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A stone that feels right in the hand: tactile memory, the abduction of agency and presence of the past

Boyd's Cove, 2010

One day, in June of 2010, I visited my friend Karen Ledrew-Day at the Beothuk Interpretation Centre near Boyd's Cove. Boyd's Cove is a sheltered inlet of Notre Dame Bay, on the northern coast of the island of Newfoundland. To find the Beothuk Interpretation Centre, you pass through scattering of white houses, which is the village of Boyd's Cove, and follow a cracked and narrow road that leads past the village shop and some abandoned fields. Where the road ends there is a white red-roofed building designed to look like a cluster of mameteeks, the winter dwelling of the Beothuk. This is the Beothuk Interpretation Centre, created and maintained by the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador as one of its "Provincial Historic Sites."

The Beothuk themselves were a people indigenous to the island of Newfoundland. They are now gone, but they left stuff behind which suggests a geography of inhabitation, and the Interpretation Centre lies close to a place where the Beothuk once lived. At Boyd's Cove their presence was evidenced by fire-cracked rocks, burnt patches of earth, middens of shells and the bones of beaver, otter and mink, as well as tools fashioned from stone, bone and iron nails. To get to this place you follow a way-marked path that leads from the Interpretation Centre through a wood of birch and spruce to a clearing that overlooks a pebble beach, with the sheltered waters of the cove beyond.

There is not much that, to an untrained eye, would suggest the long-ago presence of another people. The site was excavated in the 1980s by a team lead by the Ralph Pastore of Memorial University of Newfoundland (Pastore, 1984; Pastore 1985). When the work of disclosing the past was complete they reburied the site so all that can be seen is a grassy meadow fringed by trees. The only indication of what lies beneath are clear plastic signs marked with red numbers, each number indicating the place of a house-pit. Some of the stuff that the archaeologists pulled from the ground

is now on display in the Interpretation Centre. Hung like a picture on a wall is a square of earth from which emerge flakes of stone, white and grey. Elsewhere, behind glass, there is an array of stone projectile points and a display of crude iron nails at various stages of being cold-hammered into something else that the Beothuk would have recognised as useful.

Karen was and is (at the time of writing) the manager of the Beothuk Interpretation Centre. I had come to know her and the Centre over some years of visiting Newfoundland to do research concerning the ways in which the people of the island remember the Beothuk. On this day in June, however, I had not thought to do any research. I was on my way back from Twillingate, heading towards the highway and then to St. John's (the province's capital) and stopped by to say hello, have a bit of chat and so on. But on arriving Karen beckoned me into the small theatre of the Interpretation Centre. Normally, the theatre is where visitors to the Centre start their tour by being shown a short film about the Beothuk, the discovery of the site and Pastore's excavation. On this day, however, the theatre was closed to visitors.

In the theatre there was a middle-aged couple, Neil White and Marion Adams. Laid on a table before them was an array of stones, greyish-blue in colour, large and flat and sharp-edged. While they were waiting for the ferry from Change Islands, Neil and Marion had gone for a walk along the shore and saw an "unusual object" protruding from the ground. They dug into the ground and found other such objects, thirty in all. They could have simply been rocks, but Neil recognised them as something else. Later, when interviewed by Karen Wells, a local reporter, he described how he came to realise that the unusual object was not simply a stone but a stone fashioned into an artefact: "It had very distinctive ridges ... It was manmade, but it looked very primitive. I knew exactly what it was when I picked it up" (Wells, 2011).

Recognising these to be something other than mere stones, they had gathered the artefacts together and brought them to the Interpretation Centre. Karen called the Provincial Archaeology Office and we waited. While we waited Neil and Marion spoke of the find and the feelings that came

over them when they unearthed the cache. More than anything this was a feeling of wonderment at the sudden intimacy with the past and the enfoldment of time into the moment of unearthing.

“Imagine”, said Neil, holding up the first stone they had found, “no one has touched this since the person who lay it down touched it.”

A month later Ken Reynolds, an archaeologist with the Provincial Archaeology Office in St. John’s, came out to Change Islands and, guided by Neil and Marion, had a look around. The cache had been exposed by a ditch created by clearing a spot for the parking lot next to the ferry terminal. In that ditch they found another two pieces of shaped stone in situ, one flecked with white from the painting of the lines of parking lot (Reynolds et al, 2011: 137-141). After that came the work of analysis. It turns out the artefacts were made of rhyolite. There are two places where this stone was known to quarried, one on nearby Fogo Island and the other a bit further away at Bloody Cove, Bonavista Bay. Lead by Derek Wilton, a geologist at Memorial University, mass spectrometry and other such tests were undertaken, comparing the chemical composition of a sample from the cached artefacts with a sample of rhyolite from each of the two quarries. From this comparative analysis it was concluded that the stone was near certainly from Fogo Island. As for the question of which people had made the stone into tools: it seems the best guess (based on the form of the artefacts and, in particular, the location of the cache) is that they were made by “recent Indians”, that is the indigenous peoples who lived on the island in the centuries immediately before the coming of the Europeans at the close of the 15th century (Rast 2011; NLArchaeology 2014).

Back on that day in June none of this was known, or at least not know with any certainty whatsoever. None of us, Neil, Marion, myself, even Karen, had the kind of expertise and instruments required to properly figure out what stone this was, where it had come from or which of the various peoples who inhabited the island of Newfoundland over many thousands of years may have shaped these stones into artefacts. Of course we speculated. Maritime Archaic I suggested, or maybe Dorset

Eskimo, both peoples I vaguely thought I knew to have occupied the shores of Notre Dame Bay long before the arrival of “recent Indians” and Beothuk. It turns out I was wrong.

What we did know is that Neil and Marion had found something beyond mere rock, something not only made by someone else, but laid down, perhaps hidden, carefully and with some intention; although what the intention was behind caching thirty (later to become thirty-two) perfectly formed and seemingly unused rhyolite bifaces we could only guess. We also knew, or felt, there to be something wonderful in their disclosure, their unexpected emergence into the present.

