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Article

Winter Count

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Abstract

Winter count is a way of oral record-keeping that is expressed in the form of story, poetry, songs, and chants which may be described as historical myth or legend. Indigenous people have used this means of memorializing significant events, cautionary tales, genealogy, the meaning of names for places, and for other related occurrences and occasions.

Story-telling is a long-established system, passing tribal history down from one generation to the next generation. The importance of this method is proven by its continued usage from the past to the present day. Indigenous culture valorizes such traditional means of communication and as such, Winter Count reflects stories of my Metis family.

Winter Count

In past ages Indigenous people kept track of the passage of time by seasons. The passage of years was marked by winter counts. The year was named after whatever significant event had occurred that year. The elders were tasked with naming the counts. The tradition of winter counts faded away in the late nineteenth century, but a few Native American traditionalists fought to keep the custom alive. The stories are there and they are still being told. (Welsch, 1992, p. 3). Indigenous people were an oral culture, but not without history. Indigenous history was recalled and taught. The spoken word had importance and gendered respect. When imparted by the

elders, wise counsel enabled the tribal members to live with confidence and understand their place in the world. I am a Metis elder and these are some of my winter counts.

Winter Count: Ann's story

Metis Camps

Midden of my memory

Hidden layers of years

Secrets of our history

Saddened by our tears.

My friend Ann is Chipewyan, her dad was Beaver Clan. One of our favorite things to do was sit outside the cabin at Prelude Lake, Northwest Territories, in the late afternoon. By the campfire, Ann, the firekeeper, tended the fire with the long stick she called a "gess". We would sit and talk about our day and she told me stories about her family and Lutselk'e, on the east arm of Great Slave Lake, where she was born. We could hear the loons call and the squirrels chatter in the trees behind us.

One time, Ann quietly said: My mother told me the people say:

In the evening

when the squirrels chatter,

they are said to be making supper.

The evening meal.

Little stories from the past are not so little. "For thousands of years before they were written down, Indian legends and tales were told by the elders around countless campfires. Myths are the oldest and most popular form of Indian literature" (Petrone, 1983, p. 125). In her

examination of the prehistory of the people of the Canadian Plains, termed The Buffalo People, Liz Bryan (2005) writes: “Clues to life in the long days of prehistory must be gathered from the descendants of the First People of the Plains whose memories and myths capture shreds of their very different vision of life.” (Bryan, 2005, p. x). She also describes an important source of testimony, “their oral histories and legends provide glimpses into the mechanics of pre-contact society and its ideas about the real and spiritual worlds.” (Bryan, 2005, p. 203).

I have a personal reason for writing about Indigenous history. My own Metis family history has been lost because no one kept a historical record of the lives of my grandmother and great-grandmother who were fine Cree women. Story telling has always been a part of my culture and many stories are told over and over again. Often, with each telling the story is enjoyed even more by both the teller and the listener.

Campfire legends and stories are a special type of story that are often based on Indigenous lore, or historical events. They tell origin stories of animals, nature, or the real experience of local happenings. Of course, not all stories were told around a campfire. Elder Maria Campbell is quoted in the book *Life Stages of Native Women:* “I grew up with stories…some of the stories were told while we worked, cutting up meat and packing jars for canning, or while smoking and drying fish. Some were told on the way to the berry patch.” (Anderson, 2011, p. xv). Cree/Metis writer Kim Anderson (2000) states: “Indigenous stories are significant because they are anchors of resistance. They are also ways of preserving the language

and the power and meaningfulness of the spoken word. Our stories are an unadulterated version of our history and creation" (p. 131).

