

Connecting People to Place: The Power and Relevance of Origin Stories*

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Introduction

I have been asked to review the historical connection of Aboriginal people to the land that lies between Lake Huron and Lake Erie. As a descendant of Great Lakes Aboriginal ancestors, I have been taught that our people come from the land and that we are shaped by the land. Aboriginal history and self-understanding is conveyed across generations by stories and teachings that are grounded in particular landscapes. As a legally-trained historian, however, I am familiar with the methods and protocols used in the document-based tradition. In my research method, I combine oral tradition and archival materials in order to construct historical narratives in their cultural context.

As a specialist in Great Lakes Aboriginal history, I am often asked to answer the multi-layered question: “Who was where when?” The task of connecting particular people to a specific place in a given time period is especially daunting if the recorded names of the peoples and the places keep changing. This is the challenge that faces anyone attempting to locate the ancestors of present-day Aboriginal communities. When looking for evidence of group identity in the documentary record, one has to consider not only what the people called themselves (auto-ethnonyms) but also what they were called by others (xeno-ethnonyms). In a region as culturally complex as the Great Lakes over the span of the past four hundred years, the naming practices used by record makers create serious difficulties.

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Imagine a group of people living in the vicinity of rapids who call themselves the Passinaouek. They are known by their Aboriginal neighbours as the Rapids People. But their Aboriginal neighbours speak a different language and their term for Rapids People is Skiaeronon. So now we have two different names for the same people. Then the French come into the region and begin keeping written records and making maps. Before they meet the Passinaouek, they hear about them from the people who call them Skiaeronon. So the first French records refer to the Passinaouek as Skiaeronon. In time, the French meet the Passinaouek in person and, if they can understand their language, they may record their name correctly. But before long, the French will start referring to the Passinaouek by using their own word for people of the Rapids, Sauteurs. Now there are three different names for the same people. Eventually, the British enter the region and, for reasons unknown, start calling these people Jibbeways or Ojibways or Chippewas. The people at the rapids know that they have been there since before any of their neighbours arrived. But there are few, if any, historical records that confirm their presence in terms of their own self-understanding as Passinaouek. The introduction and recording of different names bestowed by outsiders creates the potential for confusing a change of names with a change of peoples.

As it turns out, the Passinaouek are a fairly well-documented group because their territory was visited by many record-makers. Fur traders, missionaries and military personnel were stationed at Sault Ste Marie from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards. Because there were no gaps in the presence of record-makers, there is a continuous historical record of the Aboriginal occupation at the Sault. But many Aboriginal people lived in places not frequented by European record-makers. And the

lack of documentation, combined with changing names for both people and places, creates an impression of disruption and discontinuity in the region.

Southern Lake Huron is such a region. Today, many of the Aboriginal occupants are known by the name “Chippewas”. This is a term that British colonial officials began using in the late 1700’s. The earlier French documentary record provides no evidence of the presence of “Chippewas” in southern Lake Huron. This does not mean that there is no connection between the present-day Chippewas and earliest-recorded Aboriginal people of the region. What it does mean is that researchers have to be sensitive to other evidence of identity besides French or British naming practices. Exposure to Aboriginal traditions and understanding is vital to developing the sensitivity required to discern connections in the face of documentary gaps and inconsistencies.

In my work, I have encountered evidence of identity which does not depend upon the language of the record-marker. I refer to this identity as totemic identity. It consists of the identifying symbols that Aboriginal people made on physical objects such as trees, canoes, houses and clothing. When the Europeans arrived with ink and parchment, these marks were used by Aboriginal leaders whenever their “signature” was required. In my personal experience, totemic identity has remained largely unchanged in the four centuries since contact. Let’s return to the Passinaouek. In their language, the term refers to the “Echo maker” which is their metaphorical name for the Crane. A Crane chief would make his mark by drawing the image of a Crane. It wouldn’t matter whether the record-maker referred to him as a Sauteur or a Chippewa, his mark would remain unchanged. Aboriginal use of symbols rather letters has allowed evidence of totemic

identity to persist despite changes in the naming practices and languages of newcomers to the Great Lakes region.

Connecting people to place requires an exploration of how people understand themselves in relation to their place. For the Aboriginal people of the Great Lakes, there is both a physical and spiritual aspect to identity and landscape. The relationship between people and place is created and maintained by totemic identity. In this report, I will demonstrate that evidence of totemic identity connects the descendants of the Chippewas who signed treaties in the southern Lake Huron region to their ancestors in the early contact period. In order to understand how totemic identity is relevant to the Aboriginal history of the Great Lakes, it must be approached from an Aboriginal perspective of creation.

Origin Stories and Totemic Identity

For millennia, the Great Lakes region has been home to indigenous people. French explorers and missionaries were the first Europeans to reach the Great Lakes in the early seventeenth-century, escorted by Aboriginal guides. Here, they encountered two main groups of indigenous peoples whom they distinguished on the basis of their language. The French referred to these languages as Iroquoian and Algonquian, terms still used by non-aboriginal linguists today.

The Iroquoian-speaking group included people settled on the southern shore of what is now called Georgian Bay. The French called these people Huron, but they called themselves Wendat. Other Iroquoian-speaking groups located on the north shores of Lakes Erie and Ontario the French called Neutral. South of Lake Erie, the Iroquoian-

speakers were known by the French as the Eries and the Cat Nation. To the east of these were five confederated nations, the Haudenosaunee, whom the French called Iroquois.

Surrounding these Iroquoian-speaking peoples, to the North, East, South and West, were the Algonquian-speakers. I am a descendant of these peoples. We call our language Anishnaabemwin. Over the past four hundred years, our ancestors have been given a confusing array of names by newcomers. For the purpose of this report, I will use our own naming practices wherever possible. Wherever it is clear from the archival record that the Great Lakes people in question spoke Anishnaabemwin, I will refer to them as Anishnaabeg.

To begin an account of Anishnaabeg history with seventeenth-century French colonial records, however, would be to start very late in the story. While the last four hundred years have been dramatic and challenging, the Anishnaabeg have continued to survive in the Great Lakes region by drawing upon thousands of years of accumulated knowledge and tradition. Anishnaabeg history does not begin with the first contact with Europeans. That is where the European-authored record of the Great Lakes region begins. Anishnaabeg history begins at the beginning by providing an account of the origin of human beings in the Great Lakes.

