

# "Finding the Orphaned Irish Parts of Me" at the New Cut: Defining Self-Identity Through Encountering an Archaeological Site

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of a participant's experience of exploring and connecting to the New Cut docks, in Bristol, UK, which had been excavated by Irish immigrant labourers between 1804 to 1809. This particular site was sought out by the British born, second generation Irish participant to "*find the orphaned, Irish parts of me*", in order to explore the potential for healing self-determined aspects of personal identity suppression and denial of unwanted traits, through direct connection to their ancestors.

Using this case as an example of the phenomenon of *archaeotherapy*, which encourages direct site visitation, exploration and communion, the chosen site has the potential to offer connectedness, understanding, and health and healing, in ways that promote well-being and belonging in diasporic communities. It is further suggested that heritage sites offer a unique ability to support participants, mirroring personal heritage in a manner that invites storytelling, yarning, and meaning making. This unique ability, where the site and participant are in embedded communication, suggests the site has agency and is an active therapeutic facilitator in its own way, inviting challenging and sense-making narratives that support a positive outcome.

This research has direct ramifications for UK based "social prescribing" projects that are currently being delivered by well-being, archaeology, heritage and ecotherapy organisations. Non-clinical approaches to well-being and mental health outreach in a variety of settings, including organisations who work with displaced communities and with politics of identity, will also benefit from the findings of this study.

**Keywords:** Archaeotherapy, Social prescribing, Identity, Diaspora, Heritage connection.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The emerging phenomenon of *archaeotherapy* is the process of site encounter at any human-made site, of no predetermined condition, history or age, which has the capacity to be therapeutic in some way. It is a similar concept to the now well-known Cultural Heritage Therapy or CHT (Darvill *et al.* 2019). Archaeotherapy supposes that any place can be therapeutic to an individual, rather than imposing assumptions of a top-down, colonist nature, where outside agencies determine if and how a site should be therapeutic. Archaeotherapy assumes that a site has agency, as it brings together into one location human threads of cultural heritage, ideas of ancestry, ecology, site dynamics and spirit of place. In this way, archaeotherapy embraces an animist ontology (Harvey 2005) and can be emergent, immediate, and unexpected, as well as a planned, facilitated process. In the case studied in this paper,

the encounter described was self-started and intuitively undertaken according to the participant's own needs at the time, with no facilitator present. It takes the form of a memory description, telling us of an encounter where relationship to site, and meaning making occurred.

Irish people have experienced enduring discrimination by English people, portraying the Irish as having underclass status at best, and during the Victorian era, removing humanity entirely (Brady 2017). Irish immigrants to England, as well as second and sometimes third generation Irish continued to be 30-50% poorer than the English until recent years (Cummins *et al.* 2022). Irish infant mortality was around 25% higher 1838-1950 in Britain, and ongoing health discrimination continues to persist into the twenty-first century (Delaney *et al.* 2013).

Irish economic immigration to England has been particularly challenging in recent generations for well-documented reasons that include wider political, religious, and cultural divides, as well as personal diasporic problems of identity (Hazley 2020). Although the two islands sit geographically close and share much cultural and archaeological heritage, migration between them has been challenging, fraught with racial derogation, religious persecution, and violence. Many Irish chose to migrate to America or Australia, rather than to Britain, and their experiences have been researched to some degree (Fitzpatrick 1994). Less well researched is the experiences of immigrants to the British mainland, who have suppressed or abandoned aspects of their Irish inheritance, exploring the personal reasons why this would have been done. It is suggested that more research could be undertaken (Hazley 2020).

This case study aims to offer such a story. It highlights some of the ways that encounters at heritage sites can invite healing, understanding, and connectedness to personal identity and experiences of diaspora. Here, a second-generation Irish immigrant, here given the name *Karen*<sup>1</sup>, explored her own suppressed cultural and self-identity when encountering a British nineteenth century dockland site where Irish economic immigrants had laboured between 1804-1809. Themes of assimilation, acculturation, suppression of supposed unwanted personal traits, and self-denial thread through this case study and assist us to see these meta-forces at play within the narrative of a granulated, personal encounter with the docks.

