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## **Lying in Wait to be Found: Reliquary Communities of Memories**

In July of 2007, I visited a crash site 40 kilometres north of Haines Junction, Yukon with Colin Beairsto, a Canadian aviation crash researcher. The airplane was a Douglas C-47 that crashed at approximately 8:15am on February 7, 1950 while performing a search for a US air force C-54 that has still not been located.

The C-47 that we visited is material evidence of the past, and this material evidence is viewed and translated in three differing



perspectives, which depend on the viewer, the circumstance, and the time frame. The C-47 can be interpreted as Relic, an object with an air of veneration and heritage; Artefact, an item of historical interest; or as Trash, unwanted, undesired material.

Primarily, the role that Relics perform within a personal and societal heritage creation will be examined. But this performance role is intermingled with the transition that an object makes between the Trash, Artefact and Relic groupings.

All material remnants of the past are potential relics that collect significance in differing manners and time frames, as they are also potential artefacts and trash. The transition requires the application of the viewer's personal and societal lens, which are subject to the viewer's motivation, awareness and experience.

The material route travelled into the past leads to disused city areas, sunny mountain meadows, dusty and deteriorating cabins, and into the questioning notion of how the viewer is connected or disconnected from the past. This material route is invariably adventurous, mentally it requires the placement of self into the past, and physically it entails the finding of the material past. Through the physical and mental adventures a connection is created. Simultaneously, there is a development of the sense of self and place.

Fifty-eight years ago the Douglas DC-3 was searching for the downed USAF aircraft when it crashed in the Ruby Range Mountains. Its engines and valuable components were salvaged, and the hulk is left to deteriorate slowly in the cool, dry climate, it is trash. The aircraft lies for fifty-eight years before two aircraft crash enthusiasts make the journey to locate its whereabouts. Its deterioration has grown, but now the army issued contents contained within are scarce and from another time; anachronistic. The crash enthusiasts mentally re-create the crash scene through the scattered debris, feel the arduous journey within their muscles, and smile at each other. They document the scene with photos to

remember the specifications, the view, and their trip; in the



process the aircraft becomes a relic. Meaning has flowed from the observer into the object, because of its age-induced relevance and memory-created value.

Although concurrently, the aircraft is examined as an object of historical interest, and in that sense it is also artifactually important, because the meaning is flowing from the object to the observer. The aircraft has meaning flowing from it, as well as into it, and now it occupies both territories of relic and artefact.



All objects are potential relics when they withstand the wasting processes of time. The unique way each object collects significance, and transforms into a relic involves differing circumstances and timeframes that are born from age and memory. Further to this, the change modifies the object into a character of history or heritage, which implies that the historical meaning invested within the object modifies our view of the past either as to how things came to be, or heritage-wise, that it endows a group with a common purpose. This invested meaning builds, or adds to the narrative, that we use to understand our specific location, past, present and projected place in the future.

As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, a relic is,

An object interesting because of its age or association, as a memento or souvenir, or as an object that has survived destruction or wasting (1991).

The applicable distinction between Artefact and Relic is that the Artefact relates to History and the Relic relates to Heritage. David Lowenthal, historical author and Guggenheim fellow, in his 1996 examination of the distinction, *Possessed By The Past, The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, describes the different applications of History and Heritage:

History and heritage transmit different things to different audiences. History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose (1996).

In his book *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Lowenthal examines the bias inherent within relics, and how the random deterioration and wasting allows relics to become more 'characteristic of human life'.



... the artefactual route to the past has special virtues. One is a relative lack of intentional bias... relics also counter the traditional predilection of historians for the extraordinary, the grand, or the precious... tangible vestiges are seen as more characteristic of human life (1985).

The artefactual route into the past leads into abandoned sites and middens --creating an understanding of the past through the used, old, and broken. These collections lay in situ, eventually decomposing completely or being found and investigated. An unintentional bias exists within these collections, this bias stems from the scavenging and reuse that continually removes the contents as they became useful or valuable. These middens and abandoned sites begin to reflect the side of history that was least wanted, least useful, most disposable. But at the same time, they also reflect those items that were most used, most worn out, and subsequently thrown aside. With interpretation and extrapolation the flotsam and jetsam of the past provides a view into self and society.

