

To Ojibwe country and back: *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* by Louise Erdrich

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Abstract This paper proposes a close analysis of Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003), considered as a piece of travel writing. The book is first looked at through the lenses of recent developments in travel writing critical theory. However, this theory, being developed on the theoretical tools of postcolonialism, i.e. on problematizing the intentional perception of the Western travelling subject and on questioning this *subject*’s almost innate adoption of hierarchical superiority in relation to the travelling *object*, cannot vitally apply to another “conceptual reality” in which these relations are nonexistent. After consideration of feminist reading of contemporary travel writing, the paper concludes that its, often militant, stand does not comply with a culture that knows child bringer and language teacher as a woman. To pay due respect to the text in question, the analysis turns to some of Native American authored discussions on the difference of meaning of land in contrast to mapping territory, of understanding of circularity of time in contrast to linearity of history. The paper concludes that this Erdrich’s book of travel defies Theory and develops into a potent response to the dehumanizing semiotics of the Native subject and humanity in general.

Keywords Travel writing · Postcolonialism · Feminism · Native American critical theory · Territory · Land

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Introduction

Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country is Louise Erdrich's 2003 non-fiction book devoted to her visit to the Lake of the Woods in Ontario, including description and interpretation of the paintings on the islands' rocks. The book is partly a memoir because Erdrich discusses some family issues that turned to be important formative moments in her life, while using the opportunity to record stories of her people's everyday life, some crucial past events, as well as their sacred stories connected with the particular places she is visiting. However, because it also describes her travel from her home in Minnesota to the Lake of the Woods and a boat journey around the lake's many islands, I will read the book as a piece of travel writing. The significance of physical and geographical movement described in the book is rich and manifold, not only because this time in history it is performed by a will of a Native but also because it develops into a potent response to the dehumanizing semiotics of the Native subject. The book is focused on the reality of people who once painted rocks to tell stories and now write books and own bookshops, who once used cattails as diaper material, but now engage their babies with toy computers while driving them in their vans on highways. It also speaks of a legitimate decision of a female intellectual to move and invest in her own kind of the Linnaean enterprise and, by describing the living species of the lake in Ojibwemowin language, to draw out a special taxonomy through which her people have always understood themselves and, thus, lay a foundation for the development of her own people's discursive ordering. Finally, *Books and Islands* is a celebration of the survival and the power of Ojibwe culture.

Surrounding *The Books and Islands* with theory

The Books and Islands is a unique literary project that defies theory on various levels. Because I am focused on the element of travel, I have tried to read it through the lenses of recent developments in travel writing critical theory. Travel writing was introduced as a serious subject in academia only in the 1970s with the works of Edward Said, Mary Louise Pratt, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, who considered it as an important instrument in the process of colonizing and consolidating the Eurocentric discourse. Therefore, contemporary travel writing criticism mostly relies on the theoretical tools of postcolonialism, i.e. on problematizing the intentional perception of the Western travelling subject and on questioning this *subject's* almost innate adoption of hierarchical superiority in relation to the travelling *object*. Even when Western travellers forget that, unlike their hosts in most cases, they are privileged to travel, it is insisted that they cannot avoid an "imperial" vision. Moreover, as Debbie Lisle writes, it is those who enact a cosmopolitan vision "who are most alarming, for they smuggle in equally judgmental accounts of otherness under the guise of equality, tolerance and respect for difference... they simultaneously rearticulate the logic of Empire through new networks, structures and boundaries" (2006, p. 10). These new hierarchical

structures are found even in travellers' efforts "to reveal the funny side of difference" (2006, p. 10) between them and their host, which Lisle illustrates with the example of Bill Bryson travelling through the Balkans,¹ or in these travellers' delight in finding themselves in places unmapped by tourists. Therefore, although most frequently employed, this theory does not apply to another "conceptual reality," to use John Trudell's concept,² in which these relations are nonexistent.