Winter Count: A Cold Night

The Metis and other Indigenous people also express themselves with music, song writing and poetry. Anthropologist John A. Price (1978) writes: "Poetry and literature are extensions of the human, symbolic type of oral communication or '"language"' (p. 113). Poetry has become a more natural method of personal expression for me and its concise style more suited to my story telling. Indigenous people value the ability to say a lot with very few words. Apache anthropologist Keith Basso (1996) recounts: "Poets and songwriters have long understood that economy of expression may enhance the quality and force of aesthetic discourse" (p. 73). He states not speaking too much is "most clearly evident in the spare verbal style employed by Apache storytellers" (p.84). Interestingly, Basso (1996) describes their concept of language and thought are in "pervasively visual terms…thinking occurs in the form of pictures" (p.85). While attempting to record something of my history and home, two young raccoons came walking across the yard in front of the house. Our neighbour Graham said he saw a raccoon sleeping on our roof. And sure enough, that night when I went to bed:

Winter on Church Road

The raccoon rests high in my willow tree.
At three a.m. he knocks three times
on the roof.
He scratches, scrapes and crawls
To the warm spot to sleep

by the chimney.

Essayist Rick Moody writes of emotional content revealed in stories and poetry. Rick Moody (2020) describes literature as a humanist form: “the literary arts are not the same as the study of economics or astrophysics” (p.43). He adds “literary arts are about emotions and human consciousness. Literary instruction is not only about dispensing information, it is about bearing witness, grappling with the complexities of another.” (Moody, 2020, p. 43).

Winter Count: Open Air Stages

I wrote this out of grief, after the death of my younger sister, who bravely endured a difficult end of life. While watching a pow wow on a reserve near Brentwood Bay, and then later that day, the Splash Symphony concert at the Inner Harbour in Victoria, I imagined our sister sitting with us:

Pow Wow at Tsarlip & The Symphony

Dear Dixie,

You would have had a good time

The dancing, the drumming, the people

They were open and friendly like you

They looked like you, they wanted to please.

Laughing, listening, eating bannock

Potato Hill and Little Raven driving the beat

Yellow Wolf and Star Tracker echoing in the cedars

And over the sloping plain

Spreading sound in the heat

As the dancers' approach.

Moccasins tapping out the rhythm

Jingle and feather drawing us in

I saw the past then

The ancient people too

Carrying on the heart pound

Costumed women in the round

Sure of rightness in the movement

Solemn of purpose in the wave

Four Fires surging as we drive away.

And today you would have wanted to be here

The inner harbor clear skied, water moving with ships

Music soaring out over it all and up where we sit on the Empress lawn

Tangos, waltzes, weaving people on the causeway

Pipers marching, drums timing feet along the crowded street

Fingers snapping, a family stepping out the Mexican Hat dance behind us

A man in a wheelchair waving glo-sticks

Bolero

España

A lone performer twirling golden capes

Then the Finale

Sound building to crescendo

Cannon boom to remind us of war

With fireworks to lift us up into the warm night sky

You would have swayed across the grass

Flying like the orchestra

Floating like their barque

High above the whole shebang, shebang, shebang

And driving home we see the rising Salish Moon.

Winter Count: Radio Station call letters CFYK Yellowknife

Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009), a Metis writer and health researcher has written of the need to speak and describe our grief: "Indigenous peoples have believed in the healing power of language and stories since time immemorial, and today's Indigenous writers continue to apply this belief to the creation of works of literature…silence leads to isolation, causing many Indigenous people to suppress their feelings, believing that they are alone in their experience and responses." (p.11) "The effects of emotional repression on emotional and spiritual health are long lasting." (p.16).

Listening to Puccini one winter day evoked this response:

Rain Willow

October and it's raining

Each drop on the willow leaf

Plays a note

Drop by drop the melody swells

And hangs

Did it rain that day?

Telesto, Tetlys and Calypso circle Saturn

Mimi, your little hand is frozen

The sound soars back again

While tree limbs, stretched limbs, sway

A long wet song.

We bent our heads over the radio

Saturday Afternoon at the Opera

So far away

Did you hear the music, as I did?

Now it's here again.

Late this afternoon

Look out at grey green spray

Blurry, bent with leaves of wintergreen

Strangely luminous

Pouring tears.

As the willow weeps.