The case study reflects how a site itself brings forth questions of identity, of belonging, of understanding the past in a new way, of pride in where family originated from, eventually bringing a sense of personal healing. The archaeotherapeutic process forms the structure for encounter, connection and meaning making.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL HYBRIDISATION

The qualitative case study explored here was collected as part of the initial breadth-phase research for an ongoing PhD-level investigation into the workings of archaeotherapy. Initially, the account was subject to a rigorous thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2022) in order to pick out a series of key themes. These themes identified included, but were not limited to, core themes of *understanding*, *connecting*, and *healing*. Key to understanding this case study is that it is an *encounter of place* that had personal and cultural heritage meaning for the participant; by finding and spending time at a place that Irish people had worked, with whom she identified, brought about healing, understanding and connectedness in various meaningful ways, which shall be described later.

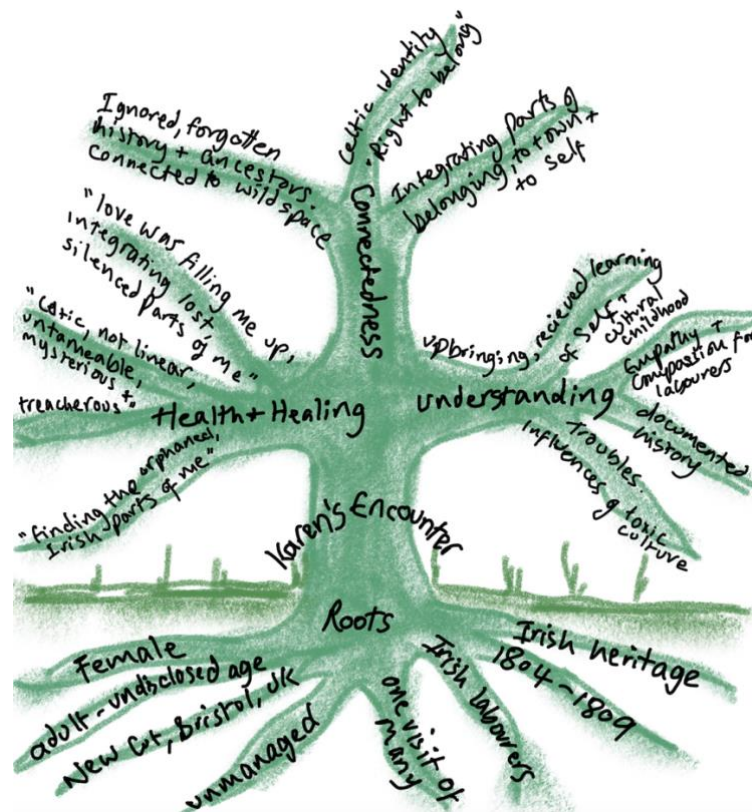
After the initial thematic analysis phase, the case study was further unpicked using a hybridised indigenous methodology, being aware that westernised methods may at times leak or drop data due to a reductionist approach where the narrative is pixelated into single 'bite-sized' datum. Bringing in three non-Westernised processes such as: ritual process (Yunkaporta and Moodie 2021); a Polynesian organic mapping system (Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea 2014); and a Kaupapa Māori self-reflection data analysis (Elder 2013), diminishes any dominance of colonial reductionist assumptions.

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<sup>1</sup> Not her real name

This is particularly important in analysing a case study of this nature; inadvertently colonising the data would be perpetuating some of the wounds highlighted in the case study itself. Being sensitive to this meant that colonial assumptions we backgrounded and the encounter itself could be focussed upon without political or cultural prejudices influencing the findings.