Similarly, Robert Ascher, Professor of Archaeology at Cornell University, maintains a specialized interest in visual

anthropology and the study of material culture. In *Tin Can Archaeology* he notes that, Memories tied to an object will create



...Artefacts partly redress the bias of written sources, and hence make historical knowledge more populist, pluralistic, and public (1974).



value and meaning out of the created narrative, whether it is a reminder of a relationship between people or a memento from a special event or time. An infusion of meaning transforms an object into a relic, which requires, like the above illustration, a varying combination of age-induced relevance and memory-created value. In the case of the crashed DC-3 expedition, the experiences en route become entangled with the idea of the airplane – causing the extrapolated meaning and memory associated with it to be more intense. *Age* of an object will create value and relevance because of the object's increasing scarcity and anachronism. *Memory and thoughts* projected onto an object will create value, in the form of either history or heritage, from the developed personal connections and reminiscences felt.

Author Virginia Woolf was preoccupied with imagining the transformation of meaning changing over time in her posthumous collection of essays, *Moments of Being*,

Is it not possible – I often wonder – that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? ... Strong emotion must leave its trace; and it is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves attached to it again... (1985).

By approaching the past through the imposition of relevance and value onto the tangible past, it can be felt through all of the senses. And in the building of a community of memory, that 'strong emotion' that she speaks of, does leave its trace in the inclusive and exclusive narratives that are developed and built upon.

Joe Bishop, a long time Whitehorse resident and hiking guide reminisced on his time spent in Dawson City.

I spent some time on a goldmine in Dawson, and the old timers used to tunnel down into the permafrost. There was this one spot on the claim that we were working on and there's this old ladder that is coming out of the ground. The ground has since kind of sloughed back in and filled the hole, so you know there used to be a tunnel... or there could be a

tunnel still if you went a little deeper (Interview transcript, 2006/09/20).

By examining this ladder a little more closely and regarding its descent into the ground as also into the past, it is readily possible to understand the intrigue that catches Joe Bishop. In contrast with Lowenthal's view that the past is a foreign country, Barry Schwartz of the University of Georgia sees 'the past as a familiar, rather than a foreign country; its people are different, but not strangers to the present (1991)'. Within this paradigm of connection between the past and present the ladder presents a suitable conduit for Joe to consider the past peopled with relations and cohorts.

Whoever made this ladder, on the last day they climbed up it, why wouldn't they pull it up out of the hole? They just left it in the hole, and here it is fifty or a hundred years later just sticking out of the ground. Now that is just the beginning of the story – where does this ladder lead? You have to start digging to find out (Interview transcript, 2006/09/20).

The tangible past residing in this ladder creates a link between the living and the dead, and in Joe's considerations becomes a component of a specific part of the Yukon's community of memory that he can build upon by becoming enmeshed within it. It subtly builds on, and also internalizes within the viewer, the telling of the Western creation narrative that began in August of 1896, confirming an existing structure of assumption. Barry Schwartz suggests that... this consensus is resilient because memories create the grounds for their own perpetuation. Memories are not credible unless they conform to the 'available past' that is generally accepted as a given (1991)'. A different viewer may have an entirely differing relationship with the descending ladder, which would also add to the community of memory; it would just be a very different one with different exclusionary and inclusionary properties.

I spent a day hiking the northern part of the Chilkoot Trail with Shawn Taylor, a Whitehorse biologist. The current flowing from personal experience, to build him a context for place and events, became apparent in a different stream during the course of our hike, one based in his biology specialization.



The Chilkoot Trail is strewn with objects from the Gold Rush of '98, and they vary in memory-created value and age-induced meaning from relics to trash dependant on the interest, standpoint, and understanding of the viewer. Shawn Taylor found his route to the place and the past, but not in the decaying relics of metal, wood, and glass. He found it in the living grain ancestors of the stamper's horse feed, the living relic that has continued to grow in a very harsh alpine environment for a hundred years.