Winter Count: Reading Rescue

The importance of stories is recorded by anthropologists Robbins and Larkin (2007) "With each telling, stories take on different meanings that depend on the goals of the teller, the audience, and the question that elicits the story. Thus, the stories people tell to themselves and about themselves are important resources for learning about their beliefs and values" (p. 31). Reading stories is an important part of my daily life. Over the winter I wrote about some of the books I read to keep my mind active and distracted from my aging body's decline. I usually have several books on the go and stop reading when I get tired, usually at places where action is about to take place or I have to think:

To Keep the Wolves at Bay

The Dormouse John Mortimer sees as the Plinth of Darkness in London
Remarque's rising mist from shallow graves
Emily Dickenson's hope with feathers
King Leopold's Ghost seems to be getting closer as Hochschild intimates
Mississippi levee muleskinners' songs in the land Alan Lomax says the blues came from
Gibbin's search for *Shrodinger's Cat*
In the *Gathering Storm* Churchill sees Hitler eyeing the Czechs
Gerald of Wales is travelling to Abergavenny for a sermon at Usk Castle, attacked by the men of Ranulf Poer, the Sheriff of Herefordshire.
Tolstoy's Nekludov waits to free Maslova, his Natusha from the past
While Richard Wilbur tells me, the *Mind* is a Bat

Cytherea eyes fair browed Springrove in Hardy's *Desperate Remedies.*

Now I await *The Wave* at Jaws, like the one Hamilton dropped in – let me know when, Susan Casey.

The book *The Last Empress* is a biography of Soong May-ling, better known as Madam Chaing Kai-shek. Recognised as a political figure in China's twentieth century history, she was a brightly intelligent, spirited and resourceful woman. I wrote this poem about an event in her life when she was travelling with her personal maid:

May-ling and the Maid

When we flew out of Burma

There were 37 Japanese planes shooting at us

And there were only 3 parachutes

One for Chiang, one for me and one for the major

My maid was crying

And I said, don't worry, you and I

Will fall together, and I will

Keep my arms around you

We two are smaller than

One man and we will drift down

Down, together, safe

Safe, like dandelion seeds.

I also read several volumes of Winston Churchill's *The Second World War*. His extensive documentary included accounts of his travels and personal uncertainties as to the outcome of each battle, war stories. The title words of this poem are his words and echo his tortuous journeys, it led to me writing this:

"… how dense and baffling is the veil of the Unknown"

Flying back on the Flamingo

At 8000 feet we flew past Le Havre

Burning

The smoke billowed black and blew to the East.

Over the Channel

Two German aircraft were

Firing at fishing boats

Good thing the pilots didn't look up.

Paris has fallen

France is lost.

Churchill's travel experiences triggered misgivings over a planned trip. My sister and I were going to travel all winter and for five months. We were travelling from as far north latitude 62°

where I had lived, to latitude 62° south, Antarctica. The time and distance loomed over me as ominously as entering an imaginary battlefield:

Via Gibraltar

If I could take a train to Damascus
We wouldn't have to go through San Diego,
We wouldn't have to figure out a
midnight run
From L.A. and arrive a 2 a.m.
If I could fly over the Queen of Spain's
"chair"
The long-drawn-out travel South
would disappear.

It all could wait
While we hung in the air
Over the Bay of Biscay
To home.

Winter Count: A Song for Linda

In writing of social justice and its consequences, lawyers have recognized: "Cultural property is the very soul of Indian tribes. These creative works – whether creation stories, ceremonial songs, or medicine pouches – provide a window through which the Native world can be viewed" (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007, p. 113). Writing as a window seems especially

pertinent in poetry. I wrote a song poem for my friend Linda after the sudden death of her husband Tom. He loved to sail and after his retirement, their home was on a live-aboard at a marina up Island near Sidney. They would go sailing every chance they got. As an expert sailor no matter the weather, she felt safe with him. This song poem is a reflection on east coast song-writer and singer Stan Roger's work:

White Squall Weather

I think he is the young guy
Lying on the deck
Looking at the stars
Doesn't think he needs a line.

Then it happens
While he's thinking of you
Sailing on calm seas
Almost to the Sault.

I said
At least he had a whole year
Living out his dreams
More than most men get -
Cold comfort.

