

THE IN-BETWEEN

A PAST ONCE DENIED IS REDISCOVERED

"They called that place Sniél-emen (mountains of the surrounded) because there they had been set upon and destroyed."

D'Arcy McNickle (1904-1977)
The Surrounded

The Mountains of the Surrounded

In the arms of Sniél-emen
I am singing

In the arms of Sniél-emen
I am singing

In the arms of Sniél-emen
I am looking

In the arms of Sniél-emen
I am looking

In the arms of Sniél-emen
The Grandmothers are singing

In the mountains of the surrounded
The Grandmothers are calling me to the
burial ground

Gretchen Cotrell

BY GRETCHEN COTRELL

Every human being has a story. This is part of mine. I offer it in the spirit of sharing something true, not only of my life, but also true of the lives of many others.

D'Arcy McNickle, author of the epigraph that opens *The Mountains of the Surrounded*, was an American Indian from my home country, the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana. The Sniél-emen are known among non-Indians of that area as the Mission Range of the western slope of the Rockies, named after the Indian mission that was founded by the Jesuit priest Pierre Jean De Smet in 1854.

McNickle was a near contemporary to my parents, and their families were neighbors during the 1920s and '30s. He grew up to become a leading chronicler and anthropologist of American Indian history and culture, as well as an accomplished fiction writer.

The fact that my parents had neither met nor heard of him, until I discovered an article about his death in the late '70s, points up some peculiar and sad facts of American Indian life in this century: Indian people could live within two miles of each other and be total strangers; members of the same families, bands and tribes could exist in the same community and have no connection with one another; Indian people could live their entire lives in ignorance of their language, their culture, their relatives and their tribal origins.



MANIFEST GENOCIDE

GREAT GRANDMOTHER ANGELINE
 HOW I WISH I HAD KNOWN THE PRESS OF YOUR WOODSWOMAN'S ARMS
 LIPS UPON HAIR
 BREASTS AND TEMPLES MEETING
 MOTHER OF MY FATHER'S MOTHER
 DAUGHTER OF THE CREE
 DID YOU EVER THINK ABOUT THE ONE
 WHO WOULD CALL FOR YOU FROM THE FUTURE?

—GRETCHEN COTRELL

How could this be? Parts of that long story of our lost identity have begun to creep into the consciousness of the non-Indian American culture over the past two or three decades. Many Indian people never forgot who they were, but as many or more either forgot or were forced to forget. That is where my story begins — with the struggle between forgetting and remembering.

The Surrounded is a story about a young mixed-blood man's tribal origins and early life in the Flathead Valley, his youthful journey 700 miles away to an "Indian school" in Oregon, his love and longing for his mountains and his home, his return, his alienation from his own people, his tragic end.

McNickle captures the irreparably wounded heart of being, the lost world, the soul of grief. Such attempts at words have the unfortunate ring of the maudlin, the romantic. Yet, on the page, we have only words to convey the tear, the drum, the dance, the song, the spirit's reach for the hauds of the lost ones.

Terms like "half-breed," "full-blood" and "mixed-blood" have a history in the destructive effort to separate human beings on the basis of ethnic origin. American Indians are the only group designated by the federal government according to "blood quantum."

This racist concept originated in one of the many government efforts to destroy tribal cultures, assimilate survivors into the dominant world, and reduce treaty obligations and land claim settlements by establishing a

qualifying minimum "degree of Indian blood." Some assimilation designs were created by well-meaning human beings who could not envision their inevitably disastrous outcomes. The "successes," though incomplete, of such efforts can be seen in what some have called the "core meltdown" of tribal cultures, the residual varieties of dislocation, alienation and identity confusion and its many manifestations in the present-day sufferings of native peoples throughout the Americas.

My personal story really begins at this conjunction, where "meltdown" was arrested. I grew up on a farm in the 1950s on the Flathead Reservation. My father's grandmother was a Cree full-blood from North Battleford, Saskatchewan. ("Full-blood" here connotes cultural way of life and lifelong identity.) Some of her ancestors were French, Scottish and English fur traders. My maternal grandmother, Anna Youpe, arrived in Montana at age 4, in 1893, with her mother and family. Her father died en route.

**'THE SUBJECT
 OF OUR INDIAN
 HERITAGE
 WAS TABOO.'**

**'For many of us
who are born
'in-between,'
it becomes
necessary to bring
half of ourselves
to life'**

My father remembers as a small boy searching with his mother for his grave, but they never found it.

Anna was educated at Fort Shaw Indian (Catholic) School in northern Montana, where she completed the 10th grade. In her day, she would have been considered fairly well-educated, but because she was Indian, servant work was the only paid work she could find. She and my grandfather met on a cattle ranch in Montana, where she worked as a cook and maid.

The Youpes were members of the Little Shell Band who came to be known as the Cree-Métis or "Mucheef" or the Landless Indians of Montana. "Métis" means "mixed" or "half-breed" in French. They spoke French, Cree and English and were among many Canadian Indian families who fled Canada in the aftermath of the second Riel or North West Rebellion of 1885.

That's another story — the Riel Rebellions. Suffice it to say that their leader, Louis Riel, founded "la nation métisse" and made the historic pronouncement that, "It is true that our savage (sic) origin is humble, but it is meet that we honor our mothers as well as our fathers. Why should we concern ourselves about what degree of mixture we possess of European or Indian blood? If we have ever so little of either gratitude or filial love, should we not be proud to say, 'We are Metis?'"

My paternal grandfather, Tom Cotrell, was an Irish and Cherokee cowboy born in Trinidad, Colo. He spoke very little of his family or his past. As my uncle used to say, "He covered his trail behind him." He revealed that he was "part Cherokee" and gave the impression that it would be dangerous to press him further on that score. He said that he left his family at age 13, worked as a cowhand for Sam Houston's son, and came to Montana from Texas on a cattle drive at age 14, around 1892.