Touching the past

This paper is about this sense of wonderment that Neil White expressed in handling a stone, which proved to be something made by another person many years ago. This is a wonderment felt in the moment of “unearthing”, when *something* which has long lain invisible, withdrawn from human affairs, emerges and, in that emergence, suggests the presence of another whose mindful activity is disclosed in the form and properties of the thing and its situation within an assemblage of other things (Filippucci et al, 2012). It is a quality of sensation which Matt Edgeworth describes when finding a lost bone needle while “working as a digger on a deserted medieval village at Stratton in Bedfordshire.” He writes that,

Such objects seem to bring us close to the everyday rhythms and routines of everyday life in a former age, almost as though no time has elapsed between then and now.

Does it really matter whether it was an hour or a millennium? An object was dropped and landed on its point. It was still gracefully poised in that position when pulled out of the ground by another person who picks it up, no matter how short or long the time interval between the two events. (2012: 81)

Of course, as Edgeworth notes, there is “something more to archaeological interpretations of artefacts than mere empathy” (2012: 81). The story of the cache from Change Islands does not end

with Neil and Marion's discovery or in their realisation that the things they found were expressions of the intentions of another person. After that there came a complex process of material hermeneutics through which the properties of this gathering of stones were disclosed and, in this disclosure, better guesses came to be made about the circumstances of their making. What began as "unusual object" became, over time and through the efforts various actors both human and non-human, thirty-two bifaces made by "recent Indians" from rhyolite quarried on Fogo Island.

Yet it is worth pausing to consider this moment of sensation in which differences described in chronological time are enfolded into the thing and Neil Edgeworth, or Neil White and Marion Adams, come to feel a kind of intimacy with some nameless other who lived sometime long before now. Amongst other things this incident and others like it describe an ecstasy of knowledge felt in the tactile encounter with that which is present to hand and yet, in its presence, reveals an absent other. This other is known to be far separate from us, held apart by the passage of hundreds, maybe thousands of years, yet in that moment when Neil picks up the stone, and in the handling finds it to be something other than a stone, this other comes close.

In such moments we "touch the past." The phrase is, of course, not mine. The notion that we may "touch the past" has considerable popular currency these days. From public archaeology projects, to object handling sessions, to historical re-enactments, tours of ruins and living history museums, we, the public, are invited to cultivate a quality of historical empathy, with African slaves awaiting transport (Richards, 2004), or Irish emigrants quitting a land of hunger (Gray, 2004), or the Jewish victims of the Holocaust (Biran et al, 2011). The past, it seems, is no longer something to be simply known in the dispassionate display and study of its material traces. History it to be felt. Experienced. Touched.

When we talk of getting in touch with the past we do so in two ways. Most simply and obviously to "get in touch with the past" is to feel stuff on and through our skin. But getting in touch with past has another meaning. To quote Agnew (2007), history has taken an "affective turn". People want the

past to come vividly to life. They wish times gone by to become enfolded into the present as, for example, they handle Virginia Wolff's reading glasses (Hancock, 2010: 116-117), or don hand-sew dresses to become a female slave in Civil War re-enactments (Auslander, 2013: 172-173), or encounter a sewing machine and a rusted bedpan in the ruins of Midwestern homestead (DeSilvey, 2007: 405). In other words, as Runia writes, "we want to be affected" (2006: 309). We seek what Huizinga describes as a "historical sensation" (Tollebeck and Vershaffel, 1992: 72-73; Ankersmit, 2005: 109-141): that feeling of intimacy with people, events and situations, which, according to the logic of time measured by the clock and calendar, are usually held to be far distant. As Edgeworth describes in the passage above, such feelings come over us only at peculiar moments when we enter into sensuous communion with the traces of past lives, be it a bone needle discovered while unearthing a medieval village, the brittle pages of a manuscript found in an archive (cf. Robinson, 2010), or an "unusual object" dug from an earthy bank near the Change Islands ferry terminal.

Traditionally, it may be thought, academics engaged in the study of history would have little time for such touchy-feely encounters with the past. There are indeed some who have voiced concerns about the commodification of history as a tourist spectacle. Interactive exhibits which provide a multi-sensory simulation of the sights, smells, sounds and feel of the past may provide little more than a "nostalgic leisure experience" (Barthel, 1996: 354), and, unless thoughtfully managed, risk turning the memory of lives once lived into "a poor quality copy of Disney World" (Liebhold, 1992: 570). Like Disney World, what is offered is an immersive sensory experience which, in its gaudy verisimilitude, banishes uncomfortable truths and conceals hidden ideologies. We may feel close to the past as we are surrounded by "authentic" sights, smells and sounds of a Viking village (Halewood and Hamman, 2001) or Colonel Williamsburg (Gable and Handler, 1996). This sense of intimacy is, however, a comfortable illusion and, as Agnew argues, is a poor replacement for "a hard-eyed investigation of historical process and rigorous coming to terms with the past" (2007: 309).

This is, however, not the whole story. Over the last couple of decades some historians, archaeologists and museologists have been arguing the merits of a more multisensory engagement with the materiality of past lives and, in so doing, calling into question the limits of the “hard-eyed investigation” which Agnew advocates (cf. Edwards, Godsen & Phillips 2006). These arguments have been in part inspired by broader “return to things” (cf. Brown 2001; Domańska 2006) in the social sciences and humanities and theorisations of affect as a quality of transformative encounter which precedes and exceeds strategies of signification (cf. Seigworth & Gregg 2010; Filippucci et al, 2012: 202-204). They also have emerged from the practice of curatorship and historical and (in particular) archaeological study, which are, by the very nature of their work, intensely engaged with and embedded in the material world and assemblages of things (Edgeworth 2012: 77; Hamilakis, 2014: 48-55; Witmore 2007: 449-551).