Yet: he is never gone

From our memories

Just waiting in another room,

To come back home.

Winter Count: Reluctant Gardeners

Living on the west coast, near Victoria the climate is so mild, winter and summer we can grow almost anything. It is customary here to keep lawns and gardens mowed and weeded, hedges clipped and neat. Due to age, getting out on the land is now reduced to a small garden. We have quite a time keeping our patch in check. We love flowers especially, yet most of the time they grow out of control. The love for the land is part of our heritage and an excerpt from Slavey trapper John Tetso's (1970) writing reveals this emotion: "A feeling that defies description swept over me as I stood there alone and surveyed the wonders of creation. There, stretched out before me from my very feet to the distant blue horizon, were rolling hills, lakes, rivers, valleys, trees, and open spaces" (p. 10).

Outdoor guides, the Conovers (1995) advise "the inner world can become the dominant landscape and we can become estranged from the natural world. If nature becomes a physical or emotional battle the voice cannot be heard" (p. 69). So, despite our difficulties in keeping things orderly we do respect the need to get outside and enjoy the beauty of our world.

Not My Neighbour's Garden

Frowsy flowers lay across their bed.

Like long-haired leisured ladies

Easy-eyed and fed.

They wait, uncaring of the time

Deliberately unaware

Of mine.

Awake and asleep tress-tangled

In bright shining blooms

Sense jangled.

My garden's grown large, loose-lazy

And makes me like it

Botanicrazy.

Winter Count: Friendship & Farewell

Historian Daniel Francis (1992) explains "The stereotype of the Indian woman as a low, sexual commodity – a '"bit of brown"' as the fur trader governor George Simpson put it – became increasingly common as Native people were pushed to the fringes of white settlement, neglected and powerless" (p. 122). However, I have been so privileged in our family to have never experienced this kind of attitude toward us in marriage or personal relationships.

This count is about Ken, our caring and thoughtful brother-in-law, who died one miserable, wet day in winter.

The Mannerly Man and Eddy

He still can't remember my name, he said

Oh, a guy I help at the sauna

His family are grown and away.

Out of Belfast City's troubles

Our family looked for peace.

Eddy's a Tsarlip – lives up near Saanichton

After a swim we go for a beer,

He's married to a Filipina,

She's off travelling somewhere.

Well, I help him into his wheelchair

He's pretty crippled up.

Quiet and polite, Ken looked like John Denver

Even as he aged,

And John Denver didn't.

He said Dixie was his First Love

And stayed with her to the bloody end.

Anyway, back to Eddy,

He still goes to the pool every day

And Ken is sleeping

Under a slender cherry tree up in Slocan

Beside her.

Winter Count: Trial of Tears

We played many different games when we were kids. Some were fun and some were scary. Who knew that one of them would come true one day? A life changing incident occurred in my childhood.

Joyce Carol Oates (2020) has depicted such happenings of horror in her writing: "the central, centralizing act of violence that seems to symbolize something beyond itself" (p. 69). When I was eight years old and my sister six, stories our mother told us saved our lives. Such protective stories have been told to children as indigenous cultural tradition. "Many… women talked about the safety they felt with their grandmothers. In their capacity as overseers, the old ladies were instilled with responsibilities to watch out for children's safety…grandmothers could provide protection and safety. The role that grandmothers held as protectors against abuse was also manifest within their role as storytellers" (Anderson, 2011, pp 141-143).

Our family moved to an area near the fishing village of Steveston. The place was isolated, in an area of towering overgrowth, tangled with blackberry and salmonberry bushes, marsh of rushes and reeds, water willow, and animal trails. Shortly after settling in, on a sunny summer afternoon, my sister and I went off to a small beach along the Fraser River, about half a mile from our home. The path was through the scrub brush, a few trees and thick berry bushes. As soon as we stepped out into a small clearing off the trail, two men appeared behind us. Unseen, they had probably been following us. One grabbed me and the other grabbed my sister. They were huge. Our father was six foot two and slim, the man that held me was taller and

heavier, blond. The man that held my sister was a little shorter and dark haired. They began demanding sexual things, even though I didn't really understand what the words meant, I knew right away we were in trouble. I understood I couldn't show that I was afraid. I just kept saying NO! as strongly as I could. The men exposed themselves and spoke terrible words, threatening. During what seemed an interminably long time of this, I constantly tried to think of how we could get away. We were far from our home in a secluded place with no one around to help us. I then remembered stories mother had told me, about being in a dangerous situation, and that I should pray for help. I did pray. Suddenly a picture came into my mind showing me how to escape. I saw narrow path running along the river between the water and the beach, where we had never been before.