I looked into the feminist reading of contemporary travel writing and concluded that its, often militant, stand does not comply to a culture that knows woman as a child bringer and language teacher. Feminist critics of women's travel writing, such as Sara Mills and Sidonie Smith, attempt to free female response to travel from the patriarchal colonial burden and map "different discursive frameworks and pressures" (Mills 2001, p. 3) through which women were forced to express themselves in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Mills observes, from their "oppressive socialisation and marginal position in relation to imperialism... women writers tended to concentrate on descriptions of people as individuals, rather than on statements about the race as a whole" (2001, p. 3), because of which their writing was received as inferior, less factual, and more subjective, i.e. as "a personal escape from boredom and repression" (2001, p. 35). Another cause of textual instability which Mills points to is determined by an ambivalent femininity that comprises both the passive position and the dominance of the narrative figure in these texts. "Rather than... the bold adventuring hero of male travel texts," women would often take the traditional feminine role of "the nurse/doctor, the invalid, the philanthropist, the angel in the house and the caring mother or wife" (2001, p. 22). At the same time, the author's relation to the Other in the works Mills discusses must entail a position of power and superiority; she is the narrator who "is never portrayed as being disobeyed" (Mills 2001, p. 22). Moreover, women travellers are often described as tomboyish and "[t]he ones which have been reprinted are those which are most stereotypically 'women travel writers: the indomitable eccentric spinsters'" (Mills 2001, p. 27).

Just as Mills relies on Kay Schaffer's analysis of the traditional analogy of nature and woman—in Schaffer's *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* (1989) nature has been considered as irrational, intuitive, feminine, "seductive and cruel" (Mills 2001, p. 43) and, therefore, an object of masculine control—Sidonie Smith advances from Karen R. Lawrence's observation (in *Penelope Voyages*, 1994) of female body as "traditionally associated with earth, shelter, enclosure" (Smith 2001, p. x) and also discusses the so called gendering of travel. Smith asks, "[i]f traveling, being on the road, makes a man a man—and makes masculinity and its power visible—what does it make of a woman, who is at once a subject as home and a subject at home?" (2001, p. x) She proceeds to examine if a woman has really gained a full access to the powerful transportation technologies of modernity and how the machine, which is traditionally identified as phallic, "affect[s] the stories women narrate about gender and bodies in motion in

¹ See Bill Bryson, *Neither Here Nor There*, 1998.

² This is a very frequent concept used by John Trudell at various occasions, both in his poetry and in his politically and socially committed speeches.

the twentieth century” (Smith 2001, p. xii). More particularly, she discusses how their stories renegotiate “the play of identity and its discontents” (Smith 2001, p. xii).

However, Erdrich travels with her little daughter and, therefore, defines her position as that of a mother. In the chapter titled “How a Mother Packs,” she is obsessed with small things to pack for the trip. Actually, she would travel with her whole home because, as she says, she hates “leaving home” (2003, 6%). After she gives a detailed description of how the home was made, what little things it cherishes, what an abundance of books it keeps, what the garden is like, Erdrich explains that home belongs to her elder daughters too although they may not be living in it at the moment. These daughters also belong to a complicated female world of appurtenances. In her typical manner of expanding the world of relations, of putting infinite within finite and divinizing the material, Erdrich now thinks about numerous and the variety of shoes girls wear through their life: “I tell myself that God and meaning are in the small things as well as in the vast. But where in the wilderness of shoes is God? In the laces? The rubber bumpers? The heels that swiftly rise at age twelve?” (2003, 6%). Apart from travelling with her whole home, the travelling mother will meet her daughter’s father at the destination. Therefore, already at the beginning of her narrative, Erdrich defines herself, i.e. the narrator, as a wife, but also the one who moves, a decision-maker, whereas her husband is identified with the place they are reaching, i.e. the Lake of the Woods, an almost unexplored, “unhistoried,” natural surroundings.

One of the issues Smith deals with is the function of automobile as a means of escaping the stifling domesticity and, at the same time, as a means of “self-making” within the American myth, i.e. making one’s way into the middle class (2001, p. 190). Apart from identifying herself as a part of home and family, with no discontents to talk about, and, thus, openly rejecting participation in the feminist discourse, Erdrich also undermines misconceptions about a typical Native woman by referring to her vehicle of transport. This woman is an active agent in her life and one that makes decision. She owes a “1995 blue Windstar Minivan,” with which she feels “connected.... We have history. I know exactly how to pack this vehicle, and feel its personality is with me” (2003, 9%). Therefore, this choice of transport is not felt as that “prosthesis” lent from the masculine culture and a necessary means of recognition within the Western middle-class system, but as almost a living being. It is “sisterly, accommodating” (2003, 9%). Erdrich describes some important opportunities when she used the car, how she packed it, and who was riding with her—in this chapter the co-travellers are members of the family, while the mentioned destinations are several variants of home.