Origin stories say a great deal about how people understand their place in the universe and their relationship to other living things. I have been taught by Anishnaabeg Elders that all Creation stories are true. There is not one story which can be true for all peoples of the world. But each peoples' understandings and traditions of their beginning is their truth. Origin stories require the utmost respect. No people outside that tradition should question it or try to impose their own story.

The Anishnaabeg peoples indigenous to the Great Lakes have their own creation story. The centre of Anishnaabeg creation is not Eden but Michilimakinac, an island in the strait which separates Lake Huron from Lake Michigan. One of the earliest French officials to overwinter in the upper Great Lakes, Nicolas Perrot, recorded a version of this story in his memoirs.¹ I rely on his translated and published account because I lack the authority and fluency required to present the oral tradition.

The story that Perrot heard did not begin at the beginning. It is not a creation story so much as a re-creation story. This story starts after birds and animals and fishes had been created. Only human beings remain to be created. As the story begins, the Earth has been flooded and the land animals are floating upon a great wooden raft. The leader of the animals is the Great Hare, *Michabous*. He knows that there is land under the water and that the animals need land in order to survive. In the name of all the animals, the Great Hare asks Beaver to dive deep under water to bring up a little soil from the bottom. He promises that if he can get even one grain of sand, he will be able to make enough land to support all the animals. Beaver dives and remains below so long that the other animals fear he has drowned. Eventually he surfaces, nearly dead, without any sand to show for his heroic efforts. Next Otter is called upon to dive. He too returns, half-drowned, without success. Finally, Muskrat volunteers to dive. The other animals do not have much confidence in him, since Beaver and Otter are much stronger have already failed.

The story continues:

The muskrat then jumped into the water, and boldly dived; and, after he remained there for nearly twenty-four hours he made his appearance at the edge of the raft,

¹ As translated by E.H. Blair in *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi and the Region of the Great Lakes* (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1911) p.31 *et seq.*

his belly uppermost, motionless, and his four feet tightly clenched. The other animals took hold of him, and carefully drew him up on the raft. They unclosed one of his paws, then a second, then a third, and finally the fourth one, in which there was between the claws a little grain of sand.

The Great Hare, who had promised to form a broad and spacious land, took this grain of sand, and let it fall upon the raft, when it began to increase; then he took a part of it, and scattered this about, which caused the mass of soil to grow larger and larger. When it had reached the size of a mountain, he started to walk around it, and it steadily increased in size to the extent of his path. As soon as he thought it was large enough, he ordered the fox to go to inspect his work, with power to enlarge it still more; and the latter obeyed. The fox, when he ascertained that it was sufficiently extensive for him to secure easily his own prey, returned to the Great Hare to inform him that the land was able to contain and support all the animals. At this report, the Great Hare made a tour throughout his creation and found that it was incomplete. Since then, he has not been willing to trust any of the other animals, and continues always to increase what he has made, by moving without cessation around the earth. This idea causes the savages to say, when they hear loud noises in the hollows of the mountains, that the Great Hare is still enlarging the earth; they pay honours to him, and regard him as the deity who created it. Such is the information which those peoples give us regarding the creation of the world, which they believe to be always borne upon that raft. As for the sea and firmament, they assert that these have existed for all time.²

This part of the story says much about Anishnaabeg notions of leadership and land. The Great Hare may be chief among the animals, but he is not despotic. His authority depends upon persuasion, not coercion. The dilemma of the landless animals is shared and resolved by cooperation and bravery. The point of creating land is for mutual sustenance, not personal gain. Creation is the continuing act of the Great Hare. The Anishnaabeg honour him as a living, creative force.

The story that Perrot heard explains the creation of human beings in the following way:

After the creation of the earth, all the other animals withdrew into the places which each kind found most suitable for obtaining therein their pasture or their prey. When the first ones died, the Great Hare caused the birth of men from their corpses, as also from those of the fishes that were found along the shores of the rivers which he had formed in creating the land. Accordingly, some of the

² *Ibid.*

savages derive their origins from a bear, others from a moose, and others similarly from various kinds of animals; and before they had intercourse with the Europeans they firmly believed this, persuaded that they had their being from those kinds of creatures whose origin was as above explained. Even today the notion passes among them for undoubted truth, and if there are any of them at this time who are weaned from believing this dream, it has been only by dint of laughing at them for so ridiculous a belief. You will hear them say that their villages each bear the name of the animal which has given its people their being – as that of the crane, or the bear, or of other animals.

Perrot's account helps to explain the presence of animal names in many tribal names. The name Amikouas, for instance, means "descendants of the beaver".³ The first Beaver is reputed to have left Lake Huron, traveling up the French River, creating lakes, rapids, portages and dams along the way. During his lifetime, he populates the country with many beaver children. In his last days, he travels to Lake Nippissing as his final resting place. Upon the Great Beaver's death, human children emerge from his remains. The Beaver People have a landmark for this burial/creation place:

They believe that he is buried to the north of this lake toward the place where the mountain appears to have the shape of a beaver, and that his tomb is there; this is the reason why they call the place where he lies "the slain beaver." When those peoples pass by that place, they invoke him and blow [tobacco] smoke into the air in order to honor his memory, and to entreat him to be favorable to them in the journey they have to make.⁴

For the Anishnaabeg, the Great Lakes region is more than geography. It is a spiritual landscape formed by and embedded with the regenerative potential of the First Ones who gave it form. The epicenter of Anishnaabeg Creation is the Island in the strait between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, known as Michilimackinac. From this Raft turned-Island, the First Animals ventured out upon the newly-made land, each finding and transforming their own Country.

³ *Ibid.*, at p.62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, at p.63.

In tracing the connection between Anishnaabek peoples and Great Lakes landscapes, it is vital to be attentive to evidence of totemic identity. It is important to understand that totemic identity is a matter of inheritance, not choice. Anishnaabeg totems are patrilineal, which means that children are born into the totem of their father. When women marry, they retain their totemic identity but the children follow in their father's line. A member of the Beaver tribe would have ancestors in their patriline, from father, to grandfather, to great-grandfather, going back to the creation of first Beaver men from the remains of the Great Beaver.

