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The Privilege of Home: A 400 Year Family History of Immigration and Inhabitation on Native Land

First, I would like to thank the Graduate Research and Creative Activity office for their generous funding and support of my project, which is nowhere near complete but which has made major stretches and strides towards something newer, deeper, and significantly longer. Additionally, I want to thank Jody Keisner and Barbara Robins for being excellent sounding boards as I worked on this project.

When my project proposal was accepted, I intended to write a single researched personal essay exploring colonization and white privilege through the specific lens of my great-great-grandfather John-Baptist Berthiaume, a Quebecois immigrant who came from a French ancestral line who had nestled themselves along the St. Lawrence River in K bec by 1663. Six generations, two hundred years, and not a single French-Indian intermarriage later, John-Baptist was the first descendant of his line to abandon K bec when he immigrated from Deux Montagnes, K bec to Flambeau, Wisconsin around 1865.

I wondered what was at stake for my great-great-grandfather when he left the land his ancestors and fellow French immigrant-descendants had commandeered and manipulated until they made themselves the dominant race. What drove my great-great grandfather to move to another landscape where whites were still squatting thigh-to-thigh with the Anishinabe on native land which had only been ceded to the US government forty years earlier?

I sought to examine the tension between immigration and inhabitation; to study the complexities inherent to cultural adaptation when non-natives inserted themselves onto native land and seized the narrative of “development.”

I spent the spring of 2017 researching and learning the occupied history of Canada. I read Peter Moogk's "La Nouvelle France: The Making of French Canada," I read Allan Greer's "The People of New France" and Hubert Charbonneau's "The First French Canadians: Pioneers in the St. Lawrence Valley." I also read Audra Simpson's "Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States."

As I researched my ancestry alongside the history of white settlement and forced native resettlement in the St. Lawrence Valley, I recognized a pattern of repeated inhabitation—traced through baptismal, marriage, and death certificates—by my family onto recently-vacated native land.

As I then taught myself the history of French-occupied K  bec, I was riveted by the spaces left empty between the written historical chronicles repeating traditional colonization narratives and the implications of absencing and/or misrepresenting the native experience.

I wrote a hybridized personal essay exploring colonization and white privilege through the specific lens of my ancestors, centering on the interplay between two texts—the settler histories found in textbooks, and the history which was not recorded. I attempted to write into the gaps of that written history to include concurrent, under-voiced experiences of inhabitation as I interwove my family's history of occupation and migration among a historical account of settlement in K  bec. The italicized portions are footnoted with typographical symbols like pound signs, ampersands, and dollar signs to keep the focus off the white historians while acknowledging their work.

It might be easier to explain if I just read a little:

1643: "One can show that after the first years the colony rapidly became habitable, and that, all things considered, the Iroquois [Haudenosaunee] were responsible for the massacre of very few colonists. The

historians are nevertheless unanimous in their claim that an extremely high proportion of the colonists returned to France before 1650” (= 198).

The Haudenosaunee raid, the Haudenosaunee raid. It is easier to blame native men for the gooseflesh fear of the freshly-arrived French habitants in a silent landscape, birch-and-oak forests darkening the banks of the river, no one in sight for miles. Frenchmen scattered and leapt on ships bound back to the old country. Or they adapted.

1660: “The wheat farms of a Canadian peasantry lined the banks of the St. Lawrence [[ga-nee-ada-row-en-neh-neh].] ...Quite apart from the overwhelming Native presence to the north and west of the Laurentian settlements, there were [only] recently established Amerindian villages on the doorsteps of Kébec City and Montréal” (§ 6).