He and I spent time examining the area that housed horse stables during the Gold Rush. Grain and hay were transported up to the stables for feed for the horses because of the lack of forage in that high, harsh landscape. From that apical ancestor, hardy seeds have germinated. To this day they continue to germinate in

an environment that is the nadir of agriculture, as they have done for the past hundred years. There is an interesting parallel between the undiminished state of this enduring living relic and the narrative of the Yukon's newcomers, which emphasizes an against all odds adventurous bravery in the face of adversity. The agriculturalist narrative manifests within the Yukon, and as such it not only connects the viewer to the place of the Yukon, but also the homeland of the viewer. As longitude draws an imaginary line from the place of measure to Greenwich, England, as does the newcomer narrative draw another imaginary line or connection to the familiar homespace or mindspace.

Yukon's past and present is heavily imagined as man working in a biological, highly unpredictable environment, one that is all the more highlighted by the virile spirit of nature in conjunction with the struggles of the early pioneers.

Historian David Lowenthal, comments on the unknowable quality of relics in *The Past is a Foreign Country* that,



Unlike history and memory... the tangible past cannot stand on its own. Relics are mute; they require interpretation to voice their reliquary role (1985).

The aviation crash researcher, and my hiking companion, Colin Bearsto reflects on his experience with the disintegrating trucks remaining on the North Canal Road when he self examines his investigative curiosity on the identifying numbers above the windshields,

You can see the old painted number on the top of the trucks. It is interesting to see a little bit of the way people operated, the patterns of technology, the way things were organized. You see the number of the vehicle above the passenger side mirror and you think 'how did they organize those? It looks like a number of about six digits, but maybe that was just stock keeping and nobody paid any attention to it from day to day (Interview transcript, 2006/07/27).

Colin envisions significance in the identifying numbers on the vehicles, but then he questions that attributed significance. It is important to have awareness of the inherent muteness of relics, and thus their interpretative flexibility. By viewing the past via our interpretation of relics, we have to imagine the people and construct their motivations, as previously stated by Schwartz, people that are not strangers to the present, but different from us. When we make this attempt, we have only our own viewpoint and experience to build an understanding of the past. There is strong desire to have a connection with these people, because it includes 'belonging' within the westerner's Yukon narrative. The sense of connection to place drives a process of pondering the methods of correspondence throughout the system, and of visualizing the people who were organizing and the workers who were being organized. Colin Bearsto ponders the cohesiveness of separate imaginings of relics, and the collaborative quality that they attain,



It is interesting for me to see those tangible links, the artefacts in the location that they were used, to feel that connection, because you can sit on the seats and smell the smell of the old vehicles which then evokes thoughts, stimulates imagination, and somehow connects you to other old relics and artefacts that you've seen of the past... whether it is cars or books or smaller pieces of equipment that you can pick up and hold in your hand' (Interview transcript, 2006/07/27).

Grasping for meaning, understanding and connection of these finds requires a personal investment of interest which begins to create the heritage that grows from these objects. Historical details, when they are available, allow the viewer to re-construct the resources, and the depth of technology available during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898 or the building of the Alaska Highway in 1943. The historical context situates an artefact historically, but the development of sense of place through relicization builds into the community of memory where the relic plays an important role in heritage development.

### **Disregarding Past Uses and Meanings of Relics**

Gail Lotenburg is the artistic director for Link, a Whitehorse, Yukon dance company who performed site-specific dance on the Whitehorse waterfront in the summer of 2006. The question is shifting a little from the reliquary connection to place, to a human individualizing dimension, and in illustration of this, Gail held a strong intention to disregard the past uses and meanings of her chosen locations, and strictly view them as discarded objects in places.

Then I was looking at it (the abandoned loading ramp located behind the old train station) and I saw those O bolts, those huge pieces of metal. I wondered, 'What could those be there for?' But then I decided to ask, 'How can I use these opportunistically... they have no apparent purpose anymore. So, what are their opportunistic uses? And that's when I decided to put a bungee cord on there and ask, 'What can we do with a dancer and a bungee cord?' (Interview transcript, 2006/08/16).'

