Memory and Métissage: Three Creation Stories

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Cynthia I was Born into a Mixed Clan

Each of us is a creation of a family; each of us is created within and from a family; and that family has a story. I am born into a métissage, from the Latin *mixticius*, to braid together two different fibres to create a single strand. The clan into which I am born a racial métissage.

Instead, my ancestors weave coal dust with blue blood, Gaelic with English, “tomahtoes” with “tomaytoes,” Orange Men with Knights of Columbus, alcoholism with religious fervor, modernity with tradition, nomadicity with permanence, communism with monarchism and colonizer with colonized.

Even though my ancestoral clan is a mixed-texture métissage, I imagine tracing all the varied strands backward to a single source, the Celts. Over hundreds or thousands of years, this tribe migrated—or was pushed—westward across Europe until they could go no further. They claimed the Green Isles as their own. But for many, these Islands were not the final destination. Colonization, and famine brought on by colonization, spurred waves of migration westward. Shiploads of immigrants leaving what is now the British Isles and arriving in North America. The clans of my family were dispersed in varied topographies, but one clan—the Welsh-Irish Lumbs—landed on the cold and windy Canadian prairies. Such a flat land could not hold them for long and, like lemmings, they migrate westward again, toward the sea. Stopping in small towns such as Brandon, Manitoba and Canmore, Alberta they work and give birth to babies until they arrive at the western edge of this New World, the city of Vancouver, where my mother is born.

I imagine the compulsion to migrate is encoded in the DNA of my tribe. I imagine that the desire to move on is at least a recessive gene, if not a dominant one that manifests itself
repeatedly in each generation. Members of my clan become so overwhelmed with nomadic need that one-day they simply find themselves selling everything, packing up their curling trophies and old 78 records in cardboard boxes, hitching a ride with a truckdriver or a bushpilot, or buying an old car that might make the trip. I was born by the sea—oceans and oceans ago--where my mother was born before me. But I was only seven-week old when the cellular compulsion to move was upon my parents. By this time, Nana (my grandmother) and her two sisters (Auntie Kay and Auntie Margaret) had already left Vancouver for the North. At first my mother, father and I migrate from the mountains to the prairies, where I learn to walk on cement sidewalks and speak Standard English. But by the time I am five years old my mother and I are alone, running to the tree line, following Nana to the Yukon. In the north, I must learn to walk on trails with only the moon to light my way, I must learn to speak English as a métissage. I change schools twenty-one times in twelve years, and in each town, in each school the creation story must begin again.
Cynthia: Dog Bites

Creation happens more than once. In our lifetimes, we are re-created over and over again. The land we live with is re-created over and over again. Our families are re-created over and over again. Each recreation braids the old and the new, the métissage of memory and creation.

Here is one such story:

...in the beginning was the darkness, the snow and cold.

When I was eight years old, the world was new, once again, and I was recreated in it. My mother and I left the Yukon for Aklavik, Northwest Territories: she was a twenty-seven-year old divorcée and I was her only child. My grandparents had moved to Aklavik the previous summer so that my grandfather could live out his dream of flying bush planes. Mother and I followed them to the Arctic, just as we had followed them to the Yukon.

We arrived in Aklavik on eve of the winter solstice. When Mother and I climbed out of the bush plane onto the river ice, we stepped into darkness. For the next two months, the night sky was an endless black, lit only by the stars and the cycles of the moon. Each day faded darkness to a sliver of dusk to an increasing arc of muted bluegray or pinkyellow only to collapse back into darkness tired of the endless struggle between dark and light.

I had to find my way in this new world. Although it was dark and cold, I ventured out-of-doors and trotted around the small town, like a lone wolf pup sniffing out new territory. One night—very soon after we arrived in town—I travelled around town alone following the hard-packed human trails that criss-crossed the village. In the dark
the trail took me to the back of a shack, and I came upon a husky staked behind the
house. When I approached—my boots crunched in the snow, alerting the dog. He lifted
his big head as if it were a great effort and stared directly at me without blinking. On the
other side of the dog, a raven jumps around and cackles. Picking at the ground with his
beak, he dances closer to the dog. I creep forward and offer my mittened-hand, just like
Nana, who raised Doberman Pinschers, had taught me. Nana always said:

—Never be afraid of strange dogs. Hold out your hand. Offer your smell.