Who do you think left behind the eel nets the Frenchmen were still catching their fishhooks upon? *“Having generally crossed alone and without relatives, and having endured an unbalanced gender distribution...these men had little hope of becoming integrated in their new country...over two-thirds of all seventeenth-century immigrants returned to France” (= 30-31).*

It is 1666, and Jacques Berthiaume’s name is scrawled into the Kébec census records for the first time; he is a thirty-two-year-old habitant fresh from France, hunkering down in [kami-sk-yo-wa]-[oo-ah-nah-gah-shee]. Jacques will take a bride in one year, but right now Catherine Bonhomme is just the eleven-year-old [fee-ah] of Nicolas and Agnes. Jacques may have been in Kébec earlier—the first census was not taken until 1666—but it is unlikely since there is no documentation of a previous marriage and most newly-arrived Frenchmen took brides as fast as they could, procreating a griphook into the ground, securing, fastening.

*1668-1669: “From 1668 onward, the borders of the white settlement of [kone-tah-gah] had become a refuge for Christian Indians of the region, and by 1669 the community had gone from five ‘cabins’ (longhouse living structures) to a settlement of eighteen to twenty families. When the Jesuits recognized the popularity of the settlement, they established a permanent mission there on a seigniorial land grant to serve the influx of other Christian Indians” (** 46).*

So the [ga-nee-en-ka-ha-ga] adapted. Or were greeted. Or were coerced. Eighteen families could tell eighteen different stories, and all the brothers and sisters would squabble over who sold out for a kettle, who wanted to gain favor, who hedged their bet against the [eh-new], the [oh-mami-wee-nee-nee], who said enough is enough, peace. Peace. Eighteen families could tell eighteen stories and not one of them would mention the seigniorial land grant; not one of them ceded their right to be on their own land; not one of them knew.

Last summer, I traveled to Cloquet, Minnesota, where my aunt presented me with an enormous plastic bin full of my great-grandfather Monroe Berthiaume's journals, documenting the last eighteen years of his life. My great-grandfather was born in central Wisconsin in a small village named Flambeau, and he moved to Cloquet to find a job the day after he was married to my great-grandmother. My roots go three-generations-deep in Cloquet; my grandmother and mother were born and raised there, and my aunt—Monroe's granddaughter—is a white settler with no native lineage who lives on legally-purchased Anishinabe land on the Fond du Lac reservation, which hugs the city limits of Cloquet. I walked through Cloquet, stopping at the graveyard where my great-grandfather and great-grandmother are buried, just a handful of blocks from the house my great-grandfather built. I visited my ancestors, I stuffed the box of journals into the back of my car, and then I drove to Ladysmith, Wisconsin, to see the land where my great-grandfather grew up—the land to which my great-great-grandfather John Baptist immigrated.

In the Ladysmith/Flambeau area, I canoed down the Flambeau River which my great-great-grandfather John Baptist had canoed as a voyageur. I visited the Rusk County Historical Society Museum and pored through the original ledgers of the town clerk of Flambeau, where I found out John Baptist had served as the town constable, the city treasurer, and on the Board of Supervisors for Flambeau. I visited the old church cemetery just across the Chippewa River from my great-great-grandfather's farm, where I found John Baptist and Angeline's graves—a location which would become more important later.

I also traveled to K bec, and flying over K bec City and seeing the St Lawrence River from overhead was an amazing mimicry of the maps I had been studying. I stayed at Wendake, the Huron settlement outside K bec City, and visited two native-run museums documenting their heritage in the K bec City area. I traveled to the Montreal area next, visiting Kahnawake, the Haudenosaunee mission established by the Jesuits in 1680 atop Haudenosaunee territorial land, and also the home of the St Kateri Tekakwitha shrine. I drove to Oka, another First Nations mission established by Catholics in 1721, which was the area where three generations of my ancestors lived prior to John Baptist’s immigration to America. Being on the ground in Oka was extremely important as it helped me understand its location in relation to Montreal—it was no suburb, it was an entirely separate farming community on the Ottawa River—the thoroughfare for the fur trade in K bec. I walked the Oka Calvary, forcibly built by the indigenous residents of Oka under Sulpician command. I drove through the countryside to St-Benoit and St-Hermas, the churches where my ancestors were married and buried, trying to find their gravesites, but as the markers had been traditionally built of wood up until the early 1900s, their specific markers had vanished.