With reference to museums, Dudley (2012), Hetherington (2003), Candlin (2004) and Classen (2005) have all written of the virtue of handling artefacts. To an extent, this is about opening the museum experience to those who find it perplexing to engage with conventional displays of things in glass cases. Both Hetherington and Candlin’s studies are based on work with blind museum goers, whose sense of the past comes through the caress of their hands rather than their eyes. Other studies have suggested that touch is central to the ways in which indigenous communities feel the presence of their ancestors in the materiality of artefacts (e.g. Townsend-Gault 2004; Classen & Howes 2006; Peers 2013; Gadoua 2014). So, as museums are coming to recognise aboriginal claims to their stolen material heritage, they are learning ways of sharing and knowing the past which are not simply about observing and conserving, but also about touching.

There is, however, more to this than making museums accessible to the blind and sensitive to the cultures of indigenous peoples. Taking artefacts out of glass cases and allowing them to be handled represents a fundamental transformation of the ways in which we know the past. In touching we reach the limits of the “rational museum” (Candlin, 2008), an institution whose

engagement with the past is predicated upon, what Hetherington (2003: 1934-1935) describes as, a “distal” form of knowing, which privileges the disembodied gaze of the “observer” and assumes things to be objects abstracted from any embodied being in the world. To allow for touch inaugurates a more “proximal” way of knowing which recognises our sensuous being in the world and the unfolding relational becoming of entities. Skin knowledge, Howes calls it (2005: 27). Not a knowledge predicated on distance, but a knowledge that is in our skin-on-skin relationship with the world.

In archaeology there are also moves to recover the lost body and, in so doing, inaugurate a critical break with some of the assumptions which organise the modernist archaeological project. Phenomenological archaeologists such as Tilley (2004), Thomas (2001) and Hamilakis (2014) argue for an understanding of the past that proceeds from a reflexive appreciation of the bodily experience of dwelling in the world (cf. Brück 2005; Johnson 2012). The things that interest archaeologists are, they argue, not inert objects. They are, to quote Chris Tilley, “expressive subjects of experience, born out of our multidimensional sensorial participation in the world” (2004: 30). To understand past lives through their material traces requires that archaeologists engage bodily with these traces in, what Hamilakis describes as, “sincere, affective and open interactions” (2014: 9), thereby countering “the sensorial hierarchy and individualisation imposed by the dominant bodily regimes of Western modernity” (Hamilakis, 2014: 9) and reanimating the materiality of past through our own “wild” embodied primal perception (Tilley, 2004: 31).

This is about seeing, but also about hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. So some archaeologists have taken to writing of the experience of touch. MacGregor (1999) turns stone balls in his hands, feeling their weight and the indentations that betray human intention. Cummings engages in the “active and intentional exploration” of Neolithic stone monuments “using primarily her hands, arms and fingers” (2002: 250). Similarly, Bailey advocates a “cheriotic” enquiry into prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines, which focuses on the human hand and the “ability of the object to be

enveloped in the hand" (2014: 34). The carved stone balls, chambered cairns and henges and anthropomorphic figurines are, these authors suggest, not simply to be gazed upon as objects behind glass or features of the landscape. They were alive to the touch and in our touch we rediscover the lively being of stone and clay and, through this tactile understanding, some appreciation of the lived experience of long-ago peoples.

There is in all this a question which lies at the heart of this paper. This is the question of the presence of the past. Or, to actually put this as a question, how is it that we, or anyone, can "touch the past"? Edgeworth finds a pin still standing upright in the earth. Handcock carefully holds a pair of reading glasses and finds them to be "weightless; exquisitely fragile; inordinately narrow" (2010: 116). McGregor turns a stone ball in his hand. This is all well and good, but what is present to the senses is the pin, the glasses, the stone ball. Yet, what is suggested in these examples is that the act of touching extends beyond the thing in the hand to a sensation of something or someone else, whether that be a long-ago seamstress who dropped a needle or a not so long dead author. How is it, then, that in these moments of intimate "skin-on-skin" contact, the past may come to be felt as present yet also announce itself to be something other than present?

This is, philosophically, a question of memory and the ontological nature of mnemonic experience, and in particular experience of "pastness" (cf. Matthen 2010). To remember, as Ricoeur argues, is to experience the presence of that which absent. The "thing" recalled is, indeed, "doubly other", for it is experienced both as "absent (other than presence) and earlier (other than present)" (2004: 39). For Ricoeur, this conundrum particularly applies to moment in which "we recognize as being the same the present memory and the first impression intended as other" (2004: 39). This act of recognition constitutes a "small miracle" for in it we "coat with presence the otherness of that which is over and gone" and so memory becomes "re- presentation, in the twofold sense of re-: turning back, anew" (2004: 39). It is this "small miracle" of experiential intimacy with that which is "over and gone" which is enacted when we "touch the past" and yet begs the question how it is that which is

absent is also felt as present in the uncanny moment of historical sensation? How, in other words, is such a miracle possible and how may its occurrence relate to our understandings of the processes and politics of social or collective memory?

“Shadow Indians” and the stuff they left behind

My own concern with the possibility of sensing the presence of the past began not as theoretical or philosophical conundrum but has emerged from experiences such as that I shared with Neil, Marion and Karen on that day in June 2010. As mentioned above, these associations and experiences were cultivated in the context of ethnographic research concerning the ways in which the people of contemporary (or near-contemporary) Newfoundland “remember” the Beothuk, a native people who once inhabited the island but then “vanished” and so are mostly (although some dispute this narrative) considered to be extinct. Usually the date of their extinction is given as the 6th of June, 1829, when a young woman named Shanawdithit died of consumption in a hospital in St. John’s, then as now, the island’s capital and principal town (Marshall, 1996: 217-221; Howley 1915: 231-232).

