I would not return to Edmonton for another sixteen years.

It was during my teenage years that archaeology caught my imagination. The ideas of adventure, exploration, and learning about things unknown were deeply compelling; at the time I didn't have the self-awareness to understand why I might want to know

more about ancient human identity and belonging, although it seems obvious to me now. An avowed bookworm, I read anything about archaeology I could get my hands on, determined to make it my future. When I came across a short article that said you had to get a PhD to be an archaeologist, I decided my future on the spot. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to do it, despite the fact that no one in my family had ever earned a university degree. Much to the surprise of everyone but me, I never lost sight of my goal, although it is vastly different than I imagined and I had no idea it would take me home in more ways than one.

Universities, at their best, reshape and transform minds. On the first day of my university journey, I was unshakable in my belief that my path would allow me to walk in the footsteps of the earliest civilizations, discovering their secrets, exploring the unknown and exotic pasts. Archaeology is a complex cocktail that intoxicates both the untethered and the secure, drawing in those captured by visions of the past and an unmet desire to know that which is not known. I was enraptured by the art and architecture of ancient places, convinced this was the way to satiate that gnawing emptiness caused by my own history.

I was wrong about ancient civilizations. I was right about archaeology. I was also right about university.

Life is slippery. Just when you think you have your footing, something happens, a little slide, a balance check, or a fall. First, I slid into a job at the First Nations House of Learning on campus. Suddenly I was surrounded by Indigenous students every day, building friendships, providing support, forging relations. These outward interactions forced me to look inward, to ask the questions about my father's past, about my own family. I pushed my father for information. He said we were Métis. When I started using this term, the questions and comments changed.

“That means you are half, right?”

“How much Indian are you really? A quarter? An eighth?”

“Do you get to go here for free?”

“My great-grandfather was Indian, so I’m Métis also.”

But here’s the one that stung most.

“You are just saying that to get money.”

Gut punch.

True, every day at university was a financial struggle for me, coming from poverty. No safety net, I relied on student loans and bursaries to feed myself, amassed debt from which I am still recovering, but I was not motivated by financial hardship.

I was motivated by a pervasive but buried sense of loss, of being adrift, of erasure.

Explaining how I felt is difficult even now.

It was a sense that something was calling me but I didn’t know how to listen. It was a sense of being underwater and not knowing how to breathe.

A balance check came in the summer after my third year of university. As part of my training, I took an archaeological fieldschool. Unable to find the means to travel to an exotic locale, I settled on the local option, disappointed but determined to make the best of it.

I did not know it at the time, but that summer would change my whole life.

Our fieldschool was held in collaboration with the Sq'ewá:lxw First Nation, where the community had an active role in what we did and how we did it. Every day, we dug alongside two members of the community on site. Every day, we would spread

ochre paste on spiritually sensitive parts of our body so the ancestors could see us and know we meant no harm. Every day, I learned from those two community members who took me under their wing. They cared deeply about the past and had an active relationship with the ancestors. Archaeology mattered to their health and wellbeing.

But I was determined, laser-focused on ancient civilizations.

Luckily, I fell.

I didn't get into the one graduate school to which I had applied. At the time, it felt like a crisis to me who had never failed at anything and the end of the world as I knew it.

It was.

A year later, I started my graduate career with a focus on the archaeology of Indigenous people on the Northwest Coast and a desire to do community-based collaborative research. Despite my best efforts, I did not succeed in developing the project I had hoped, causing me to reflect profoundly on the structures of my discipline, the construction of knowledge, and the role of colonization.

Another fall came.

At a community meeting toward the end of my program, due to circumstances somewhat beyond my control, I was called out for being yet another in a long line of colonizers. They were right, although the bruise of that accusation still aches. I was another outsider writing their history, and even with the best of intentions, I could

not center their narratives. Dissatisfied, I contemplated my future with a sense of unease.

A few months later, I got the most unexpected email. The University of Alberta wanted to interview me for a tenure-track job, although I had applied to be a postdoctoral fellow.

Flash forward to Edmonton, early May, a blizzard, an interview. A job offer. Suddenly I was moving to a place foreign but familiar, a place haunted with my own past, a place far from the fragrant forests and briny ocean of my childhood. The questions changed again.

“Who are your people?”

And it mattered in a way that it had never mattered before.

Life is slippery. One cold November morning, a year or so after I started my job, I slid my way into a talk on Métis history and my past, present, and future collided with a resounding thwack. A completely new path was revealed to me in that moment, the echo in my soul palpable, a voice from within calling out in joyous agreement.

Here. This. Please.

And so I came home.

At the end of an event I've organized on campus, a group of young Métis university students are doing a post-feast jigging performance. The fiddle music echoes through

the room, punctuated by the rhythmic sound of moccasined feet. My daughter, eighteen months old, is wearing her sash and moccasins in honour of the occasion. She squirms from my grasp and makes her way across the floor, watching.

After a moment of contemplation, her tiny feet begin to step in rhythm to the music and a smile breaks across her face. Soon she is stomping and laughing, her attempted jigging drawing the attention of every person in the room, her bright eyes seeking mine across the room. My heart swells with an unspeakable joy and that lost part of me is further anchored.

Unseen through my tear-filled eyes, a tiny blue bead falls off her moccasins.

The tiny blue bead has been measured, photographed, and removed to a new home where it can live a different sort of life. I have taken the beads lost by my relatives and am seeking to reweave them into some semblance of order, of understanding that which cannot easily be known. I think of my cousin who I met a few years ago when I was talking to the community about my archaeology. I think of my grandmother, whom I would never meet. I think of my aunts and uncles, disconnected from a sense of belonging but forever seeking.

I think of my daughter and her delighted attempts at jigging.

I lay my hand down on the soil. I can feel them breathing, my ancient relatives, the lands and the waters. I can feel them breathing, my ancestors. Their breath fills me, heals me. I breathe with them, our heartbeats in sync.

I am Métis.

I am home.

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