But her advice came from in a different world, a different time, one where dogs
were pets and Myna birds were kept in cages. Here in Aklavik, Raven is free to talk and
tease whomever he pleases, especially the huskies. Here in Aklavik I am an unsuspecting
pup wanting to play. My potential companion is curled in a circle; his bony back rimming
a small depression in the snow, his wolf tail cloaking his paws and legs folded in
conserving precious belly heat. When I come close enough to reach out and offer my
hand, the husky snubs my hand. Instead, he curls his lips, and Raven cackles and dances
around again.

Then the husky jumps up and grabs my outstretched hand, as if to greet me. At
first, I think this is a game of Tug-a-War, like the ones we played at the Dominion Day
picnics on the 1st of July. I pull one direction, the husky pulls harder in the other. Then
with his massive paws splayed in the snow, he braces himself and pulls back with all his
power. He jerks his head—with my hand in it—left and right, back and forth, trying to
take me down. He clenches his teeth harder, and the top incisor penetrates the mittens. He
grinds further, and the incisor reaches the soft flesh of my palm. The flesh is tearing, the
hand shakes from the wrist, the arm swings in the socket. My young, southern city self is
being transformed. In the microsecond before the husky can overturn me, I give up a self
and past I didn’t even know I had. In a split second, I abandon my southern manners, the
protocols I—like all southern suburban children—learned at great cost in childhood: play
fair, take turns, and be nice to animals. In this moment, I am recreated as a young girl
who can survive here in this place, alone, under the aurora borealis, with only Raven as
my witness.

With my one-free hand and both legs, I punch and kick at fur, head, ribs and back.
Any part of the dog I can reach. Through the tears and the snot and the fur of my parka
hood, my screams register a note of human power, a pitch typically accompanied by the
crack of a whip. The husky’s jaw relaxes momentarily and I scramble backwards—just
far enough. He leaps at me, but a short chain jerks his head back, and his body follows.
The commotion rouses other dogs staked nearby. In an instant, the entire team is leaping
and lurching for me but their chains snap them back to their wooden stake and the piss-
crusted snow around it.

As I scramble away from the edge of this tight circle, the dogs continue to snarl
and curse, their stinky fish breath frozen in the air with nowhere to go. They lift their
heads in a cosmic howl for freedom, for the loss of the hunt and the kill of the pack. I turn
away and start the walk back to Nana’s house, my new home in this new world. Tears on
my eyelashes crystallize, and through them the path ahead glitters. Behind me, Raven
lifts off from the snow and is gone. The crunch of my boots on the snow is a comfort
now.

No one in my family remembers this time, when the world was new and I was re-
created in it. Or maybe they just don’t believe me. Maybe I just never told them. Perhaps
I too would doubt this memory, if I could not reach out, right this moment, and touch the palm of my left hand. If I could not feel the white tooth scar paralleling my lifeline, severing my heart line.
The McNeely's. With a name like that anyone could tell they were not from Fort Good Hope. Barney McNeely was white but he had married a Dene woman, Gwich’in I think, and they had several children. Dickie was about my age—ten or eleven years old—and as much an outcast as Wendy and I were. Wendy and I were the only white kids in town. Dickie was a mixed-blood, but he looked white, and he wanted to be a priest.

"Priests do not lie, and I will never tell a lie," Dickie vowed.

I tried to use logic to trick him into hypocrisy and thus make apparent the foolishness of his dream.

"Sometimes you gotta lie." I tell him, looking to Wendy for support. "White lies, y'know. So you don't hurt people's feelings." I knew about these things. My family made quite fine distinctions about lying. White lies were not only acceptable, they were a preferred mode of discourse when the truth was invisible or painful, which was often.

"I will never lie," Dickie was digging in, becoming firmer in his resolution by the moment. This wasn't going to be easy.

Well, I knew he was full of shit and I desperately wanted to prove it. This incident foreshadowed my developing attitude toward life, particularly self-righteous people.

"What will you say if someone gives you something to eat and you don’t like it?" I demanded.

Dickie says; "I won't say anything."

"But what if they ask you if you like it? You'll have to say something. You can't just sit there with your mouth full and not say anything!"
"I will swallow the food," he said, his developing Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he demonstrated to us, "and then I'll say 'Thank you, but I've had better.'"