Ritual, mapping, and self-reflection practices were enacted throughout the analysis process: ritual action in the form of giving thanks to the participant for sharing their experience and thanking the site itself for being in relationship to the participant. A mapping system was devised in the form of a tree, that depicted the case as it grew from the roots, or the facts of the encounter, through the trunk and into the boughs and to individual 'leaves' that encoded descriptions and quotes (see Figure 1). This pictorial guide assisted analysis as if the story was a living being, with living, vibrant threads between branches. Throughout the study I engaged with self-reflection as researcher, constantly asking myself if I was honouring the participant's experience and bringing the story to life without prejudicing the results. I kept connecting to the words, reflecting upon the messages they were giving me, and ensuring that I guarded the encounter as a being in itself, supporting its integrity throughout the process of analysis.



**Figure 1:** Organic Analysis of the Living Whole (OALW). An organic mapping system, in the shape of a tree that depicts key aspects of Karen's encounter. The 'roots' are the facts of the encounter, such as demographic information, historical facts, and if the site has managed or unmanaged status. The 'trunk' is the core of the matter; in this case the tree is a depiction of the key themes, described in granular, or 'foliage' level detail at the end of the branches. The theme is shown in brackets, and they are *connectedness, health, and healing, and understanding*.

### 3. CASE STUDY: 'FINDING THE ORPHANED IRISH PARTS OF ME' AT THE NEW CUT

This case study, given by a participant who shall be called Karen, is an account given by a British woman of undisclosed age. Karen begins by explaining that she grew up in London as a second-

generation Irish immigrant, but had later moved to Bristol, where she “*could find few Irish traces*”. This had brought her grief: “*Being second generation Irish I felt a grief in this and a difficulty in arriving into this new City*”. After some exploration, she discovered that her local walk included a dock, called the New Cut, that had been excavated by Irish economic migrants between 1804-1809. “*This waterway became my focus for healing and finding the ‘orphaned Irish parts’ within me.*”

Karen describes this waterway in ways that to her reflected a Celtic identity: “*It was the wild waterway in contrast to the tidy harbour. It was in nature, Celtic, not linear, untameable, mysterious and treacherous. My heart sang.*” This theme of finding something and somewhere perceived to be alternative to the dominant culture appears again in the final line: “*The New Cut calls to me to heal something within myself and within this toxic, privileged system of Capitalism.*”

Site exploration brought ancestral closeness for her, a sense of belonging and closeness to others like her, as well as a closeness to natural processes in the shape of ivy broomrape she found growing there; “*a rare wild flower*”. As she was exploring the site, she notes a rareness to the experience of being so physically close to Irish heritage, “*this interconnectedness I was feeling with my Irish ancestry in the place where I live*”, which brought about “*a slight shift in my heart, and love filling me up, as if integrating lost, silenced parts of me. I heard whispers ‘we contributed a lot’, ‘you have the right to belong here’.*”

After further site exploration Karen researches the documented history of the site: “*My heart ached at the thought of the racist, disrespect and cruelty, no doubt had been extracted [sic] upon these men and their families. All that I could find written about their work was that there had been a big drunken brawl when the job had finished!*” This lack of documentation or civic recognition of the labour caused her anger, as well as compassion and empathy for the labourers, as well as for herself. Karen’s research highlights the perpetuating stereotypes of dominant colonized perceptions of the Irish.

Some personal and cultural explanation is also given at the end of the case, where she describes her childhood, being deliberately encouraged to drop her Irish accent that had been picked up when listening to relatives. Karen describes how people of Irish descent living in mainland Britain find it hard to identify one another due to their success in assimilation, often because of accent acquisition. Karen describes how as an adult speaking “*BBC English*”, an “*Irish-less*” accent, “*hastened my journey into the middle-classes, as an incorrectly identified British, educated woman.*” This accent adjustment elicited a sense of her own Irishness being lost, and how she colluded with this by “*going along with it*”. As the account ends, Karen describes how knowledge of the Troubles “*disturbed my confidence in my fuller sense of identity.*”

#### 4. KEY FINDINGS

There are many themes in this encounter that are worthy of exploration, but three have been chosen to focus upon: *understanding, connectedness, and health and healing*, as mentioned above. These three themes encompass many of the ways that Karen felt her well-being was improved. *Understanding* encompasses threads of knowledge, meaning making, factual understanding, intuition, and sensory modes of gleaning knowledge. *Connectedness* focuses on Karen as the subject connecting to others and herself, as well as the site and ancestors connecting to her. *Health and healing* in this case suggests wider sense of well-being, which include physical and emotional, but also include health of belonging and personal acceptance.