Henry Schoolcraft, a nineteenth-century Indian Agent in the Michigan Territory who married into the Caribou clan, understood the unchanging nature of totemic identity. In his detailed study of Aboriginal history and culture, he paid particular attention to the symbolic devices used to represent identity:

It will be seen, in view of the several devices, that the greatest stress appears to be laid throughout upon the *totem* of the individuals, while there is no device or sign to denote their *personal names*. The totem is employed as the evidence of identity of the family and of the clan. This disclosure is in accordance with all that has been observed of the history, organization, and polity of the Chippewa, and of the Algonquin tribes generally. The totem is in fact a device, corresponding to the heraldic bearings of civilized nations, which each person is authorized to bear, as evidence of his family identity. The very etymology of the word, which is a derivative from *Dodaim*, a town or village, or original family residence, denotes this. It is remarkable, also, that while the Indians of this large group of North America, withhold their true personal names, on inquiry, preferring to be called by various sobriquets, which are often familiar lodge-terms of infancy, and never introduce them into their drawings and picture-writing, they are prompt to give their totems to all inquirers, and never seem at a moment's loss in remembering them. It is equally noticeable, that they trace blood-kindred and consanguinities to the remotest ties; often using the nearer for the remoter affinities, as brother and sister for brother-in-law and sister-in-law, &c.; and that where there is a lapse of memory or tradition, the totem is confidently appealed to, as the test of blood affinity, however remote. It is a consequence of the importance attached to this ancient family tie, that no person is permitted to

change or alter his totem, and that such change is absolutely unknown among them.⁵

What Schoolcraft means by tracing “blood kindred to the remotest ties” is that every person belonging to the same totem was considered a close relative. A Beaver person could travel anywhere on the Great Lakes and expect to be welcomed, sheltered and fed by any Beaver relatives he met along the way. It didn’t matter if they had never met before, their common totemic identity was sufficient evidence that they were related to and responsible for one another’s well-being. The strength of Anishnaabeg totemic identity facilitated extensive trading networks and military alliances among far-flung communities. Totems were the glue that held the Anishnaabeg Great Lakes world together.

It is the fact that totemic identity cannot be changed which makes it the key to demonstrating continuity between people and place. The names given to people by outsiders can change but totemic identity cannot. With this in mind, I have perused the archival record from the French period looking for evidence of Anishnaabeg totemic identity in the land that separates Lake Erie from Lake Huron.

First European Encounters: French Presence in the Great Lakes 1615-1760

In 1615, when Samuel de Champlain reached the shores of the body of water now known as Georgian Bay, he encountered Anishnaabeg people who were widely-travelled and had extensive trade networks. Champlain was so impressed by their distinctive

⁵ Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Historical and Statistical Information respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. Part 1. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1853) at p.420.

hairstyle that he gave them a French name, *Cheveux Relevez* (*High Hairs*).⁶ But because Champlain did not record the name that these people called themselves, it is not possible to ascribe a totemic or tribal identity to the Georgian Bay Anishnaabeg that he encountered. Much of the French record is similarly flawed, making it difficult to re-establish the precise locations of the Great Lakes Anishnaabeg in the early encounter period.

Champlain spent most of that winter among the Hurons on southern Georgian Bay. In January of 1616 he visited the *Cheveux Releves* in their villages to the West of Huronia. He provided the following account of the customs and country:

This nation is very numerous and the greater part are great warriors, hunters and fishermen. They have several chiefs who take command, each in his own district. The majority of them plant Indian corn and other crops. They are hunters who go in bands into various regions and districts where they trade with other tribes distant more than four or five hundred leagues. They are the cleanest savages in their household affairs that I have seen and the most industrious in making mats, which are their Turkey carpets. The women cover themselves, but the men are uncovered, having nothing on but a fur robe like a cloak, which they usually lay aside, especially in summer.⁷

Once again, Champlain neglects to provide any specific reference to the tribal or totemic identity of these Anishnaabek people.

⁶ H.P. Biggar, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, Volume III, p.43-45: "We met with 300 men of a tribe named by us the Cheveux releves, or "High Hairs," because they had them elevated and arranged very high and better combed than our courtiers, and there is no comparison, in spite of the irons and methods these have at their disposal. This seems to give them a fine appearance. They wear no breech cloths, and are much carved about the body in divisions of various patterns. They paint their faces with different colours and have their nostrils pierced and their ears fringed with beads. When they leave their homes they carry a club. I visited them and gained some slight acquaintance and made friends with them. I gave a hatchet to their chief who was as happy and as pleased with it as if I had made him some rich gift and, entering into conversation with him, I asked him about his country, which he drew for me with charcoal on a piece of tree-bark. He gave me to understand that they had come to this place to dry the fruit called blueberries, to serve them as manna in the winter when they can no longer find anything. A and C [Slide C] show the manner of their equipment when they go on the war-path. For arms they have only the bow and arrow, but made in the manner you see in the picture; these they carry as a rule, and a round buckler of tanned leather which comes from an animal like the buffalo."

⁷ *Works*, Volume III, pp.96-101.

One of the earliest documents recording the location of various Anishnaabeg tribes along the shores of Lake Huron is provided by the Jesuit Father Paul LeJeune. Writing in 1640, LeJeune relied on information provided by the fur trade interpreter Sieur Nicolet.⁸ He provides several tribal names rendered in Anishnaabemwin. Many of names have references to animals or places embedded in them. For instance, along the Ottawa River he locates the Kinouchepirini.⁹ “Kinounche” is the Anishnaabemwin word for Pike and “irini” is the ending used to indicate names of peoples, hence the Pike People. Between the Hurons and the French River are the Ouasouarini [possibly Birch Bark people], the Outchougai [Heron people] and the Atchiligouan [possibly Black Squirrel]. North of the French River, on the shores of Georgian Bay, are “the Amikouai, or the nation of the Beaver”, the Oumisagai at the Missisagi River and the Baouichtigouian, “the nation of the people of the Sault”, at Sault Ste. Marie.¹⁰

It is not until 1648 that we get a detailed account of the various Anishnaabek tribes on the south shore of Lake Huron. Father Ragueau writes of the Ouachaskesouek, Nigouaouichiririk [possibly Carp], Outaouasinagouek [Black Squirrel], Kichkagoneak [possibly Bear], and Ontaanak, “who are all allies of our Hurons.”¹¹ From the earliest records kept by the first French visitors to this region, there is evidence of Anishnaabeg people and their totemic identity on the shores surrounding Lake Huron.

