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"Can We Touch the Past?: The Sensory Experience of a
Black Leather Ball"

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Can We Touch the Past?

The Sensory Experience of a Black Leather Ball

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Abstract

This ethnographic essay reflects on the process of the past coming into the present. In particular, it questions the ethics and the politics of which pasts are appropriate to encounter. It creates tensions between which pasts are real and authentic, which questions the ownership of the pasts we are not permitted to feel. It suggests that when we encounter and touch things that are not ours, we feel a connection to an Othered past. This “Othering” risks prescribing an Orientalist, colonialist narrative. It concludes that perhaps to meaningfully encounter the past, we must recognise that the only authentic pasts are our own.

Keywords: touch, sensory experiences, post-colonialism, Indigenous materiality

Upon returning home, I come across a black ball with a red trim. I feel its familiar softness and breathe it in. Suddenly, I am ten-years-old, launching the ball across my dad’s office and watching it bounce off the metallic bookcase. I can even smell the room, the lingering scent of stale coffee and rubber bands. The ball itself comes from the Evenki people who are indigenous to the Russian north. Subsequently, I suggest that this toy has a powerful effect on me in two ways. One exists locally, within me, a memory of my own childhood. The other brings me to a distant past that is not my own. I simultaneously feel the past - or absent self - of an Evenki child playing with this ball. These two different experiences interplay to suggest



Figure 1 (left): Evenki Leather Ball. Photograph by author.

how, and the processes in which, the past comes into the present. Further, it creates tensions between which pasts are considered real or authentic, which questions the ownership of pasts we are not permitted to feel.

Whether we can touch or smell the past can be outlined through different ontological arguments. Ankersmit (2005: 112) outlines the constructivist argument that one can never re-experience the past as it is something that is only

real once. Constructivists contend that “nothing replicates the past as it was for those who lived it as their present” (Lowenthal, 1996: 170). Consequently, my feeling of being ten again is simply felt - an “imaginative construction” - but not real in itself (Lowenthal, 1985: 4 in Birth, 2006: 179). This argument sees the past “as a foreign country” (Lowenthal, 1985), suggesting that the past is separate from the present, and any revisiting of the past is purely fictitious.

However, how does this explain the vividness or reality of my experience? Birth (2006: 179) argues that seeing the past as a foreign country denies the way it imposes on the present. Ingold (1996) suggests the past exists simultaneously within our present, that our past experiences form our present self. For example, my ten-year-old self has shaped the development of my present self, so my past self is always inherent within me. Thus, a mind-body relationship or “unity” with the past exists in “the consciousness of the self” (Ingold, 1996: 165); embodied in memory. For this reason, it can be suggested that the past is always “imminent within the present” (Küchler, 1996: 230). Through the development the past has on our present, it becomes a “constituent in the real world” (Küchler, 1996: 183). Therefore, the past is not a foreign country because it is intimately entwined within the present through our interactions in the world.

This suggests the past is phenomenologically present (Birth, 2006). Phenomenology describes the ways “we apprehend the material world through intervention in our surroundings” (Brück, 2005: 46). Ankersmit argues that this intervention allows us to feel objects that contain “an aura of the past itself” (2005: 114). This material presence is encountered through the body. By smelling the leather, the past and the present are eclipsed by my senses encountering this “aura” and remembering my past. Although, if this encounter is produced by memory and can only be phenomenologically felt, one may question the “objective” reality and tangibility of this past.

This assumes that reality is only present within material objectivity. It assumes that sensory perceptions cannot be real also. This then becomes an ontological question of what is real and whether multiple ways of knowing the world exist (Brück, 2005). Western ontology defines what is real by its objective materiality: that real pasts can only be seen and not smelt

or touched (Paterson, 2005). By this logic, my experience with the ball is not real as these sensory perceptions are too subjective and unreliable (Ankersmit, 2005: 123).

This Cartesian ontology is considered the most real and authentic way of knowing the world.

Yet, it creates distance between things, by separating the “thingyness” of things” (Paterson, 2005: 129). For example, sight creates space between the subject and the object which challenges the ways in which we know it (2005: 124). By touching the leather ball, I know its weight, texture and material. Touch also allows me to encounter its affective power and relive the past. Brück (2005) argues to understand how the past imposes on the present, an ontological shift is necessary. This allows us to accept that sensory perception can help us better “know” the things we encounter.