Because this time Erdrich is also travelling to another variant of home whose surroundings and culture she will describe in a number of vivid ethnographic details, it would be possible to essentialise her book as an example of typical female travel writing. As Smith elaborates, the woman traveller has always been limited to a number of, traditionally believed, suitable topics.

Her attention could most properly be trained upon social arrangements, domestic relations, and the activities and lives of women. As a result, women

travelers contributed cultural information in what became a popular narrative form, the narrative of customs and manners, what Mary Louise Pratt calls “ethnography’s antecedent” (“Scratches” 139). Reporting on manners and customs, women travelers exercised their eye for fine and practical details, a mental habit identified as proper to femininity. Such reportage signaled as well the traveler’s attentiveness to the social space of domesticity, the space to which bourgeois women were assigned. (2001, pp. 18–19)

However, Erdrich’s intention goes beyond mere ethnographic reporting and develops into an important political statement. This statement is also of historical agency, not only for her people but also for humanity at large, which becomes obvious in the elaboration of the return journey when, suddenly, the almost magical description of the natural surroundings, the spirituality, and the old ways of life of the Ojibwe are given the purpose of intensely contrasting the reified contemporaneity of Western society.

Some Native American perspectives on time and space

To pay due respect to the text in question, I turned to some Native American authored discussions on the difference of meaning of land in contrast to mapping of territory, of understanding of circularity of time in contrast to the linearity of history.

In his paper “Narrating Nationhood,” Joseph Bauerkemper reflects on the imperatives of linear history that has determined nationality and statehood in their modern sense. Progressing to the end of history, which, according to Hegel, is a realization of absolute rationality and freedom, everything that belongs to the domain of non-progressive, non-linear, therefore, indigenous and feminine is concerned devoid of rational existence and value. Therefore it must undergo exclusion, suppression, marginalization from history. As Bauerkemper explains, Hegel’s main concept, sublation, meaning at the same time negation and preservation, suppression and appropriation, enabled the right of abolition, relocation, genocide (2007, pp. 33–34). This progress Vine Deloria called the “culture of death” (*God Is Red*, 1972; as cited in Bauerkemper 2007, p. 37) as it aims at dehumanization, by its discourse of power and technology, and reification of peoples and their geographic, genetic, and spiritual histories (Bauerkemper 2007, p. 49).

On a similar line of thinking, in his book *Other Worlds*, Jace Weaver develops the concept of *communitism* as a unique hermeneutics that leads to real postcolonialism that is not to take place in a future, but that has always existed for native peoples because it cannot be abstracted from land. Analogously, the act of creation is understood not as something that took place in the past, historically, but as something that happens spatially, at an always present “here.” Relocation, therefore, entails not only one’s deprivation of territory but also of “a numinous world where every mountain and lake holds meaning for [people’s] faith and identity” (Weaver 2001, p. 300). Weaver further explains that among the natives the

Greek script *basileia tou theou* has always been understood spatially, as a metaphor for creation that represents an ideal of harmony and balance. It is upon this understanding that humans build their responsibility (2001, p. 301).

As Vine Deloria also claims, tribes always combine space and time into “sacred geography” (1994, p. 122). Therefore, the dilemma about the nature of history could only arise at the moment when religion was disconnected from space and became an exclusive agent of time (Deloria 1994, p. 121). Land became secular to justify colonization, while human needs were projected onto the heavens to justify the irresponsibility towards nature. Now, at the end of expansion and history, the tools of linear thought and “abstract morality” show to be ineffective, as “it is becoming increasingly apparent that we shall not have the benefits of this world for much longer” (Deloria 1994, p. 284). Deloria describes this world as a comprehensive matrix of life forms and calls for a radical shift in a viewpoint which is not political or economic, but primarily a religious act of centralizing space (Deloria 1994, p. 284), giving it back its sacredness by cherishing our verbalized co-living with it, i.e. a responsible dialogue. Weaver defines this hermeneutics as “we-hermeneutics,” in which, contrary to the monological “I-hermeneutics,” the community is not only the tool or the frame of hermeneutic action but is also its context and its aim (2001, pp. 302–303).