*Understanding*: through the act of spending time at the site, Karen is able to get to know the scale of the endeavour, computing the effort required to undertake the labour her ancestors must have exerted in order to excavate the dock. Physical site encounter therefore enables mental cognition and sense making of concrete facts. Being at the site offers her intangible encounter with her ancestors, in the guise of disembodied “*voices*” who explain how they contributed so much, and that she has a right to

belong. By being present at the site, she is able to viscerally understand aspects of her heritage that would not have otherwise been possible.

*Connectedness*: the site offers connectedness to her own heritage, being in the presence of Irish achievements, in the presence, too, of “Celtic” aspects, of untameable waters, non-linear existence and wildness. Karen finds a connectedness to herself, as she feels a connection to those Irish parts of her which she has deliberately “orphaned” over the years, in order to assimilate into the dominant British culture of “BBC English”. The connection to her ancestors elicits strong emotions of outrage and indignation for their treatment. Anger arises from the current system of Capitalism which she sees to be “toxic, racist and privileged”. This connectedness inspires a wish to heal this system as well as heal aspects of herself. Karen hears “whispers ‘we contributed a lot’”. This may be the site requiring acknowledgment in its own right, being an active participant in the healing process of encounter. Connectedness, therefore, in this case is reciprocal between Karen and the site.

*Health and healing*: as connectedness and understanding grow, so does the wish to heal “orphaned Irish parts” within her, but also the “orphaned wounded” place itself. Healing comes in the form of feeling empowered by her ancestors’ achievements to belong to Bristol; she has the right, just as much as anyone else, to be there. Healing has come with staying with the trouble (Haraway 2016) of difficult emotions and memories that Karen found within her, as they were mirrored in the “wild waterway” qualities the site presented to her. She stays with the uncomfortable feelings of colluding with the process of suppression; “going along with” accent loss, and with orphaning the Irishness of herself, finding self-compassion and healing when she does so. She also stays with the uncomfortable feelings of anger on the behalf of her ancestors when thinking about their treatment under a racist and unsympathetic culture, finding through staying with this a confidence, power, and sense of belonging to the city; “With this acknowledgement, I notice another feeling arising, one of empathy and compassion for them and for me, for this ‘orphaned wounded’ place and I feel a growing sense of power and my place in this City.”

Attendance at the New Cut is the catalyst for much self-reflection and cultural heritage exploration. Karen has identified this place as somewhere important to her identity as a second-generation immigrant. It is also in its own way an animist agent that speaks directly to Karen, with the qualities and characteristics it has that supported her need to connect to her Irish identity, as well as housing an ancestral presence that can speak directly to her and through her. The New Cut mirrors back to her qualities that she sees as “Celtic”; wild and non-linear, an important reflection of self that reaffirms to her these aspects of her own identity, albeit ones that have been hidden and suppressed since childhood.

When Karen left London to live in Bristol a void appeared in her life, a landscape and peoples appeared that were not displaying familiar Irishness. The New Cut was a welcome remedy to this, and Karen attended to the place with openness and a sense of “relief and wonderment”. Being Irish is deeply significant to modern identity, and is enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, Article 2, 1998:

*“It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish Nation. That is also the entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.”*

The “relief” that Karen expressed seems deeply rooted in family and cultural belonging that, when missing, as when Karen moved to a city that lacked Irish qualities, brought up feelings of grief and orphaning.