There is debate as to what caused the “collapse of the Beothuk world” (Pastore, 1989). Some argue that the English and Irish fishers and furriers who populated the northern bays of the island in the eighteenth century engaged in a wanton slaughter of the indigenous people that amounted to genocide (Horwood, 1959). Others suggest that the extinction was more of an ecological event, arguing that the Beothuk were a small population eking out a precarious existence hunting caribou, fishing and gathering eggs and shellfish (Upton, 1977; Rowe, 1977). The coming of the Europeans brought disease and denied the Beothuk access to vital marine resources and so they dwindled and finally “disappeared”. Whatever the case, what is beyond dispute is that the ancestors of many of the people who now “belong” to Newfoundland are somehow responsible for the extinction of a people. This is, perhaps, felt most intimately in central Newfoundland, around Notre Dame Bay and up the River Exploits to Red Indian Lake. This was the traditional territory of the Beothuk. This is also

where most of the murderous encounters between Beothuk and settlers took place. Many of the families in this area still trace their ancestry back to men involved in these encounters: the Culls, Peytons, Rowsells and others. The past is poorly buried here. It lies close to the skin of the present. In stories. In the form of the landscape. In small things found.

In spite of this grim history of violence, dispossession and extermination, the story of the extinction of the Beothuk is well-remembered within the public culture of Newfoundland. It is remembered in novels and poems, documentary and feature films, on plaques set into stones, hiking trails, archaeological sites, paintings and, of course, the Beothuk Interpretation Centre at Boyd's Cove. My research in Newfoundland has mostly consisted in spending time with people, like Karen, who in one way or another were engaged in the work of remembering the Beothuk. This includes those who were and are variously employed in the work of commemoration in the public sphere – archaeologists, museum curators, painters, poets, novelists, film-makers and so on – but it also includes those who have nurtured a more private interest in the Beothuk, by reading books, listening to old stories and seeking out and gathering together the material traces of the aboriginal inhabitation of the island.

This research began, therefore, as a fairly straightforward investigation of the mnemonic practices and commemorative strategies by which people in Newfoundland constituted a collective imagery of a shared past in the public domain. In this sense, I was content with the idea of the past as social construction which, in various functional or dysfunctional ways, was allied to the interests of those living in the ethnographic present. The Beothuk, in other words, were, to quote Mary Dalton, “shadow Indians”, who had no substance, no quality of presence, and so took on whatever form “we” the living wished to give them (usually some variation of the noble savage, rendered all the more noble by the inevitability of their demise and the fact of their absence) (cf. Goldie, 1989; Dalton, 1992; Budgel, 1992; Delisle, 2006; Polack, 2009).

During the course of my research, however, something happened to trouble this line of enquiry. It was a couple of things actually, although they are closely entwined. The first thing is that a fair few of the people I met spoke of having felt the presence of someone, who they took to be Beothuk, in their sensuous communion with the world around them. Perhaps it was while standing up in a gathering of conifers in the cold evening light and listening to the sound of snow falling on spruce needles, or when sitting on the porch of their cabin and hearing a shrew in the undergrowth, or coming across the bleached bones of caribou when walking along the beach, or when hunting Rabbits alone in the autumn woods. They would be in such a situation and a feeling would come over them – “a fear that was not quite a fear”, as Richard Croucher described it – that they were not alone and that, in this moment of stillness and solitary sensuous communion with the trees, water and lighted air, someone else pressed against the skin of the present and made themselves felt.

Stories such as these, which described an uncanny feeling of pastness, presented me with a theoretical conundrum. One could suggest, that such feelings are themselves culturally and historically embedded and so are an internalisation of a given set of conditions by which the past is collectively constituted and experienced as the past. This seems to be, for example, the suggestion of Holtorf (2013) when considering the problem of object authenticity and how people feel that a given object allows them enter into empathetic communion with past. Although, Holtorf seeks to chart a position between “conventional materialist” and “cultural” approaches to object authenticity (2009: 430-431) by evoking the notion of the “experience of pastness”, this experience itself is, in the final instance, best understood as it is “firmly situated in a given cultural context” (2009: 431). The quality of the object is not wholly immaterial to our understanding of this experience; for, as Holtorf argues, it must be possessed of certain attributes, such as “obvious wear and tear, decay and disintegration”, which serve as “material clues” to the object “being of the past” (2009: 432). The focus, however, remains on “the politics of plausibility” (2009: 441) by which the pastness object, and by extension the possibility of the experience of pastness, is constituted in the present.

There is much that is helpful in Holtorf's approach, but it does not wholly or satisfactorily address the question of how we may "touch the past". The problem is not in attending to the ways in which such feelings are articulated and negotiated in the present; rather, it is in the fact that there is nothing that exceeds or precedes these processes of articulation and negotiation. The past, in other words, cannot impinge on the present, cannot make itself felt, but only comes to be sensed in reference to various conditions of possibility which are encompassed within the unfolding horizon of the contemporary (even if the condition of the contemporary is historicised in our scholarship). In other words, we evoke the notion of historical sensation only to deny that it is anything other than an extension of the ways we socially construct the past in its absence. What confounds this mode of explanation is the possibility that Richard Croucher and the others I spoke with are indeed feeling the presence of someone else in being possessed of a fear (which is not quite a fear) when hunting rabbits alone in the autumn woods.

The other thing that I discovered during my research is that this "feeling of pastness" was entangled with the ways in which people unearthed and engaged with the material traces the past, including bits of stone that resided in the earth. The story of Neil and Marion's discovery of thirty shaped pieces of stone (later to become thirty-two rhyolite bifaces) was just one of several instances when people showed me (and others) collections of artefacts they had gathered over years of beachcombing, scrabbling away at eroding river banks, or inadvertently when digging the foundation for a cottage or, for that matter, taking a stroll along the beach before the departure of the Change Islands ferry.

For example, back in 2006 I visited Bill Sceviour who lived out near Lower Sandy Point on the Bay of Exploits. After eating some dinner and talking of this and that, Bill brought out a shoe box and laid on the table those things he had found, all the time telling the stories of their finding. There was a fine, almost white, biface broken in two. He said that had found the first half many years ago and then, five years after that, he was in the company of a Japanese exchange student, just walking along the

beach, and she bent down and found the point and they seemed a perfect match. He marvelled at this coincidence. Finding the two halves of a broken artefact five years apart. He then picked up his favourite most lovely thing, a finely worked black point, near as big as a child's hand. He told me the story of that too: how he had been standing in shallow water and there were bits of bark swirling around that looked like spear points, and he just stood there staring into the water as the dog ran circles on the beach. He kept thinking he saw something, but then thought it was another piece of bark. It was only when he reached his hand into the water and pulled up this fine flat piece of worked stone that he realised this to be not just a thing of nature but something made by another person. He recalled how much it touched him, to find this whole and perfect thing.