I knew the little prick was lying but what could I do? Being the only atheist kid in a Catholic town, I was having a hard time arguing with Catholicism and an even harder time arguing with Dickie McNeely. Dickie was a lot like me: fair-skinned, good at school and hated by all the other kids. At least Dickie was born in Fort Good Hope and his mother was Dene. That should have accounted for something, but it didn't seem to. Like me, Dickie couldn't speak Slavey and he wasn't born into a Good Hope family. He wasn't white but he wasn't Good Hope Dene either. Insider/outsider. At least, I was just plain outsider. No compromises. A clear position. For Dickie it was never so clear.

It was very cold, at least -40°C, so cold that even the spruce trees complained, their thin black trunks snapping suddenly like a gunshot ringing out. But cold or not all the children played outside. Everyone in Fort Good Hope lived outside as much as possible. The houses were too small, the families too large, to do otherwise.

I wasn't there when it happened, but I know it did. The town kids were playing Cowboys and Indians and Dickie was the cowboy. The Indians attacked the cowboy and in the flush of their victory they tied their white captive to a tree, one of those thin black spruce, and they left him there in the bush. They left Dickie tied to a tree when it was 40 below and they all went home.

When my mother tells this story I am the one left tied to the tree. But I know it wasn't me. It was Dickie.
Cynthia: On Being a Nomad

Nomads don’t always leave; sometimes they follow. Sometimes you follow something in particular like the stars, the weather, migrating herds, or family who have already left. Sometimes you follow an inner, ingrained compulsion to cleanse the species, to seek new ground or simply to move on. And to be a nomad is to make your home where you are at that moment. Your home becomes a context rather than a place—a set of relations among yourselves as nomads, what you are following and where that following has led you, was well as what you have left behind. I have inherited the gene. My cells and my bones are inhabited by a deep and inexplicable need to move on, to migrate away from old names and places towards new ground, part of a thousand-year-old search for that place where I am finally at home.

After Fort Good Hope, Mum and I move to several other northern towns, places with names like Yellowknife, Hay River, Lac La Ronge, Uranium City and Inuvik, each place a métissage of language, race, religion and economies. With the big ears of an only child and the watchful eyes of a nomad I hear and see some of what it means to be Native and everything about what it meant to be an immigrant to these places that I cannot call home.

Métissage is a site of creation as well as disputation. The north—its people and landscape—and my memory of it all re-create and transform me into someone my family doesn’t recognize and must learn to love all over again.

In the north I begin my own clan, a more complex métissage, as I marry into a large Catholic Métis/Treaty family and have children of my own. Eventually like Mum and Nana before me, I too divorce and move on. With my small children, and a $250 Chrysler Saratoga, I leave the North for Saskatchewan, to become a teacher. Eventually the compulsion is upon me and I migrate north again. But the pull of education is strong and soon I find myself migrating
south again, back to my birthplace, to the Pacific Ocean where I learn to become a professor.

When the caribou calves are still young, they follow the cow, just as I followed my mother, and she followed hers.

Eventually I migrate—or am exiled—to the desert. This time for a job. It is a dry, brown place, starved for moisture. Everything seems to blow past: the clouds, the rain and the wind. My calves have all grown now, migrated elsewhere, but I stay on. I’ve lived in this desert for more than a decade. Except for Auntie Kay who moved to Whitehorse after the war and never left, no one in my tribe has stayed anywhere this long, since they all left Vancouver fifty years ago.

I might yet learn to call this desert home. A decade has passed and I am still here, getting annual updates on my pension contributions. I still travel but there are differences. I travel less. I pack suitcases. I fly or I drive a car that makes the trip without breaking down. I travel alone instead of with my clan. I have a house from where I depart and to which I return. Perhaps now I am a nomad more in my memory, imagination and my writing than anywhere else. I travel back and forth through the overlapping territories of memory and present tense, like a caribou migrating to the calving grounds each spring—zigzagging thousands of extra miles to graze and flee from warble flies and other predators—only to turn around in the autumn and begin the journey all over again. In my sleep I can still hear the clicking of our hooves on the pre-Cambrian shield, the oldest rock on the planet.