The narrative choices that Karen adopts are dualistic; in order to define her own concept of Irish heritage, she challenges the narrative of the dominant culture by using strongly worded phrases such as *“The New Cut calls to me to heal something within myself and within this toxic, privileged system of Capitalism.”* This system she identifies herself being embedded *within*, yet does not state that she identifies *with* that system. This dualism is further reflected in her use of the term *“right”* to belong, implying a sense of living without rights in some way, reflected, too in her identification with the wildness of the muddy New Cut, as opposed to the *“tidy”* city harbour pedestrian zone. It is notable that Karen must go to an unmanaged, hidden part of the shadow urban landscape in order to find immigrant narratives mirrored back to her.

In the UK, many archaeological sites from all ages were built by itinerant and economic migrants, brought in for the specific task of construction and engineering. Such examples can be found in the Irish-influenced Neolithic henge monument of Mayburgh henge, Penrith, Cumbria, UK (Topping 2014), Viking sites in Northumbria, (Richards and Haldenby 2018), and Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Monastery, Eskdalemuir, UK (Xin 2018), for instance. It is possible for migrants from many places in the later global British Empire to find archaeological and still-standing sites where origin identity can be found. What makes Karen’s experience notable is that the New Cut comes without recognition. It is not part of an Irish heritage that is obvious; it is part of the landscape of hidden psycho-geography, where Karen’s identity as well as the site are *“orphaned”* and abandoned, shunted into the shadows.

Karen’s knowledge of the Troubles *“as I grew up disturbed my confidence in my fuller sense of identity”*. This is reflected in her choice (or lack) of site with which to build a relationship. This choice of a shadowy forgotten site may be completely unconscious, yet this speaks about hiding migration identity, feeling fear of disclosure, and preferring to keep parts suppressed, strategies Karen employed in order to hasten assimilation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Archaeotherapy has the potential to bring diasporic communities and individuals to culturally significant sites. It is an important offering in the mosaic of well-being services currently being offered in *“social prescribing”* projects. Finding the New Cut in a relatively small city such as Bristol, and then, importantly for Karen, building relationship to the site, presented the possibility of understanding, connectedness, and healing to occur. As well as finding *“orphaned parts”* within herself, Karen felt she understood the orphaned nature of the site itself, and by extension, the orphaning by the dominant culture of her ancestors’ story and presence. Relationally and animistically, this can be seen as the site and ancestors actively requiring attention in order to be recognised, speaking through Karen so that their presence is brought into current realms of awareness. They declare their value, and by doing so they state their value in the wider culture, thus recognising and healing their own orphaning.

The site and Karen were in embedded communication. The site had agency for Karen and was an active therapeutic facilitator in its own way, inviting challenging and sense-making narratives. It also supported Karen to stay with the trouble when it arose, troubles such as: anger; unbelonging; and living in a perceived dualistic cultural narrative. By practicing methods of ritual, organic mapping, and self-reflection, the case was studied in a way that attempted to avoid unhelpful colonial assumptions that the author may have unconsciously had. Such assumptions were backgrounded through ongoing self-reflection practices, so that the encounter itself could be focussed upon without political or cultural prejudices unwittingly influencing the findings.

This research based upon Karen’s story will benefit UK-based *“social prescribing”* projects that are currently being delivered. The themes identified, such as of cultural understanding, connectedness to an ancestral heritage that is viscerally reflected in the landscape, and healing by belonging in a foreign land, strongly suggest that supporting participants and communities to attend to sites that reflect their

own cultural identity can bring positive outcomes. Organisations who work with displaced communities and with politics of identity, would therefore benefit from the findings of this study and from applying archaeotherapeutic practices. Policy makers may use such studies as this to identify sites around the UK that are culturally meaningful, considering management and conservation requirements for well-being purposes. The current cultural climate and Black Lives Matter movement have focussed the need to integrate and value the contributions of diasporic colonised communities. This kind of storytelling and yarnning brings to the fore the voices of those who, in Karen's words "contributed a lot", who have a "right" to belong, and who have an opportunity to be noticed.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper was written by Harriet Sams. Vanessa Heaslip and Timothy Darvill contributed to the study conceptualisation, study data analysis, reviewed, and commented on the draft paper. Many thanks for their contributions.

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