⁸ R.G.Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1898) Volume 18: 227-235.

⁹ *Ibid.*, at p.229.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, at p.231. A later account by Father Paul Ragueau puts the Nikikouet (Otter people) on the north shore of Georgian Bay, between the Achirigouans and the Michisaguek, see Volume 33: 149.

¹¹ *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 33, p.149-151.

Between Lake Huron and Lake Erie: A Contested Land

An early Jesuit map entitled *Nouvelle France* shows the region between Lake Huron and Lake Erie as the border zone between the peoples of different cultures and languages. This was a densely populated, culturally complex region existing in a complicated equilibrium. With the introduction of European trade goods, weapons, missionaries and diseases, the intersocietal stresses increased and the balance did not hold. Small pox epidemics caused devastating population losses amongst the Hurons and the Neutrals which made them more vulnerable to Haudenosaunee aggression. A series of sustained Haudenosaunee attacks between 1648 and 1650 destroyed their villages and corn fields. Many were killed and perhaps as many or more were taken captive to replace equally devastating Haudenosaunee losses. The survivors had to move out of striking range, at least temporarily.

Haudenosaunee dominance of the region did not go unchallenged by the Anishnaabeg. As early as 1653, the Jesuits reported that several Anishnaabeg Nations, together with “what remains of the Tobacco Nation and of the Neutral Nation” were uniting against the Haudenosaunee.¹² Anishnaabeg oral tradition records the sites of many battles on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. The first British naval surveyors on the River Thames were shown the site of a seventeenth century battle between the Anishnaabeg and the Haudenosaunee. A watercolour map indicates the location of a burial mound with the following notation: “In the side of this Knoll there are great quantities of Human Bones. A Battle is said to have been fought near it between the

¹² *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 38, p.181.

Chippewas and the Senekies contending for the dominion of this Country, when the latter were put to flight with great Slaughter and driven across the River Niagara.”¹³

For military and trading purposes, French officials were anxious to buttress the claims of their Anishnaabek allies in the southern Lake Huron region. In 1687, Sieur de la Durantaye performed a symbolic taking of possession at the straits separating Lake Erie from Lake Huron. He did so on behalf of the King of France and the “Chaouannons and Miamis, for a long time owners of the said lands of the strait and of Lake Erie, and from which they withdrew for some time for their greater convenience.”¹⁴ The Chaouannons were not the only Anishnaabeg tribes anxious to return to southern Lake Huron. Their re-settlement of the region was facilitated by the signing of a treaty in Montreal in 1701.

The Great Peace and Totemic Identity

In August of 1701, representatives from more than twenty Anishnaabeg Nations assembled in Montreal to participate in Peace negotiations sponsored by the French Governor Calliere. Captives were exchanged and the Haudenosaunee and the Anishnaabeg promised to live together in peace. The document ratifying the peace, signed on August 4, 1701, contains the earliest Anishnaabeg totemic marks known to exist. None of the “signatories” use alphabetic marks, not even an X. Instead, marvelous images of animals and birds are drawn. Not surprisingly, the “amikois” chief is clearly represented as a beaver. The mark of the “missisagues” is a bird of prey, probably an

¹³ U.K. Hydrographic Archives, No.23 1aA, circa 1815.

¹⁴ NAC, MG1, C2A, 10; as translated by Ernest J. Lajeunesse, Editor, *The Windsor Border Region: Canada's Southernmost Frontier* (Toronto: The Champlain Society for the Government of Ontario University of Toronto Press, 1960) at p.11-12.

eagle. The “sauteur” chief signs with a shore bird, likely a crane. This document underscores the totemic nature of tribal identity. The chiefs clearly self-identified by their totems, not by some broader political or linguistic identity. By confirming the correspondence between tribal names and totemic identity, this treaty shows that Anishnaabeg self-understanding persisted from time immemorial into the French colonial era.

The treaty document signed at Montreal was not the only record made of the Peace between the Anishnaabeg and the Haudenosaunee. At a council held at Lake Superior, the Haudenosaunee secured peace by delivering a wampum belt to the Anishnaabeg. This belt was carried by successive generations of chiefs who were charged with remembering the meaning of the symbols worked upon the shell beads. Each generation had a responsibility to renew the peace forged by their ancestors. In 1840, the Anishnaabeg chief Yellowhead read the belt at a Renewal council with the attended by the Haudenosaunee. Yellowhead’s reading was recorded by Peter Jones, a Methodist minister fluent in both English and Anishnaabemwin:

Chief Yellowhead rose up and made a speech and exhibited the great Wampum belt of the Six Nations, and explained the talk contained in it. This Wampum was about 3 feet long and 4 inches wide. It had a row of White Wampum in the centre, running from one end to the other, and the representations of wigwams every now and then, and a large round wampum tied nearly the middle of the Belt, with a representation of the sun in the centre. Yellowhead stated that this Belt was given by the Nahdooways (Haudenosaunee) to the Ojebways (Anishnaabeg) many years ago - about the time the French first came to this country. That the great Council took place at Lake Superior - That the Nahdooways made the road or path and pointed out the different council fires which were to be kept lighted. The first marks on the Wampum represented that a council fire should be kept burning at the Sault St. Marie. The 2nd mark represented the Council fire at the Manitoulin Island, where a beautiful White fish was placed, who should watch the fire as long as the world stood. The 3rd Mark represents the Council fire placed on an Island opposite Penetanguishene Bay, on which was placed a Beaver to watch the fire.