It is the agentic properties of the leather ball that brings about these processes. The ball has an ability to affect me, which blurs the line between subject and object (Brück, 2005). Thus, the agency of the ball can shape a real past in the present. By giving precedence to different ontologies, a post-human “ontology of objects” can help us understand the power within the interaction with things (Domanska, 2006: 337). Objects in their ability to create feelings of pastness “not only affect us but make us who we are” (Brück, 2005: 65). By undoing the subject/object or past/present distinction, they begin to incorporate another. By accepting that things can be performative, one can see that these things are not just present, but “have presence” (Domanska, 2006: 348).

But at what point is this presence realised? Are objects always agents, or only when they are engaged with? Harries (2017: 121) argues that agency is not in the thing itself, but in our engagement with it. This could also suggest that multiple pasts are inherent within things, constructed from different “mindful intentions that form the artefact” (Harries, 2017: 121). For example, perhaps when my dad touches the ball he is brought back to his experience in the Russian wilderness. Thus, the leather ball is comprised of multiple agentic powers that are specific to those who encounter it.

Therefore, the Evenki ball can also contain pasts that are not ours. Initially, I envisage my own past where I kick the ball across the blue synthetic carpet in my dad’s office. However, when I smell the cracked leather, I find my mind wandering to pasts that are not my own. I know

the ball used to belong to an Evenki child. When I smell its smokiness, I imagine it basked in the glow of a fire. I hear beating drums and feel a soft furry reindeer hide beneath me. This construction of a “historical experience” (Ankersmit, 2005 in Robinson, 2010: 512) further dissolves the past and present. I experience a “subjective historical experience”. Despite it not being materially objective, it still becomes a real “sensation of the connection with the past” (Robinson, 2010: 512).

However, the problem is that this is only a sensation and it is entirely imagined. Constructing these sentimental narratives results in remembering a past that I have never encountered, a past that does not concern me (Robinson, 2010: 512). This calls into question the post-colonial implications of these “historical sensations”. Robinson (2010) suggests that the past is not a foreign country but an Oriental one. I encounter this past like I may encounter an “exotic society” (Duffy, 2009: 18 in Robinson, 2010: 515). I have constructed, or appropriated a memory based entirely on my imagined stereotypes of Evenki people. These imaginations are unfounded and not rooted in any historical truth or accuracy for I have never experienced this moment, nor studied Evenki people.

Recognising the absence of this former agent (the Evenki child) creates further tensions. A distance is created in that I identify the owner of the ball as not “being like me” but to “have been like me” (Robinson, 2010: 515). By establishing this child as “gone” and prior, an Otherness is created. Harries (2017) argues that when we encounter these things and touch the past, we steal the agency of the former owner: the absent Evenki child. Recognising this absence and feeling this gone-ness creates an intimacy with the past that has not been permitted (2017: 127). Appropriating this past seems whimsical to me, a “nostalgic leisure experience” (Harries, 2017: 114). Yet, simultaneously it exists as a stereotyped, neo-colonial, romanticised narrative: a problematic “imaginative construction” (Lowenthal, 1985: 4 in Birth, 2006: 179).

Perhaps then, the only pasts we can deem as rightfully real in the present are the ones we “abduct” from ourselves. Clearly, the agentic properties of things and their phenomenological effect allows the past to be experienced in the present. However, one must question whose past we are experiencing. When we feel a connection to an Othered past, we risk intruding on a history that is not ours. This “Othering” risks prescribing an

Orientalist, colonial narrative and intrudes on pasts that we have not been given permission to feel. Thus, tension arises in the ownership of these pasts we experience. Perhaps to meaningfully encounter the past, we must recognise that the only authentic pasts are our own. Therefore, the memories in the black ball can be touched and felt, but only in relation to my experience of them. I am meaningfully touched by the pasts inherent in its cracked leather, but only by the ones that are real to me. Our own pasts are willingly given, thus we can allow ourselves permission to access them in the present.

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