The difference between the concepts of territory and land may be also observed by the examples from cartography, as explained by Johnson (2007). European maps, she elaborates, reveal the typical masculine rationality; they are always made by men, with assumed legitimate geographical knowledge, and they are always presented as transparent, scientific, objective, and universal because of the constructed belief that European man can disconnect his thought from body, emotion, and past (2007, pp. 104–105). On the contrary, native maps do not know standardized schemes, but they encircle both the context of the stories and the past by focusing on the cultural significance of topography. Thus, a lake connected with stories will be represented as bigger from those in reality more expansive water formations, or would not appear if it does not serve the reason of map-making (Johnson 2007, p. 113). Therefore, for a native subject, maps are also a way of narrating the relationship between humans and nature, i.e. “space is a storied space” (Johnson 2007, p. 113).

The journey Erdrich narrates develops on several levels. In the most obvious, outer sphere of the narrative, it as a geographical and physical journey, from home in Minneapolis to the Lake of the Woods in Ontario and Minnesota that has 14,000 islands, some of which she will visit. It is also a journey to her people’s past, as she visits the places, provides facts, and imagines what life must have been like before the relocation. At this level, the journey is also given contours of a pilgrimage. At the peak of the narrative, we follow a journey into the old symbolism of the “painted islands, the rocks bearing signs ranging from a few hundred to more than a thousand years old. So these islands, which I’m longing to read,” Erdrich says, “are books in themselves” (2003, 3%). Therefore, it must also be a journey into books, into words, language, and the narrator’s own belonging to the world of words. Her belonging to the Ojibwe culture and to the world of words is identified so much that her own being acquires the sacred geography which she is here trying not to map,

but to develop language for that will not be reductive, but is instead reflective of the numberless possibilities of life. Therefore, it can also be read as an inner journey and as a search for one's self. Finally, it is a journey home. Home is also a book, a human symbolic relationship with the universe; it is where she lives as an author.

In the middle of the book

In the centre of Erdrich's interest are the old islands' rock paintings, whose meaning she tries to divine. To locate the paintings temporally, Erdrich points to the difference of the two conceptions. Her husband's conception is that of belonging—"The Anishinaabe have been in Lake of the Woods forever, according to Tobasonakwut" (34%). However, the archeological thinking is about measuring, so the paintings have existed "[s]ince at least two thousand years before the birth of Christ, according to archeologists" (34%). Therefore, she will proceed with the method of belonging because

the ancient symbols on the rocks are as familiar and recognizable to Tobasonakwut as are, say, highway and airport and deer crossing signs to contemporary Americans. Of course, the rock paintings are not just pointer signs.... They refer to a spiritual geography, and are meant to provide teaching and dream guides to generations of Anishinaabeg. (35%)

On a travel of this kind, both ontological and symbolical, Erdrich cannot travel without books; therefore her travel also belongs to a so-called "footsteps genre," and is inevitably a "secondary journey" (see Hulme and Youngs 2002, p. 97), as she will be following in the steps of others, in the first place her own people, but also of some published authors. Such is Joe Paddock, whose book on Ernest Oberholtzer, *Keeper of the Wild*, she carries on the road and quotes from. Yet, unlike some other travelled destinations that would lose allure when written over, the symbolical language of the lakes keeps the roads vibrant. To Erdrich "words are everything around us, and all what we are" (2003, 63%). Therefore, they should be used carefully, i.e. assuming that "a spirit or an originating genius belongs to each word. Before attempting to speak this language [Ojibwemowin], students petition these spirits with gifts of cloth, tobacco, and food" (63%). Therefore, she says, she "never go[es] anywhere without *A Concise Dictionary of Minnesota Ojibwe*, by John D. Nichols and Ealr Nyholm" (8%).