The 4th mark represents the Council fire lighted up at the Narrows of Lake Simcoe at which place was put a White Rein Deer. To him the Rein Deer was committed the keeping of this Wampum talk. At this place our fathers hung up the Sun, and said that the Sun should be a witness to all what had been done and that when any of their descendants saw the Sun they might remember the acts of their forefathers. At the Narrows our fathers placed a dish with ladles around it, and a ladle for the Six Nations, who said to the Ojebways that the dish or bowl should never be emptied, but he (Yellowhead) was sorry to say that it had already been emptied, not by the Six Nations on the Grand River, but by the Caucanawaugas residing near Montreal. The 5th Mark represents the Council fire which was placed at this River Credit where a beautiful White headed Eagle was placed upon a very tall pine tree, in order to watch the Council fires and see if any ill winds blew upon the smoke of the Council fires. A dish was also placed at the Credit. That the right of hunting on the north side of the Lake was secured to the Ojebways, and that the Six Nations were not to hunt here only when they come to smoke the pipe of peace with their Ojebway brethren.

The path on the Wampum went from the Credit over to the other side of the Lake the country of the Six Nations. Thus ended the talk of Yellowhead and his Wampum.¹⁵

This speech, confirmed by the Haudenosaunee representatives at the Renewal Council, demonstrates how wampum belts served as evidence of ownership of territory. It also shows the link between totemic identity and territory. Specific tribes are given responsibility of specific regions. We know from other documentary records that Chief Yellowhead was a White Rein Deer (or Caribou) chief. When he signed treaties, he drew the figure of a Rein Deer. He drew his authority from his fathers and grandfathers before him back to the first White Rein Deer. He understood that his role was to stand in the place assigned to his ancestors until the end of time. Treaties and wampum belts are a rich source of evidence of totemic identity. In treaty documents signed with totemic marks, genealogy and territory are fused in a landscape that is both geographic and spiritual.

¹⁵ NAC, RG10, Volume 1011.

Anishnaabeg Burials and Totemic Identity

Anishnaabeg attachment to lands can be related to a corresponding attachment to the graves of ancestors. Because the Living have are obliged to care for the Dead, proximity to family burial grounds is extremely important. Just as the Creation Story ties people to place, so there is a connective force in burial traditions. They tells us much about Anishnaabeg understanding of human beings, their bodies and souls, and their connection to land and their ancestors, both human and other-than-human.

In Anishnaabeg culture, there is an ongoing relationship between the Dead and the Living; between Ancestors and Descendants. It is the obligation of the Living to ensure that their relatives are buried in the proper manner and in the proper place. Failure to perform this duty harms not only the Dead but also the Living. The Dead need to be sheltered and fed, to be visited and feasted. These traditions continue to exhibit powerful continuity.

Champlain was the first European to write about this relationship between the Living and the Dead. In 1608, he noted that “they believe in the immortality of souls, and say that the dead enjoy happiness in other lands with their relatives and friends who have died.” And yet he observed a continuing attachment to burial sites: “In the case of chiefs, or others having influence, they hold a banquet three times a year and sing and dance upon their grave.”¹⁶ Feasting the Dead is an obligation that continues to be observed by Elders in my community.

In 1613, Champlain recorded the first description of an Anishnaabeg cemetery on Tessouat’s Island in the Ottawa River:

¹⁶ *Works*, Volume 2, p.50.

Now, as I looked about the island, I noticed their cemeteries, and was filled with wonder at the sight of the tombs, in the form of shrines, made of pieces of wood, crossed at the top, and fixed upright in the ground three feet apart of thereabouts. Above the cross-pieces they place a large piece of wood, and in front another standing upright, on which is carved rudely (as one might expect) the face of him or her who is there buried. If it is a man they put up a shield, a sword with a handle such as they use, a club, a bow and arrows; if it is a chief, he will have a bunch of feathers on his head and some other ornament or embellishment; if a child, they give him a bow and arrow; if a woman or girl, a kettle, an earthen pot, a wooden spoon, and a paddle. The largest tomb is six or seven feet long and four wide; the others smaller. They are painted yellow and red, with various decorations as fine as the carving.¹⁷

This description of grave houses bears a striking resemblance to nineteenth-century accounts and drawings of Anishnaabeg cemeteries. It is important to note that these are not random burials but well-marked and well-tended cemeteries.

Burial in Native Country

The Jesuits also paid attention to aboriginal burial practices. They were struck by the importance attached to burial in one's native country. The permanence of the connection between body and soul was grounded in a particular landscape. In the first published *Relation* was written by Father Baird recounting his work among the Algonquian-speaking peoples of the Atlantic region. He notes the attachment that people exhibit towards the Dead:

Some time afterward, the father of the young man fell sick, and wished to be also brought to us, where after being received into our hut and even into the bed of the one the Fathers, he piously departed this life; and, what was novel and displeasing to the savages, he was buried among Christian people: for they themselves are very reluctant to be separated from the tombs of their ancestors.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Works*, Volume 3, p.279-280. Biggar's translation leaves something to be desired. In the original, Champlain refers to "la figure" not "la visage" of the deceased. The former is consistent with later representations of totemic images on Anishnaabeg grave posts.

¹⁸ *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 1, p.215.

The second volume of the Jesuit Relations contains an account of the funeral of a warrior “who had died in the land of the Etechemins.” The funeral occurred on the coast near Port Royal, making it clear that his body had been transported a considerable distance eastward across the River Saint Croix.¹⁹ It was simply not an option to bury the dead where they fell.

In 1636, Anishnaabeg from Lake Nippising over-wintered with their Wendat allies on southern Georgian Bay. Although seventy of them died there from diseases, they were not interred. The Jesuit Relation reports that ‘On the 19th [April], the Bissiriniens, seeing the ice broken and the lake open, embarked to return to their own country, and carried away in seven canoes seventy of those who had died while they wintered among the Hurons.’²⁰

People who had relocated due to war were often keen to return to the lands where their ancestors were buried. Father Jerome Lalemant, writing in 1646, names various Algonquian-speaking nations who had formerly dwelt at Montreal but withdrew fearing Iroquois aggression. With a French military presence on the Island, many resolved “to recover it as their country”.²¹ Among those who re-settled at Montreal was an octogenarian whom Lalemant does not name but whose tradition he records: “Here,” said he, “is my country. My mother told me that while we were young, the Hurons making war on us, drove us from this Island; as for me, I wish to be buried in it, near my ancestors.”²²

¹⁹ *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 2, p.133-135.

²⁰ *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 14, p.37.

²¹ “The Onontchataronons, whose ancestors formerly inhabited the Island of Montreal, and who seem to have some desire to recover it as their country, remained firm, and after their example, the Mataouchkairiniwek.” *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 29, at p.147.