Bill packed away his collection and we went out to Lower Sandy Point. There a thin spit of gravelly beach curves out into the Bay of Exploits, just where the river joins the sea. We walked along the beach. Bill talked of the history of this place. He told me that at this place the Peytons, a powerful family of eighteenth-century planters who profited from the salmon fishery, had a house and wharf. It was to this house that Shanawdithit and her mother and sister were taken after a party of furriers found them, half-starved, by the frozen shores of Badger Bay. It was from this place too, some years before Shanawdithit was taken, that the Beothuk stole a whole schooner, packed with barrels of salmon, and sailed it away to leave it ruined in a nearby cove; thereby unleashing, as old Peyton sought redress, one of the better documented stories of cruelty in the history of the extermination of the Beothuk (Howley, 1915: 91-102; Marshall, 1996: 162-166). The house was long gone, although some thought that one could still see its outlines in the contours of the ground. Bill himself was not so sure, noting that other houses had come and gone in the years between.

We followed the curve of the beach back towards the land, looking down amongst the stones, seaweed and bits of wood and plastic. We picked up rusted nails and turned over bits of stone that looked as if they may have been worked by human hands, but concluded them to be just a rock amongst many. Then Bill bent down and picked up this little white stone, about as big as the end of

my thumb, which seemed flaked on one side so that the edges were still sharp. He handed it to me and I turned it over in my hand, looking closely as he told me of the flakes and the sharp edges and how these marked this to be not a thing of nature but something that was made by someone a long time ago, likely as a small scrapper for taking the fat off hide.

It being just a little thing and, having found many suchlike and finer, Bill gave it to me along with a couple of the rusted old nails. So, like him and others, I keep my own little collection of bits of stone and iron that somehow constitute the traces of past inhabitation. My collection is a plastic tub and, like Bill and the others, I bring it out sometimes in the manner of show and tell.

Picking up stones with Alfred Gell

Returning to the problem described a few pages back: the question is in what sense, if any, could I, or Bill, or anyone, sense the presence of the past as we see and handle this little piece of white stone?

As a starting point I wish to consider the way in which Alfred Gell theorises the peculiar qualities of the art object in his monograph *Art and Agency* (1998). To move from picking up stones at Lower Sandy Point to the work of Alfred Gell is not a great leap, for to illustrate his argument Gell sketches a scenario that is similar to the ethnographic anecdote I have just related. Gell writes of “strolling along a beach” and finding a “stone which is chipped in a rather suggestive way”. “Is it”, he asks, “a prehistoric handaxe?” If it is, then this stone has become an artefact and as an artefact it has become “an index of agency; both the agency of the maker and the man who used it” (1998: 16). Gell’s appreciation of the suggestively chipped stone is embedded within his wider, and much discussed (cf. Tanner & Osborne 2007; Chua & Elliott 2013), theorisation of the art object. Gell argues that the art object cannot be defined either by some inherent aesthetic qualities or a culturally situated appreciation of its aesthetic qualities; rather, “the minimum definition of the (visual) art situation is the presence of some sort of index from which ... abductions can be made” and, specifically, the “abduction of social agency” (1998: 15). Hence, the stone tool found on a beach

may be considered to be an art object, for, as we turn it in our hand and feel along its bevelled face and sharp edges, we can sense the agency of the long-ago person who made and used it.

There are two aspects of this definition which are helpful when thinking through the question of how the past is made present in the touch of stone. The first is the notion of abduction. Gell borrows this notion from linguistics as a way of circumventing the problem of cultural reductionism. He argues that “abduction covers the grey area where semiotic inference (of meanings from signs) merges with hypothetical inference of a non-semiotic (or not conventionally semiotic) kind” (1998: 14). As such the notion of abduction is useful “in that it functions to set bounds on linguistic semiosis proper, so that we cease to be tempted to apply linguistic models where they do not apply, while remaining free to posit inferences of a non-linguistic kind” (1998: 15). Moreover, there is the suggestion that these inferences, drawn from the quality and nature of our engagement with the phenomenal world, can be distinguished by a certain feeling state that is neither derivative to the quality of thing nor to our quality of encultured consciousness, but is finally in the very quality of that engagement.

The second interesting aspect of Gell’s definition is his theorisation of the agency of the object. To an extent Gell seems confusing on this issue and, as Chua and Elliot reflect, his “treatment of materiality ... has been criticized for doing both too much and too little with objects” (2013: 13). On the one hand, he argues quite clearly, and in a manner not dissimilar to Bruno Latour (2005: 63-82), that “things” possess a quality of agency by virtue of the fact that they are “social” and dwell in unfolding relations with other social agents. However, as he also makes clear, this quality of agency is and can only be an extension of a mindful intentionality into the material world. Gell elaborates the point by making a distinction between “primary agents”, which he defines as “intentional beings who are categorically distinguished from ‘mere’ things or artefacts”, and “secondary agents”, which are the dolls, cars, works of art, etc. and through which “primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and render their agency effective” (1998: 20). In other words things are agents because “objectification in artefact-form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the

proliferation of fragments of 'primary' intentional agents in their 'secondary' artefactual forms" (1998: 21).

