

A continuance, a softening

Audie Murray response to Allan Sapp's *Softening a Moosehide*.

As I cut into you, I feel a connection. I know what it is like to be cut and pulled apart. Seven layers, at least-

skin

fat

rectus muscles

fascia

peritoneum

uterus

amniotic sac.

I know what it is like to split open, be stitched up and become transformed.

I do a preliminary fleshing before I trim your hair. This will relieve some weight and let water move freely through your skin.

It's the late fall of twenty twenty four. I decide to put a weekend aside to process the moose that is stored in my deepfreezer.

An hour, hours, days, weeks. I realize this work will take seasons to complete.

Life is work, and work is labour. This labour is like

a circle

the welcoming of a baby

equinox &

solstice

the loss of a kôhkom

, it's like the shape of
your hide.

Tanya Lukin Linklater says this labour is a kind of
continuance.¹

I think of Allen Sapp's painting *Softening a Moosehide*,
1972. The painting memorializes an older woman,
presumably Sapp's kôhkom Maggie Soonias. She is on
the plains, her home in the background. She's using a
cord tied to a tree to soften a moosehide. Her forearms
look strong, she is smoking a pipe, her hair is covered
and pulled back with a scarf. This is likely for the
utilitarian use of keeping her hair clean and out of her
face, but it's a cute look.

¹ Tanya Lukin Linklater, *Slow Scrape* (Montreal, Quebec: Anteism,
2020), 77.

The unnatural scales in the painting communicates to
the viewer that the exactness of the scene is not what
is important here. It is the story, the memory, the
marking of time. The utilization of images, not words,
reminds the Elders of the importance of identity and
cultural values. These values are intended for Sapp, as
a grandson, and for his grandchildren and for theirs
and so on.² It is apparent in Sapp's paintings that
continuance and care is an innate aspect of Indigenous
worldviews.

I think of how late in the process we get to softening
the hide. Even then, there's still so much left to do.

After softening, we get to smoke.

It's rest work - rewarding and smells good. I like to think
this is what being a kôhkom could feel like. I ask my
mom, and she says she doesn't know because she's
never processed a hide but she does know that there's
nothing better in the world than the smell of smoked
moosehide. She says being a kôhkom is the same as
smelling this smoke, it's euphoric. It's like you can be
with your children without the strain of early
parenthood. You can be in the moment.

² L. Whiteman and L. Carrier, "Through the Eyes of the Cree,"
essay, in *Through the Eyes of The Cree and Beyond. The Art of
Allen Sapp: The Story of a People* (North Battleford, Saskatchewan
: Allen Sapp Gallery , 2005), 94–102, 94.

You get to sit back and smell the smoked hide.

She says she can smell the hard work.

She's done the early steps, and now it's rest work.

I turn you over and start to trim your hair using a sharp knife. Some hair pulls out from the days of soaking. The thicker hair on your shoulder and back is trimmed down and will be revisited when we frost scrape.

I spend
most of my time
in the backyard, alone
with you.

I listen
to an audio book
about
childcare work,³

I thought it could parallel this experience well.

Although not necessary for this process, one way to build rage is to listen to some of the ways colonial society has stripped us of what we know. Community in child labour and birth, community in parenting, community in traditional work, community that is honest, who listens and cares.

³ The book is Matrescence by Lucy Jones, and is cited in the bibliography.

It's a necessity that is rarely afforded in western society.

I sometimes feel lonely in motherhood.uoy htiw gnikrow ni ylenol leef semitemos I

I won't ask or let anyone help. Independence to a fault is just another symptom of living within settler colonialism. My lived experience isn't ~~capitalizing from~~ reconnecting with an Indigenous relative, it's feeling and processing rage for what is being done to my family.

Remember, continuance is a labour.
And I'm just out here trying to make the work lighter.

In this practice,

I feel myself

rooting

in every direction

Caring for my baby is caring for my Nôhkomak. I like to think that is where Sapp's art and mine interconnect.

“When we consider an accumulation of time, we acknowledge the painful histories and current conditions of colonialism within Canada. We also consider and remember the significance of Indigenous knowledges that are rooted in place and shape our present.”⁴

An hour, hours, days pass. My son spends the day running errands and playing with his dad. He spends time with his Mooshum and Khokum harvesting potatoes from their garden. He goes to the valley with his Koko and uncle to visit. He spends time with us in short bursts. I worry about him touching your flesh and hair. It’s important to me he sees this work in hopes it roots in his memory. Again, I think of Allen Sapp and how his memory is honest documentation. In this sense Sapp’s memory is an archive. His (and our) memory is the most important archive.

When I return to fleshing and begin to remove the membrane, it’s a smoother process. I allot myself three hours. It takes many more. I am depleting and making slow progress. Once this is done, I let us rest until the outside freezes and we find ourselves in another season.

My partner shows me a photo he took of me. I look like the khokum in Sapp’s painting with my utilitarian scarf that doubles as a cute look. This image shapes my present, reaching to a future, rooting in our past.

⁴ Tanya Lukin Linklater, 73.

Prep work

During my MFA I tried to process a moose as part of my studio work. I had left it outside during the winter and mice made a home of it. Previously I had worked on two deer hides, so I thought I knew what I was doing. I don't really know what I am doing. I was able to harvest some bones and sinew from this moose. Later that semester I had a dream of a moose without skin. My advisor kindly talked me through it and I put out an offering for the moose. I think I needed to be more aware of what I was working with.

Later that year I got you from a friend. I picked you up when I was twelve weeks pregnant only to find out my friend's partner was pregnant too. Now our kids are toddler friends- I'm pretty sure at least. You waited in the deep freeze, alone, then next to my placenta. Until the prospect of connecting with Sapp's work through embodiment is what got us to where we are now.

You had briefly defrosted, leaving a pool of frozen blood. I cleaned this up before going on a family excursion to the hardware store. My partner helped me build a frame and fleshing beam. I put out some food and tobacco for you and soaked you for many days, changing the water in the evening after my son went to bed. And then step one begins.

And it will all get done.

Step one begins
and the plum sized fetus is a toddler.

Step one begins
and now I am a little older.

Step one begins
and I'm a Kôhkom softening a hide.

Step one begins
&

I'm a memory hanging as a painting on the wall
I'm documented as a photo on an outdated phone
I'm archived as a mended hole in your hide.
That was transformed over an hour, hours, days,
weeks, seasons.

Measures of
time that will still be felt
in the archives of the memories that our babies are
creating.

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