²² *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 29, at p.173.

The importance of burial in one's native country persisted throughout the French Regime. In his Memoirs, published in 1781, Pouchot noted:

When an Indian is dead, we hear no cry nor plaint in the cabin, but they come to make their farewell visit. They bury them with all their finest garments, their arms, and a keg of brandy to help them on their journey. They raise over the grave a kind of cabin made of poles in the form of a monument, and by its side another great post on which are fixed the family arms. They mark thereon some characters representing the number of scalps and prisoners they have taken. Some nations have the custom of sending the women during the first eight days, to build a little fire near the grave, and to sit upon their heels, remaining there immovable for a quarter to half an hour at a time. If he dies while hunting, even if it has been three or four months they will disinter him and carry him in their canoes to bury him in their villages. They do the same in regard to their children.²³

There is a strong continuity of tradition between Champlain's account in the early 1600's and Pouchot's account in the late 1700's. Later accounts also attest to the persistence of burial traditions.

Tending the Needs of the Dead

The Jesuits were mystified by the care and attention which Aboriginal people showed towards their Dead. In the Christian tradition, the unitary soul separates from the body at death and the body, devoid of spirit, is presumed to return to dust. It became clear to the Jesuits, however, that for Aboriginal people, the remains of their Dead retained a spiritual essence which required ongoing respect.

Father Brebeuf was the first Jesuit to fully grasp that Aboriginal burial practices arose from their understanding of a diversity of souls within the human body. He writes:

It is amusing to hear them speak of their souls, – or rather, I should say, it is a thing quite worthy of compassion to see reasonable men, with sentiments so low concerning an essence so noble and bearing so distinct marks of Divinity. They give it different names according to its different conditions or different operations.

²³ Memoires sur la derniere Guerre de l'Amerique Septentrionale, entre la France et l'Angleterre (Yverdon: 1781). Volume II. Translated and edited by Franklin Hough, printed by W. Elliot Woodward, 1866

In so far as it merely animates the body and gives life, they call it *khiondhecwi*; in so far as it is possessed of reason, *oki andaérandi*; “like a demon, counterfeiting a demon;” in so far as it thinks and deliberates on anything, they call it *endionrra*; and *gonennoncwal*, in so far as it bears affection to any object; whence it happens that they often say *ondayee ihaton onennoncwat*, “That is what my heart says to me, that is what my appetite desires.” Then if it is separated from the body they call it *esken*, and even the bones of the dead, *atiskan*, – in my opinion, on the false persuasion entertained by them that the soul remains in some way attached to them for some time after death, at least that it is not far removed from them; they think of the soul as divisible, and you would have all the difficulty in the world to make them believe that our soul is entire in all parts of the body.²⁴

Although Brebeuf was dismissive of the Huron beliefs, he was anxious to understand

more about the souls of the bones of the dead:

Returning from this feast [of the Dead] with a Captain who is very intelligent, and who will some day be very influential in the affairs of the Country, I asked him why they called the bones of the dead *Atiskan*. He gave me the best explanation he could, and I gathered from his conversation that many think we have two souls, both of them being divisible and material, and yet both reasonable; the one separates itself from the body at death, yet remains in the Cemetery until the feast of the Dead, – after which it either changes into a Turtledove, or, according to the most common belief, it goes away to the village of souls. The other is, as it were, bound to the body, and informs, so to speak, the corpse; it remains in the grave of the dead after the feast, and never leaves it, unless some one bears it again as a child. He pointed out to me, as a proof of this metempsychosis, the perfect resemblance some have to persons deceased. A fine Philosophy, indeed. Such as it is, it shows why they call the bones of the dead, *Atiskan*, “the souls.”²⁵

This notion of the souls of bones is key to understanding both the reverence with which human remains are treated after death and the abhorrence of grave disturbance which persists among the *Anishnaabeg*. The belief that a spiritual essence remains bound to the body after death was shared with me by Elders during an 8-day vigil which we kept on an unceded burial ground within the city limits of Owen Sound back in 1992. The vigil resulted in federal recognition of the burial ground’s reserve status under Treaty No.82. Many Euro-Canadians miss the redundancy in the expression “sacred Indian burial

²⁴ *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 10, p.141-143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, at p.287.

ground”. How could burial grounds not be sacred if they contain the Body-Souls of one’s ancestors?

This belief in the diversity of human souls was shared by the Algonkian-speaking peoples. Relying upon his experience among the Montagnais, Father LeJeune wrote the following passage in his 1639 *Relation*:

They distinguish several souls in one and the same body. An old man told us some time ago that some Savages have as many as two or three souls; that his own had left him more than two years before, to go away with his dead relatives, - that he no longer had any but the soul of his own body, which would go down into the grave with him. One learns from this that they imagine the body has a soul of its own, which some call the soul of their Nation; and that, in addition to this, others come, which leave it sooner or later, according to their fancy.²⁶

I understand this reference to “the soul of their Nation” as connected to Anishnaabeg origin traditions. The remains of the First Animals contained a powerful spiritual essence that gave birth to the First Humans. Human remains return to the earth with their spiritual essence intact, continuing the spiritual cycle of birth and rebirth.

LeJeune notes that souls which have left the body to travel with dead relatives were feared by the living:

The same Father, seeing some Algonquins busily engaged in striking upon their cabins with sticks, asked them what they were doing. They replied that they were trying to drive away the soul of a dead woman which was prowling around there. It is said that there were some so simple as to stretch nets around their cabins, so that the souls of those who pass away at the houses of their neighbors may be caught therein, if they wish to enter their dwellings. Others burn some ill-smelling thing to turn away the souls by this odor, - they even put something with a bad odor upon their heads, so that the souls may not come near them. A Juggler one day brandished his javelin in the air, imagining that he would frighten a soul which had recently left its own body. They greatly fear that these souls will enter their cabins, or will sojourn there; for, if they did, they would take some one away with them into their country.²⁷

²⁶ *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 16, p.191-193.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, at p.195-197.