This assertion of the primacy of human (or human-like) intentionality may irk some of those who are arguing an analytic based on a post-humanist recognition of the "force of things" (Bennett, 2004; cf. Ingold, 2010: 95). Miller, for one, suggests that "while Latour is looking for the nonhumans below the level of human agency, Gell is looking through objects to the embedded human agency we infer they contain" (2005: 13). "So", Miller argues, "Gell's is a theory of natural anthropomorphism, where our primary reference point is to people and their intentionality behind the world of artefacts" (2005: 13). It is, however, precisely this *looking through* to some mindful agent who is *behind* the thing, which makes Gell's formulation of the abduction of agency intriguing when thinking about how the past may be felt to be present. There seems to be a spectral quality to the art object as it is minimally defined by Gell. The abduction of agency may be through the thing, but in the thing we also sense the being of an absent other, whether the other be Jackson Pollock, whose drip paintings are "self-portraits of a man in frenzied ballistic activity" (1998: 33) or the prehistoric maker and user of the thumbnail-sized scrapper. Artefactual forms, therefore, may be felt to be fragments of the "primary intentional agents" but, by their very fragmentary nature, these agents are occluded and so felt to be at once present and absent. Agency is, after all, not "in" the artefact, rather it is the hand guided by mindful intention that formed the artefact, and, through a process of abduction, we sense the presence of this hand in the materiality of thing but we also and equally realise its absence.

This allows us to slightly refine the question of how we may "touch" the past. It seems that to touch the past is to abduct the agency of an absent other who once held the brush or knocked flakes from a rock. What we feel is not the presence of these primary agents, whose intentions, at once manifest and mysterious, are imminent within the materiality of the object; rather we feel, or abduct, the agency of some other being possessed of a human-like capacity to project their mind into the world through the intentional transformation of matter. This other is not present, yet we can sense their presence in and through the material traces of their intentional projects. In this sense we do not

really “touch” the past, since that mindful other, whose absent-presence is indexed in the form of the thing to hand, is withheld as a point of origin.

There is, however, a way in which this absent hand becomes present and that is in the handling of the artefact and in the discovery of fit between our hand and the contours of the stone, created in its making or through long use. To elaborate on this possibility it is worth noting a couple of limitations to my readings of Gell’s formulation of the art-object as an index of the agency of an (absent) other.

Firstly, there is the problem of the process by which we “abduct” the agency when, for example, we find a stone on a beach. Central to Gell’s theorisation of the anthropology of art is the distinction between stuff that simply happens as “the outcome of a natural causal process” and stuff that happens because a human (or human-like) agent makes it happen on purpose (1998: 15). The problem is how, in the process of abduction, do we realise this difference and so abduct the mind of another in the form of the stone on the beach. How, in other words, does a stone “*become* a prehistoric handaxe”. Gell somewhat glosses over this process. In a sense, it seems, we just do it. How we do it is not important. Neither is it important whether the stone “really” is an artefact or ecofact. What matters is that we think it to be an index of the agency of another. It is quite possible that is “really” just a stone, unaltered by the work of any intentional agent, but if we perceive it to be an “artefactual index” within a given “causal milieu” then it becomes so.

Even in this, however, there are ambiguities. The very notion of abduction suggests that there is something about this stone which calls forth the inference of the distributed agency of a mindful other. In this case Gell’s position seems to be similar to that of Holtorf’s discussed above. The “authenticity” of the object as artefact can only be understood as social process of making sense of *something*; however, this process of sense-making is not wholly immaterial since the thing itself is possessed of qualities that invite certain inferences. So the visible “brushwork in works by Van Gogh emanates an almost palpable sense of the artists presence, smearing and dabbing the still viscous oil

paint" (Gell, 1998: 33) or the "suggestive" chipping of a stone calls forth the realisation that is a prehistoric handaxe.

The suggestion that the thing calls forth the abduction of agency introduces the peculiar possibility that "recipient" is rendered passive and so enters into an empathic connection with the mindful intentions which are indexed in the art object – a proposition which is akin to the notion of the "historic sensation" mentioned above. This is evident in Gell's discussion of the "elementary formula of passive spectatorship", which suggests "that the primary means through which the index affects the recipient is by subverting the recipient's sense of *self-possession* in some way" (1998: 31). He gives the example of an Asmat shield. The design of that shield, according to Gell, "seems to have been composed in a mood of terror" and so makes terror "manifest" in artefact, and, by "submitting to their fascination", we the viewer "are obliged to share in the emotion which they objectify" (1998: 31). So it seems that we experience communion with that other whose presence is deferred as origin yet, in our "submission" to the force of the object, comes into presence through our own experience. In effect, we touch (or are touched by) the past.

This, however, does not interrogate how this givenness is solicited. The fact of the matter is that there is often some ambiguity when it comes to indexing the agency of another in our encounters with things and, since the indexicality of the thing is not simply given, there is some work involved in the process of abduction. Take the matter of stone tools. As Roy Ellen amply demonstrates in his work on "eolithes" (2013), the question of whether a stone is a mere thing or an "artefactual index" can become fraught, contested and, when it comes to the work of archaeology, often requires the deployment of sophisticated techniques to discover the traces of mindful intentionality in the form of stone. The point is that when it comes to stone tools (or anything else for that matter) the abduction of agency does not just happen, but is solicited in our interactions with stuff. Sometimes this processes may be highly complex, as in the case of the identification of 3.3 million year old stone tools discovered in West Turkhana, Kenya (Harmand et al, 2015). In many cases, however, the process of abduction by which a stone *becomes* an "artefactual index" is not so complicated or

potentially contested, perhaps consisting of little more than a glance. So, for example, there is Bill's story of finding his most lovely artefact. He tells of how he looked in the water and thought he saw "something" amidst the swirling sand and bits of bark. Similarly, Neil and Marion walked along the beach while waiting for the ferry and "noticed an unusual object from protruding from the ground" (Wells, 2011). Even in these stories, however, there is a process of abduction. In fact in both these examples, this process may begin with *something* coming to notice in a glance, but this thing is fully revealed as an artefact only when it comes to hand. Neil says that he "knew exactly what it is *when he picked it up.*" For Bill, there remained some ambiguity as to what the thing was as long as he looked down into the moving water. Only when he reached in hand in and pulled the stone from the sea and so disentangled it from the swirl of bark and sand did it become an artefact.