I kept saying NO! as forcefully as I was able, and suddenly the man holding me let go. He said something to the other man holding my sister and they both turned away and went to urinate in the bush. I reached out to grab my sister's hand and we ran. We ran and ran along the water's edge away from the woods until we reached a house and came out on the dyke road. No one was around and we ran home safely. Our mother's stories and careful guidance saved our lives.

What Time Is It, Mr. Wolf?

The flowers: we called them shooting stars

And the pretty in pink lady slippers were orchids

Reeds and rushes, iris blue and yellow

All along the way.

On the right the riverside,

What time is it Mr. Wolf?

One o'clock.

Blackberry thorns and pussy willows left

A deep dyke draining the island

Beyond this empty fields

We walk the high, narrow path.

Wide enough for two little girls

What time is it Mr. Wolf?

Two o'clock.

What were we singing?

Something learned in school

Warm air and warm breath

The grassy trail, trailing

What time is it Mr. Wolf?

Time to eat you up!

Winter Count: Starlit Starry Nights

"Look up, please, to the heavens and count the stars if you are able to do so." is written in Genesis 15:5. This gracious invitation was extended to the revered ancestor of Jesus Christ, Abraham, by his Creator. In contemplation, Abraham was reassured by the stability of the vast universe. Confident and trusting, Abraham came to be known as "the father of those having faith" (Holy Scriptures, 2013, pp. 59, 1511). This same invitation has impressed me to do the same:

Galaxies

Galaxies spiral lenticular and irregular

Orion always comes up sideways

Hanging from his belt are stars and nebula of the Hunter's Sword

Dying in a deep field

Left behind in the supernova

Is a spinning neutron star.

The pulsar spins red threads

Across blank space

The filaments, strings like glowing wires.

Transit

In the starfields of memory

Orion always comes up sideways

When I sleep, he sleeps

When I wake, He rises

Is this an awful time to be alive?

Ann and I and other friends who came to the cabin to pick cranberries after the first frost also enjoyed our campfire times together. After a long day out on the land we would sit and wait until the sky darkened and the northern lights came out. Explorer John Rae, when he was near Sombak´e (Yellowknife) at Beh´cho (formerly Fort Rae), over a century ago, journaled that whenever he saw the northern lights, so impressive and even unsettling, he felt something important was going to happen. We often felt that way too. They are exciting and build to such extraordinary heights and reach crescendos in colour and brightness it is astonishing. Finally, we would get so tired we would one by one have to leave our warm fire and go to bed, leaving the night sky to perform without us.

Aurora

Stardust in starlight strung with dark lanes of energy

Point to polar plains

We wait for the aurora

Then watch jagged colours

Build and fade as dawn comes up

And Orion slides away from us.

Professor of Ethnic Studies Gay Wilentz's book *Healing Narratives* is dedicated to "the stories we tell to keep us healthy and sane" and "literature as a healing art" (Wilentz, 2000, p.15). She further states that narratives can be a source of consolation "recovering what has been lost" (Wilentz, 2000, p 90). Writing has been a restorative activity for me and perhaps these

stories, poems and song will encourage others to heal by sharing their life experiences. Traditional culture is said to run deep. We do not have to bear our losses alone.

The valued stories of our people are life sustaining. Educator Emma LaRocque (1997) speaks of: “maintaining orality in writing” (p. 13). This need to keep using our voice, and “history demands of us to assume our dignity, our equality, and our humanity” (p. 15).

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