Two centuries later, in a remarkable demonstration of continuity of tradition, Peter Jones recounts his childhood experience of Anishnaabeg funerals:

In the evening of the day on which the burial has taken place, when it begins to grow dark, the men fire off their guns through the hole left at the top of the wigwam. As soon as this firing ceases, the old women commence knocking and making such a rattling at the door as would frighten away any spirit that would dare hover near. The next ceremony is, to cut into narrow strips, like ribbon, thin birch bark. These they fold into shapes, and hang around inside the wigwam, so that the least puff of wind will move them. With such scarecrows as these, what spirit would venture to disturb their slumbers? Lest this should not prove effectual, they will also frequently take a deer's tail, and after burning or singeing off all the hair, will rub the necks or faces of the children before they lie down to sleep, thinking that the offensive smell will be another preventive to the spirit's entrance. I well remember when I used to be daubed over with this disagreeable fumigation, and had great faith in it all. This that the soul lingers about the body a long time before it takes its final departure, they use these means to hasten it away.²⁸

This fear of disembodied souls can be contrasted with tenderness which Anishnaabeg exhibit towards the soul that remains with the body. In 1635, Father LeJeune provided following account of a Feast for the Dead:

On the twenty-eighth [of September], Father Buteux and I found a band of Savages who were having a feast near the graves of their deceased relatives; they gave them the best part of the banquet, which they threw into the fire; and, when they were about to go away, a woman broke some twigs and branches from the trees, with which she covered the graves. I asked her why she did this, and she answered that she was sheltering the souls of her dead friends from the heat of the Sun, which has been very great this Autumn. They reason about the souls of men and their necessities as they do about the body; according to their doctrine, they suppose that our souls have the same needs as our bodies. We told her repeatedly that the souls of reasonable beings descended into hell or went up to Heaven; but, without giving us any answer, she continued to follow the old custom of her ancestors.²⁹

Indeed, many Anishnaabeg communities continue to follow these ancestral customs. I have attended Feasts for the Dead hosted by Elders in my community. And I have seen Elders put food in their woodstove fires, saying they are feeding their deceased relatives.

²⁸ Peter Jones, *History of the Ojebway Nation*, p.99-100.

²⁹ *Jesuit Relations*, Volume 8, p.21-23.

During his travels in the Upper Great Lake region in the 1760's, Alexander Henry participated in funerals and feasts for the Dead. Not understanding the Anishnaabeg belief in the duality of the souls, he was confused by varying accounts he received of the afterlife:

I have frequently inquired into the ideas and opinions of the Indians, in regard to futurity, and always found that they were somewhat different, in different individuals.

Some suppose their souls to remain in this world, although invisible to human eye; and capable, themselves, of seeing and hearing their friends, and also of assisting them, in moments of distress and danger.

Others dismiss from the mortal scene the unembodied spirit, and send it to a distant world or country, in which it receives reward or punishment, according to the life which it has lead in its prior state. Those who have lived virtuously are transported into a place abounding with every luxury, with deer and all other animals of the woods and water, and where the earth produces, in their greatest perfection, all its sweetest fruits. While, on the other hand, those who have violated or neglected the duties of this life, are removed to a barren soil, where they wander up and down, among the rocks and morasses, and are stung by gnats, as large as pigeons.³⁰

This apparent contradiction was explained to another Great Lakes visitor, Henry Schoolcraft, when he enquired into Anishnabek grave construction practices:

When an Indian corpse is put in a coffin, among the tribes of the Lake Algonquins, the lid is *tied* down, and not nailed. On depositing it in the grave, the rope or string is loosed, and the weight of the earth alone relied on, to keep it in a fixed position. The reason they give for this, is, that the soul may have free egress from the body.

Over the top of the grave a covering of cedar bark is put, to shed the rain. This is roof-shaped and the whole structure looks, slightly, like a house in miniature. It has gable ends. Through one of these, being the head, an aperture is cut. On asking a Chippewa why this was done, he replied, - "To allow the soul to pass out, an in."

"I thought," I replied, "that you believed that the soul went up from the body at the time of death, to a land of happiness. How, then, can it remain in the body?"

"There are two souls," replied the Indian philosopher.

³⁰ Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, p.144.

“How can this be? my friend.”

“It is easily explained,” said he.

“You know that, in dreams, we pass over wide countries, and see hills and lakes and mountain, and many scenes, which pass before our eyes, and affect us. Yet, at the same time, our bodies do not stir, and there is a soul left with the body, - else it would be dead. So, you perceive, it must be another soul that accompanies us.”³¹

Peter Jones’ description of an Anishnaabeg burial on the River Thames bears a striking similarity to Schoolcraft’s account:

I was present at the burial of an old pagan chief by the name of *Odahmekoo*, of Muncey Town. We had a coffin made for him, which was presented to his relatives; but before they placed the body in it, they bored several holes at the head, in order, as they supposed, to enable the soul to go in and out at pleasure.³²

In the sketch which accompanies this description, Jones shows the grave houses with circular openings in front. Again, this burial tradition has persisted in Anishnaabeg communities. I have attended the funerals of Elders whose coffins have been modified by drilling a hole near where their heads rest.

Graves and Family Marks

Henry Schoolcraft paid great attention to Anishnaabeg mortuary practices. He sketched five “Chippeway” grave posts, including that of his wife’s grandfather Wabojeeg (White Fisher), “a celebrated war-chief and ruler of his tribe, who died on Lake Superior, about 1793.” Schoolcraft deciphers the pictographic record of Wabojeeg’s memorial as follows:

He was of the family or clan of the addik, or American reindeer. This fact is symbolized by the figure of the deer. The reverse position denotes death. His

³¹ Schoolcraft, *The American Indians, Their History, Conditions and Prospects*, at p.127.

³² Jones, *supra.*, note 65 at p.100 [Slide 35]. For a sketch by Paul Kane, see Slide 37.

personal name, which was the White Fisher, is not noticed. The seven transverse marks on the left denote that he had led seven war parties. The three perpendicular lines below the totem, represent three wounds received in battle. The figure of a moose's head, relates to a desperate conflict with an enraged animal of this kind. The symbols of the arrow and pipe, are drawn to indicate his influence in war and peace.³³

Schoolcraft provides the Anishinbemowin etymology of the name for grave post:

ADJEDATIGWUN: The import of the thought of this term is given by the expression *death-stick*. It is derived from the verb *adjidj*, to reverse, meaning that the totem of the person interred is reversed. As this totem is the symbol of the person, the ideographic import is, that the deceased has been returned to the earth. *Atig* is the noun in this compound, denoting a tree, stick, board, or post. The termination in *wun*, is the plural.