This brings me to the second limitation of my reading of Gell's formulation of the abduction of agency. One could argue that the deferral which I am reading into Gell's work is an effect of his emphasis on sight as the chief sense by which we recognise the agency of past lives in our encounter with things. In so doing he is reproducing an ocularcentrism which, as K uchler suggests, deeply informs the ways in which "we" of the post-enlightenment West conceptualise the past as being "out of touch" and so make it into "a foreign land" (1996: 183) to be colonised with our own fancies and whose irreducible otherness animates the modernist projects of historical and archaeological study (cf. Witmore, 2006: 169-171). It is possible that in touch, time becomes enfolded into the thing and our hand becomes, in effect, the hand of the absent other, at least for a brief uncanny moment. Gell himself seems to suggest just such a possibility. Following on from the discussion of the possibility of our "submitting to the fascination" of the object, he goes on to suggest that such a relationship "need not be restricted to those contexts in which the recipient is confined to seeing the index, as opposed to interacting with the index in some other way" (1998: 32). He gives the example of kissing an icon of the Virgin Mary. In such a case "it is the inherent agency of the material index, rather than the Virgin, which is at issue." From this example Gell hypothesises that "[w]hen images have to be touched, rather than merely looked at, there is an imputation that there is an

inherent agency in the material index" (1998: 32). In a more extended discussion of the "distributed person" he returns to this question and considers Hindu "idols" and the "tactile forms of homage" which "are very important elements in Hindu image-worship" (1998: 117). These forms of homage include sight, for within this tradition "seeing was, like touching, a form contact" and so is fundamentally interactive, rather than simply be a matter of our gaze falling upon a passive object (1998: 117). So it is both in and through the image that the worshiper enters into communion with the divine. As Gell writes: "The gaze directed by the god towards the worshipper confirms his blessing; conversely, the worshipper reaches out and touches the god. The result is a union with god, a merging of consciousness according to devotionalist interpretation" (1998: 117).

The past, like the Hindu god, is, therefore, not something beyond touching. It is not some "foreign country" which we visit only in romantic imaginings and academic study. The past is, rather, in the present "as a constituent of the real world" (Küchler 1996: 183). It is, in other words, imminent in that moment we walk along a beach and find a stone chipped in a suggestive manner, much as the god, at once and forever transcendent and withheld, suddenly becomes immanent and present within the act of submission when the devotees gaze meets that of the divine image and they "touch" one another. Following Gell, what I am suggesting is that in and through the tactile process of abduction in which the thing reveals itself to be an artefactual index there is the possibility of intimate sense of communion with that other who is at once immanent in thing and yet before and beyond it. This may all seem a bit leap of interpretation, but it does seem to make some sense of some incidents I experienced and shared with others while doing research in Newfoundland.

The tactility of stone

Just a day after I had been out to Lower Sandy Point in the company of Bill Sceviour, I was back to the same spot, this time in the company of John Sutherland. It was a perfect day of blue sky and sunshine, and, after walking along the beach picking up bits of iron and oddly shaped stones, we stopped out on the point and leaned on John's car and drank a can of beer and talked of the

Beothuk. Sometime during this talk he reached out an old plastic box in which, packed in paper towel, were various bits of metal and chipped stone that he had picked up from Lower Sandy Point. He handed me this big lump of dark smooth stone. There was not much to show that it was anything more than a stone. I held it in my hand. He showed me where there was a groove, just where the thumb closes to hold it. So it was: I closed my hand to hold the stone and my thumb rested in the worn-smooth place and the stone sat snug and close and it felt like a tool, something to work with. We both remarked that it is a strange and wonderful thing to feel, in the cold contour of stone, the shadow of a thumb that had made this place for itself hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago, so fashioning a stone that still, once and for all, fits close in the hand.

Nor was this the only time that the fit of stone in the hand was remarked on. In the summer of 2010 I was sitting around a kitchen table in a cabin at Point Leamington, Notre Dame Bay, talking of the Beothuk with my host, Tony Stuckless, and two of his friends of, Eric and Everett. Sometime in the evening Eric went to his car and came back with a Tupperware box lined with tissue paper. He unpacked this box, laying out a stone lamp, a scrapper made of grey chert and a big lump of stone, one end slightly chipped and worn, which he took to have been some kind of tool. There was some debate as to whether this was indeed an artefact, or merely a stone naturally worn in a slightly suggestive manner. The rock was handed around and we each held it and hefted it, closing it our hand and bringing it down in a tool-using motion, as if we were bashing and breaking something. We remarked on the fit and balance of it in the hand, how the contours of rock seemed to shape to our grip and how in our grasp, it felt like an artefact.

There are a few things to note about these episodes. Firstly, they are about the process of abduction by which the people who had found suggestively shaped stones tried to discover whether these stones were in fact artefacts, whose form gave evidence to the intentional actions of mindful others. Secondly, this process of abduction was, to recall Bailey's (2014) turn of phrase, a "cheriotic" enquiry: a matter of touching, holding, moving the stone in the hand and in doing so discovering in its fit and balance whether it seemed plausibly tool-like. Thirdly, this process whereby a stone

becomes an “artefactual index” was fundamentally social, a matter of achieving some consensus amongst a gathering of people as, for example, the stone passed from hand to hand amongst the men gathered in a cabin in Point Leamington. This is not, however, to argue that the indexicality of the stone become artefact is wholly a social construction. As Holtorf and Gell suggest, the agency of the absent other is not just attributed to the stone according to the whim of those present. It is, rather, discovered in our handling of the stone and how in our hand we discover that this stone was made to be held in a certain way and so given to a certain purpose.

When considered in reference to the question of how it is we may “touch the past”, there seems to be something strange happening here. The agency of the absent other is not recognised as we look upon the thing and find in its appearance the traces of past intentionality; rather, we discover the agency of another in our tactile engagement with stone: in holding it in our hand, running our fingers along the still slightly sharp edge, taking it in our grasp and hefting it in a way to reveal its use. In other words, the stone becomes an artefactual index in our hands. In this the difference between self and other dissolves in the sensation of grasping a stone and finding that it fits to the form of our (or another’s) hand. In a way this stone was shaped for and by us, not us as specific individuals, but us as humans with hands and a disposition towards tool-use that is indivisible from our peculiar handedness.