I spent the fall processing what I had seen in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and K bec, but mostly reading about the settlement of Wisconsin and northern Minnesota and the Anishinabe experience. I also began reading my great-grandfather Monroe’s diaries—he was a very prolific man who truly recorded his thoughts in his diaries, not just a list of places attended or a catalog of meals.

As an example:

Feb 11-52

Well, well, sixty years old today, and all is well. Five more years and I hope that I can retire and really enjoy the rest of my life, that is if I live that long and “Old Winneboosh” doesn’t point his finger at me and say “Come along, you have cluttered up the world long enough.” The Indians had a great philosophy of their lives and also of the hereafter. No matter what happened, “Old Winne” had a reason for letting it

happen so. In that way, their God was brought before them continually. We folks are vain enough to try and give ourselves credit for things that happen and forget our “Supreme Being.”

I meticulously scanned and hand-typed (to the tune of over 330 double-spaced pages so far—and I’m only through 1964) every single mention of Indians in his diaries. I also paid attention to the elements of Monroe’s life which he mentioned like clockwork as the calendrical year wheeled its way around—the maple-sugaring in the spring, the berry-picking and ricing in the summer, deer hunting in the fall, ice-fishing in the winter. They mimicked the Anishinabe rhythms I had read about, rhythms which stuttered when their land was truncated and their movements abrupted. White men like my great-grandfather were able to adopt Anishinabe methods of living seasonally with the land, but the Anishinabe, who, for instance, had traditionally relocated to different camps across their landbase for each of these seasonal experiences, were now confined to reservations.

Monroe returned to his childhood home in Flambeau like a homing pigeon, multiple times a year, always stopping at that church graveyard and “visiting old friends,” as he puts it. Monroe was struck by the changing landscape of the place he had loved and left, and there is a longing for home that he expresses, again and again, throughout his journals.

I understand his behavior, on a very visceral and personal level, and it has made me restructure my original intentions—to wonder what does it mean to long for home, for a life which was taken away through circumstance, through other people's decisions, and how does that connect to the research I did about my family in Kebec: for nearly four hundred years, my ancestors were able to create "home" and manipulate the landscape into a new home for themselves. Who was displaced for that, whose homes were taken, who were forced into new "homes" at the cost of someone else's vision? What does it mean to be forced into a definition of home you didn't write?

I am hesitant to provide a settler hagiography of the travails of my ancestors settling and resettling on native land when there are indigenous people whose voices should be the ones telling these stories of intrusion, indigenous people whose voices should be describing the adaptations both sides had to make once white men, like my great-great-grandfather, declared their land to be his home.

How do I keep space cleared for native voices to be heard?

Well, I can write about the privilege of home. I can write about the implications of my ancestors being ABLE to seek a new definition of home simply because they were white and their governments, both Canadian and American, kept clearing the land of the native presence.

I can't talk about the Anishinabeg cultural experience or about their understanding of their home; I can talk about the unique experience of my patronymic line settling on native land twice (Canada and US) and of the historical precedent that made that possible; I can talk about my settler ancestors adopting the rhythms of Anishinabe land.

I can talk about the narrative of myth-building that my ancestors have practiced. I can examine the truths about their presence that it must have become necessary for them to believe, and the settler-controlled history books that validated only one side of the story.

I cannot presume my understanding of my ancestors is complete; there are too many missing elements, too many papers I cannot make speak. I cannot presume to give voice to the Anishinabe experience. What I can do is question the codification of history, I can tease apart the weave to make space for the voices whose historical experience is as valid as the settler versions. I can use my family as a case study for migration, a case study for settlement in the New World which was never new to its original inhabitants,

and I can look at the histories my family has carried with them, how the settler governments elbowed aside the rights and the land of the indigenous people to allow my family the space to seek home.