And so the grave post itself speaks to the cycle of coming from the earth and returning to the earth. Not just any earth, but one's birthplace, the land of one's fathers and near the graves of one's ancestors.

Schoolcraft's work is not the only source for "reading" grave posts. The German traveller, Johann Georg Kohl, who visited to Lake Superior in 1855, sketched the memorial which his Ojibway guide "read" for him:

The three strokes cut into the board, painted of a red colour, were explained to me to be the three bloody hero deeds the deceased had performed, or three enemies he had killed.

The three figures holding each other's hands were his relatives mourning his loss or celebrating his funeral feast, and the inverted animal – a bear – was his family sign or name.

Reading this, it would run in our fashion: "Here lies the chief of the Bear clan. His relatives and friends mourn for him. But he was a hero, for he killed three of our mortal enemies."³⁴

³³ Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Historical and Statistical Information respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. Part 1. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1853) p.356.

³⁴ J.G. Kohl, *Kitchi-gami: Life among the Lake Superior Ojibway*. Translated by L. Wraxall. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985) at p.159.

Again, it is the family name and identity which matters. The Bear, not the man, is shown returning to the earth. And so the record of relationship between ancestor and descendant, between individual and family identity can be understood in terms of the attachment of people to place.

Anishinabek representational practices were not limited to graves markers. Family identity was important to the living and incorporated into personal adornment. How discernible these marks of identity were depended on how well-trained the observer was.

In 1670, Father Louis Nicolas took up residence at the Jesuit mission on Manitoulin Island. Over the next few years, he wrote an Algonkian grammar, a Natural History and created dozens of pen and ink drawings. His artist's eye and linguist's ear enabled him to decode many culturally-specific marks of identity. Regrettably none of his work has been translated into English and his potential contribution to Great Lakes historiography remains largely unrealized.

Much like his *Anishinabek* hosts, Nicolas does not separate men from animals, nor spiritual from physical identity. So in his *Histoire Naturelle*, he can speak of the Hare's fur, flavour and habitat on the same page that he recounts Michabous' role in creation. Nicolas was acquainted with people who were "descended in a direct line from this majestic divinity, so beautiful, so pure, and so white."³⁵ He reports that they place a great hare as their coat of arms (*écussons*) on their weapons and they consider it a great honour to say that their race has its being from this divine parentage.³⁶ According to

³⁵ *Histoire Naturelle des Indes Occidentales par M.L.N.P.* [Monsieur Louis Nicolas Père] France, bibliothèque nationale, Département des manuscrits, Fonds français, MG 7, I, A2, Volume 24225, pp. 61-62.

³⁶ *Ibid.* The transcript reads "que toute leur race étoit déce sang divin".

Nicolas, the eldest of this divine family bears the name *Michabous* and “in order not to forgot his nobility, he is always dressed or surrounded (a la mode des sauvages) by a robe of rabbit skins which need be killed in times of snow so that these rare furs have become totally white and that this illustrious elder descended from the great hare god always wears the colour of this divinity.”³⁷

Nicolas was not the only Frenchman to recognize and record *Anishinabek* marks of identity. Military personnel paid attention to family because their Allied Warriors identified themselves by their coats of arms (les armoiries). In 1736, an “Enumeration of the Savage Nations that are related to the government of Canada, the warriors belonging to each one of them and their coats of arms” was completed by an unnamed French colonial official.³⁸ But the colonial usage of generic ethnonyms, such as Outaouas and Saulteurs and Mississagues, comprehending disparate totemic groups made it difficult for the enumerator to distinguish between overlapping layers of identity:

At this point, one could raise an objection and ask how to tell the difference between a Sautteur and a Mississague with the same armorial bearings.

I would answer, first of all, that every Indian of every Nation, entirely apart from the armorial bearings of the Nation and those of his family, has distinguishing marks which are unique and by which he is known at least by those of his own Nation. Thus, it is only a question of being known as a Mississague - if that is what one is - and not being mistaken for a Sautteur by a foreigner. This would not be the case if all the Indians were not raised to identify each Nation by its particular style of lodge, of cutting hair, by the difference in weapons, arrows, bows, by the snowshoes, canoes, paddles, and other identifying signs which they leave on their routes.

Secondly, I do not pretend to explain all the contradictions and difficulties which one can find in this manner and form of heraldry and I doubt very much that any amount of study and practice can give one distinct

³⁷ *Ibid.* The transcript reads “les Liuvées et la couleur de cette divinité”.

³⁸ Colonial Archives, France: MG1, C11A, Volume 66, folios 236-246v. Attributed to Joncaire by Newbigging. Attributed to M. de la Chauvignerie by Henry Schoolcraft.

knowledge to collect on paper and provide a perfect idea of all the traits they use to distinguish one from another.³⁹

And so there are layers of identity (national, familial, and personal) and names and markers which correspond to each. This complexity was certainly a challenge to strangers. At least the bemused enumerator realized that internal recognition was not a problem. Part of one's cultural fluency included training in reading and rendering such marks.

The *Anishinabek* practice of indicating totemic identity by outward adornment has continued up to the present-day. Diamond Jenness observed as much in his short stay on Parry Island in the summer of 1929:

On ceremonial occasions [clan] members painted their faces in a special style, and occasionally represented the totem bird or animal on their clothing. Thus the otter people worked an otter in beadwork on the front of the coat, and the loon people attached the head of a loon.⁴⁰

My father's mother shared this practice with me when I was a child, by showing me her winter moccasins trimmed in otter fur. I remember asking her what kind of fur it was. She told me it was Otter. I probably asked her why, because the next thing I remember her saying was that she was Otter clan. I likely asked her what that meant, but I don't remember my questions, only her answers. She said that she was Otter because her Father was Otter and her Father's Father before him and her Father's Father's Father before him; that her father had been the last in a long line of hereditary chiefs from the Otter clan. I don't know what became of her moccasins, but I carry the memory of the look and feel of that Otter fur and the lineal connection it gave me.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ff.238v-239.

⁴⁰ *Supra*, note 224, at p.8.