Perhaps this is a very honest interpretation of relics, because instead of connecting the viewer to place via the past, they connect the viewer to place via the viewer. Previously this has been suggested in differing anecdotal evidence, the air crash enthusiasts connect to place via aircraft, the biologist creates connection via his specialization in biology. This echoes the widely accepted approach of Mead that conceptions of the past are construed from the standpoint of the new problems of today (1929). When Gail Lotenburg viewed the O bolts she fleetingly pondered their past use, but that pondering was shaped by her concerns of the present, which was in regards to the aesthetic combination of a dancer, a bungee cord, and an O ring.

By casting off past uses and meanings, these objects could be said to reside in the present. Their past becomes less important because they have become a contemporary connection between now and then, with the focus shifted onto their present use and interpretation.

Through the investment of use and interpretation, in this very present sense, she built an atemporal relationship with the past, but she also felt compelled to comment on the constancy of the subconscious reminding of past, community, and culture from these old things.

I cannot tell you how surprised I was at the impact from the influence of these objects that have no apparent use anymore. What I didn't expect when creating this dance piece was how strong that effect would be on me personally. It took me being there and subconsciously absorbing the structure to realize that those brackets were used interpretively. By the nature of this dance project there was inherent celebration of the recognition of the value of the uniqueness of place (Interview transcript, 2006/08/16).'



Past and future are alike inaccessible. But though beyond physical reach, they are integral to our imaginations. Reminiscence and expectation suffuse every present moment (1985).'

David Lowenthal perhaps answers to her primary impulse in disregarding the how and who of the objects of her project, and her later creation of connection to place through the aesthetic reworking of place, because, Gail Lotenburg actively engages in recreating her chosen locations with new and very different emphasis and value, in her celebration of their discarded nature, and in her creation of her personal relics through dance. This process elevates her chosen locations from industrial discards with a widely accepted historical context into relics imbued with created and creative meaning both familiar and foreign.

**And so,**

Trash, artefacts, relics. The flow of meaning from object to viewer or viewer to object is a necessary distinction between these contributors to one or the other of either history or heritage. The development of these two aspects of the past, one deriving from 'how things came to be' and the other 'providing a group with common purpose' intermittently superimpose new elements into the community of memory, but in a way that the elements conform within a structure that is built by community consensus over time.



Behind the relevance of these objects lives the narration that we develop to contextualize them and to find understanding of self. In creating context for ourselves, the original meanings and uses of the relics can be misunderstood and misrepresented, so that they can be placed within a context that is needed or desired. Or perhaps, with intentional casting off of original meanings and uses, the relic is able to be reinvented within a modern paradigm, and it is thus made new again, and becomes relevant as contemporary.

The narratives that are created from meeting with and interpreting the tangible past are a part of adding and expanding one narrative of the present Yukon. Specifically within the Yukon, which embodies a dominant narrative of colonial adventurism, there is a disconnect between the peoples who connect through this narrative, and the indigenous narrative that resides in the space of the Other. This is a generalization, but one that must be held in mind, because the conversation between these two narratives is both contemporarily strong and abyssal.

The trash, artefact, relic of the C47 near Haines Junction, like the dance pieces by Gail Lotenburg, provides a stage for the mental adventure of creating meaning from materiality of the past through individual interest and knowledge. Understanding the draw for the biologist to the tenacious relic hay is similar to the draw developed by the long term Yukoner Joe Bishop to the ladder now locked within the permafrost. It is a draw that is inherently based within experiences and knowledge of self. These anecdotal illustrations contain both historical ideologies of the past as a foreign country -- constructed from the standpoint of today, as well as the past being familiar -- a stable image with the intermittent superimposition of new elements that adhere to an existing structure. This awareness of the existing structures of the different communities of memory in the Yukon, and their influence on the contemporary experiences that they shape, is essential because it signals attentiveness to the inclusionary and exclusionary facets of narrative.

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