It would seem then that memory, to adopt a line of argument being explored by Sutton (2008) and Malafouris (2008a; 2008b), is a matter of distributed cognition (Sutton 2008), technoetic awareness and the material extension of the self into the world (Wilson, 2005; Malafouris, 2008a). Like Gell, Malafouris and Sutton are concerned with the question of “material agency”. Unlike Gell however, they argue that the agency of things does not ultimately derive from the ghostly hand of a “primary” agent, whose intentions are extended into the world through various inanimate “secondary” agents. According to Malafouris, “while agency and intentionality may not be properties of things, they are not properties of humans either. They are, rather, the properties of material engagement, that is, of the grey zone where brain, body and culture conflate” (2008b).

This is an argument not wholly dissimilar to Ingold's (1993) discussion of the temporality of "landscape", or, to use his preferred term, "taskscape". According to Ingold we perceive the temporality of the "taskscape" not as "spectators but as participants" (1993: 159). He rejects the notion "that we can stand aside and observe the passage of time" as being "founded upon an illusion of disembodiment", and instead argues that "this passage is, indeed, none other than our own journey through the taskscape in the business of dwelling" (1993: 159). Moreover, and again in a way not wholly dissimilar to Sutton and Malafouris, the temporal nature of our engagement with the phenomenal world should, above all else, be understood as a concrete material engagement – an engagement with matter as the very medium through which our extensive social selves are constituted in the ongoing relational processes of dwelling and making.

In this context, it is perhaps significant that Malafouris and Sutton prefer to talk of "material agency", rather than the agency of things. The latter would suggest that the agency of things lies in our intentional projects becoming concrete in the form and appearance of things. By emphasising material agency, however, Malafouris, Sutton, and Ingold, suggest that intentional projects should be understood as constituted in the material process of being, thereby disavowing any *a priori* human consciousness, an "in here" of thinking and feeling, which precedes and directs material expression "out there" in the world (cf. Ingold 2010). In such circumstances, as we run our fingers over a sharp edge or hold the stone in our grasp, the agency of the thing no longer lies in the "abduction" of ghostly hand that once sometime before made and used this artefact, it lies in our hand, in our sensuous realisation of the peculiar qualities of this material. It lies, in other words, in our feeling it to be a tool, not a tool in some prehistoric man's hand, but a tool in our own. Time becomes thereby enfolded into matter, or more precisely into the material realisation of hand and stone. These sensuous moments, which both exceed and are insufficient to representation, are moments when the geometric time of historical narration, neat and ironed flat (to borrow an image from Michel Serres), crumples like an old handkerchief to become topological time in which two

points, held distant geometrically, may “suddenly become close, even superimposed” (Serres and Latour 1995: 59).

So it is that past is immanent in our embodied engagement with world. The notion of the “immanent past” is borrowed again from Kuchler (1996: 185) and, in particular, Kevin Birth (2006). In adopting this turn of phrase Birth argues that we would do well to “shift the focus away from “treating the encodings of the past as objects” and towards the ongoing material processes by which we experience “the phenomenological presence of the past” (2006: 181). So to say that we may “touch the past”, when we handle the lump of grey smooth stone or turn a chipped white rock between our fingers, is not to say that we discover the marks of past use and from these “abduct” the distributed and deferred hand of a “primary agent”. In this moment of skin on skin contact – the meeting of the skin of our bodies with the surface of stone – time, to again use an image from Serres, “percolates” (1995: 58; cf. Witmore, 2006: 278-281). The past seeps into the present or, equally, as suggested by Tulving when defining the nature of “episodic memory”, we travel back in time while standing still (2002: 5). Finally, the very distinction which we make between present and past, a distinction described upon geometric or abstract imaginings of time, falls away and we dwell within the folds and pleats of time which is indivisible from, and always immanent in, our embodied being the world.

The stories told to me those who felt the presence of the Beothuk were stories precisely of such moments: the moment when you hear the sound of shrew moving through undergrowth, or when find the bones of animal on the beach, or when you close your hand around a stone and find it fits snug in your grip. In this sense to remember the Beothuk, or whichever native people fashioned these artefacts, is no longer a matter of seeing past the stone to imagine the absent hand that shaped and used it. It is a matter of holding the thing, touching it, discovering its material properties and, in so doing, entering in communion with the other hands that fashioned and used it as a tool. In a way the ghostly hand disappears, no longer haunts the thing, for this hand is our very own.

Conclusion

This article began with the question of how it is we may touch the past when, like some of the people I met in Newfoundland, we extend our arms outwards and close our hand around a lump of stone. The conclusion, provisional and partial, is that the answer to this question lies in the socio-technical process by which discover the thing to be an artefactual index in and through which we may abduct the agency of another. At the heart of this process is a difference, or deferral, between the thing in the hand and the mindful other, whose agency at once dwells within the thing and yet exceeds it. Yet in some circumstances this difference can be, temporarily, uncannily, undone through the very process of abduction, and, in particular, as Gell anticipates, through touch; for it is in touch, that the thing becomes an artefact and so we enter into a bodily communion with other lives, normally held distant and absent with topological time.

This conclusion raises two questions. The first is how this quality of “historical sensation” relates to the ways in which the feeling of pastness is incorporated into, and elicited by, the more general field of mnemonic practices by which a society remembers (or forgets) the past and how this process relates to a contemporary politic of belonging, identity and indigeneity. Secondly, there is the question of difference, and how difference not only collapses into the tactile processes in which we recognise a stone to be artefact, but also emerges from this same process. The possibility of historical sensation, of the enfoldment of otherness into sensuous moment, assumes a quality of intimacy, of commensality, of empathic communion. Yet in places, such as Newfoundland, where contemporary articulations of belonging both incorporate and are spoken in the absence of an indigenous people whose “disappearance” may constitute the very condition of possibility for the expression of settler nativism, this dissolution of the distinction between self and other, assumed in the notion of “touching the past”, is necessarily problematic. This invites a more critical theorisation of the “feeling of pastness” in which the absent other is withheld as being excessive to, or beyond, experiential knowing even as it sensed in the present.