Anna and Tom homesteaded 160 acres near Choteau, but in the infamous winter of 1919 their cattle herd froze to death and they lost everything. So they migrated from town to town between Choteau and Kalispell, where they cut lodgepole for railroad ties, sheared sheep, and took in washing. They



Compelled by a "drive to become whole," professor

knew the Flathead to be good hunting country and ended up there, where, during the Depression, they squatted in deserted houses.

The Flathead Tribe tried to enroll the family in the '30s, which would have improved their fiscal lot significantly. However, my grandparents chose against the constraints of official tribal membership that subjected one to white authorities at every turn, such as physical restriction to the reservation without a written pass. Also, to be a "reservation Indian" was to be even more vulnerable to the vagaries of white persecution. Indians were still being shot like game during the '30s. My father remembers sitting in school and listening to young white boys express their ambitions to "kill an Injun."

If one was mixed-blood, some non-Indians would not recognize one to be Indian, so, in that era, the phenomenon of "passing" was adapted by many for survival. So my father grew up in a household that marked the boundary between two worlds and belonged to neither. He remembers visiting his mother's relatives in a teepee village on the Sun River when he was very young. He also recalls a trip to see his mother's grandparents high in the Montana Cascade Range outside of Choteau where they had hidden for years in order to avoid deportation to Canada.

Over the years, he saw his relatives less and less. His parents believed that they were protecting their children by cutting them off from their relatives and avoiding discussion



CHUCK SCHUBER PHOTO

Gretchen Cotrell found her Cree-Métis heritage.

of their Indian heritage. My father and his brother were punished when they attempted to learn to dance and use the sweat lodge. What their parents did not understand was that their silence and isolation generated bewilderment and feelings of inferiority, which were reinforced in the public schools of the time, systems that failed to acknowledge the realities of racism and its effects on Indian children in a dominantly white milieu.

An Okinagan half-blood woman known as Mourning Dove or Cogewea (1888-1936), who lived on the Flathead, describes the peculiar plight of the "in-betweens" in her book *The Half-Blood*: "...the half-bloods ... were just a go-between people, shut within their own diminutive world. There seemed no place for them among either race ... 'We' breeds are half and half ... in a separate corral. We are despised by both of our relatives. The white people call us 'Injuns' and a 'good-for-nothing' outfit; a 'shiftless' vile class of commonality. Our red brothers say that we are 'stuck-up'; that we have deserted our own kind and are imitating the ways of the despoilers of our nationality.'"

Cogewea aptly portrayed my father's experience, which I inherited from him, except that I was not taunted and attacked by my schoolmates for being Indian, as was he. Because my mother is non-Indian, most of my schoolmates did not recognize me to be Indian because I "looked white." My par-

ents also believed that silence was golden, thus the subject of our Indian heritage was taboo. My sisters and I were discouraged emphatically from ever speaking of it, although it was well-known in the adult community, as I later came to realize.

This fact was an ongoing source of confusion for me, from a very young age. I knew that I was Indian but that, mysteriously, I should not speak of it. Through reading, from about the age of 10, I developed a deep identification with Indian people and "their" history. At the same time, I had neither guidance nor reinforcement for understanding that history and culture to be my own. In effect, only my non-Indian heritage was affirmed and valued; the Indian side was denied and devalued. My father's stock answer to my persistent questions was, "All that is over. The white man won. The Indians are dying off. We have to forget."

Yet, I sensed his ambivalence, a mixture of confusion, shame, pride and grief.

In our community, there were about 500 Euro-Americans and 6,000 American Indians. Yet, the white community was the most "visible" and dominant in the public sphere. It is hard to believe (or maybe not), but it is true. The non-Indian, Euro-American world was, in effect, the only model, the only reality.

My mother's last name was Strong. Her ancestors were from all parts of the British Isles. My maternal grandmother was born in a sod house on the Nebraska plain. She and Grandpa Strong moved from Oregon to the Flathead Reservation when it was opened to non-Indian settlement in 1909.

My mother's family did not socialize with Indian people. She and my father grew up together on the Flathead and attended the same country school. After high school, Mother married Dad against her father's will.

Denial works in strange ways. Neither of my parents acknowledged until very recent years that theirs was an inter-ethnic marriage, so it was impossible for them to recognize many of their basically cultural differences.

Psychology and anthropology tell us that suppressed cultures have a way of surviving

independently of the awareness of the survivors. I now recognize Indian values and ways of being that have survived through my father, despite two generations of denial. For example, he has an "Indian" sense of humor, he embodies a non-aggressive reticence, hospitality, and respect for others that seem distinctly tribal and his relationships with the natural and spiritual worlds take marked precedence over the material. This is not to say that similar traits are uncharacteristic of other cultures, but that as an adult, I understand my families differently, in light of a more complete history of their lives and times.

My father had almost no information about his family history. Both his parents died when I was 1, so I could not ask them the many questions that worried me as a child. Particularly, I wanted to know who I was — all of me — my whole history, and where all of my relatives were on my father's side.

When I became old enough to make my own decisions, I discovered my paternal family history through talking to my aunt and uncle, through library research, and eventually through going to meet my numerous unknown relatives in eastern Montana. In this way, compelled by the drive to become whole, I became who I always was but had been ordered not to be. In Montana in the '50s, one could be either white or Indian. There was no in-between. For many of us who are born "in-between," it becomes necessary to bring half of ourselves to life, long after birth.

The great African American writer James Baldwin wrote what one might say of American Indians or any other suppressed minority group: "I can conceive of no Negro native to the country who has not, by the age of puberty, been irreparably scarred by the conditions of his life. ... The wonder is not that so many are ruined but that so many survive." □

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