Erdrich finds the Ojibwemowin to be the language of these never-ending symbolic relationships. For example, *mazina* "is the root for dozens of words... concerned with made images and with substances upon which the images are put" (4%). Thus, "*mazina'iganan* is the word for 'books'," we learn from her narrative, while "*mazinapikiniganan* is the word for 'rock paintings'" (4%). Erdrich further explains that when the Ojibwe "began to watch television and go to movies, the word came in handy. *Mazinaatesewigamig*. Movie Theatre. *Mazinaatesijigan*. Television set... *Mazinaakizo*. To be photographed" (4%). Books, therefore, cannot be limited to the reified meaning they get in the consumer culture. When in the very last sentence of the book Erdrich says that she writes as not to be alone, she

implies the interconnectedness and the real responsibility of humans as symbolic animals. “I found myself compelled to behave toward the world as if it contained sentient spiritual beings” (12%), she confesses, and explains the complexities of Ojibwemowin as based on this cosmogony: “*Kawiin gego omaa ayasinoon*, a phrase used when describing loneliness, carries the additional meaning of missing a part of one’s own being.” A part of herself is, therefore, in this storied space. She experiences the lakes as living libraries (5%): “[T]he rock paintings are alive. This is more important than anything else I can say about them” (35%).

Because language is adapted to the land, Erdrich holds that it is of crucial importance for a Native author to be familiar with her/his mother tongue:

Its philosophy is bound up in northern earth. Lakes, rivers, forests, and plains. Its origins pertain to the animals and their particular habits, to the shades of meaning in the very placement of stones. Many of the names and songs associated with these places were revealed to people in dreams and songs—it is a language that most directly reflects a human involvement with the spirit of the land itself. It is the language of the paintings that seem to glow from within the rocks. (60%)

Being the house of relationships, language is about processes and actions. Erdrich tells us that Ojibwemowin is entered in the Guinness Book of World records as one of the most difficult languages to learn:

Two-thirds of the words are verbs, and for each verb, there can be as many as six thousand forms. [Because] the verb forms [describe] the relationships among the people conducting the action, ... the precise way the action is conducted and even under what physical conditions.... There are lots of verbs for exactly how people shift position. Miinoshin describes how someone turns this way and that until ready to make a determined move, iskwishin how a person behaves when tired of one position and looking for one more comfortable. The best speakers are the most inventive, and come up with new words all of the time. Mookegidaazo describes the way a baby looks when outrage is building and coming to the surface where it will result in a thunderous squawl. There is a verb for the way a raven opens and shuts its claws in the cold and a verb for what would happen if a man fell off a motorcycle with a pipe in his mouth and drove the stem of it through the back of his head. (59%)

Ojibwemowin is also the language of emotions, intellectual and dream states. Erdrich provides several examples. *Andopawatchigan* means “seek your dream,” but also “that first you have to find and identify your dream, often through fasting, and then that you... must carry out exactly what your dream tells you to do... by doing this repeatedly you will gradually come into a balanced relationship with all of life” (60%). To show that Ojibwemowin is not a language of vanished spirituality, Erdrich gives examples of “*wiindibaanens* or computer... ‘little brain machine.’” Although the native subject is not traditionally seen as explorer of other continents, peoples and species, Ojibwemowin has words for them:

Genwaabiigwed, the long-necked horse, is a giraffe. *Ojaanzhingwedeyshkanaad*, rhinoceros, the one with the horn sticking out of his nose. *Nandookomeshiin* is the lice hunter, the monkey.... *Aniibiishaabookewininiwag*, the tea people, are Asian. All European are *Omakakiininiwag*, or from people, but the French are *Wemitigoozhiwag*, the wooden-cross people. Catholics, who included the Jesuit priests, are *Mekadewigonayewununuwag*, the black-robe men. *Agongosininiwag*, the chipmunk people, are Scandinavian. (61%)

As for nouns, their conception is explained in terms of relations, which Erdrich uses as an opportunity to offer us an invaluable insight into Ojibwe culture. Namely, nouns are understood as animate or inanimate, and there is no other explanation why something will be understood as living but through stories, especially because it is a language of memory (62%):

For instance, the world for stone, *asin*, is animate.... [T]he preexistence of the world... consisted of a conversation between stones. People speak to and thank the stones in the sweat lodge.... They are addressed as grandmothers and grandfathers. (61%)

Because the lakes have a very rich ecosystem, Erdrich addresses the world of flora and fauna. The word for tobacco is *asema*. *Akawe asema* means “First offer tobacco” (12%). Erdrich narrates how while riding on the lake they saw a man doing this offer, which made her husband “extremely happy.... It is evidence to him that the spiritual life of his people is in the process of recovery.... He is doubly pleased because he knows where this man sets his nets, and knows that he went ten or twelve miles out of his way to visit the rock painting” (12%). Erdrich’s, or the lakes’, floral taxonomy, is followed by explanations and instructions:

The great *maskiig*, or bog, between Red Lake and Lake of the Woods, is traditionally the great Ojibwe pharmacy.... There is Labrador tea, or swamp tea, *makigobug*. Snakeroot, which I should be carrying for good luck and health on this journey.... *Ininiwunj*, or milkweed, used on whistles as a charm for drawing deer. Pitcher plant or *omukikiwidasun*, which makes great toys. The Ojibwe name means “frog leggings.” There is willow for indigestion, for basketmaking, the inner bark for kinnickinnick and headaches. *Makibug*, sumac, for dysentery. White cedar for coughs.... *Winabojobikuk*, for snakebite. That’s “Winabojo’s arrow.” (16–17%)

One of the important ingredients in Ojibwe life is *wiikeenh*, cattails, or sweet flag, which “is the ultimate medicine” (41%). When mixed with “a mashed waterlily root, *okundamoh*” (44%), it strengthens the immune system, draws out infection and poison, strengthens voices of the singers” (44%). They are also “a perfect diapering material for the tender new bottoms of Anishinaabeg babies, used to stuff in the bags of cradleboards. Reeds were used for floor covering, woven into mats” (40%).

The blueberries, which they have for breakfast, are *miinan* (79%). At this occasion, Erdrich describes how at breakfast Rose Tainter, a traditional elder, prays in Ojibwemowin with her sacred pipe. Eating is described as an important ritual:

We have a huge bowl of blueberries. A spirit dish is prepared. The dish is made up of small portions of the food we'll eat, with tobacco set alongside the portions. The spirit dish is either left outside for the spirits or burned as an offering. This is the way the Ojibwe have always given thanks for the first berries of the year. After Rose has finished praying and the spirit dish is set outside, we eat. We eat seriously. We eat with attention. We eat with a lot of laughing.

It seems to me that Ojibwe people always eat with happy grace. Food is part of every gathering and ceremony. (79–80%)

On their way around the lake, they meet a number of animals, which “come close as if they want to get a good look at this child whose ancestors watched their ancestors” (40%). *Mikinaak* is a turtle, and it is of both particular and symbolical importance in Ojibwe life. Its thirteen back plates are associated with the thirteen moons in the yearly cycle. It helped women calculate their own biological circles and thus, Erdrich explains, women “were responsible for beginning Ojibwa mathematical calculations.... Mathematics wasn't abstract. It was intimate” (43%). There is also *shaw-wa-Be-na-se*, or falcon (32%); crayfish is *ashaageshiinhyag* (20%). Erdrich depicts some pelicans, “constantly wheeling eagles” (40%), “three young moose, gangly and playful” (39%), an otter appears on the site, and “a nice fat *waboose*, a grown rabbit,” friendly behaving (50%).

Nameh is sturgeon, a revered animal for the Ojibwe. Erdrich explains how Ojibwe practiced fish-farming and had special “sturgeon gardens” long before white people arrived. They did it in “shallow and protected parts of the lake where they mixed eggs and sperm and protected the baby sturgeon from predators. The eggs and sperm were mixed together with an eagle feather in an act both sacred and ordinary” (53%). Yet, the overfishing by non-natives and search for caviar supplies at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century dramatically depopulated this fish—“The sturgeon were indiscriminately taken by the non-Indian fisheries for their roe.... They were stacked like cordwood all along the lake and often left to rot. An agonizing sight for the Ojibwe” (53%). Yet, we are also told that the Ontario Ministry of National Resources has begun a conservation program with tribal communities to raise sturgeon in Lake Winnebago near Shawano Wisconsin (53–54%).

Another important animal is bear, *niiyaawaangashing* in Ojibwemowin:

The bear slides into the channel and dog-paddles with powerful assurance to the other side, where he doesn't hide himself at all, but stands up and rakes the berry bushes underneath a tree containing a huge eagle's nest. One eagle hulks stubbornly next to the nest, watching over an eaglet, whose head pops up, curious, from time to time.

Sometimes a little bear will get caught in the crotch of a tree and hang himself. When such a skeleton is found, it is very sacred to the Ojibwe and is used in religious ceremonies. (25–26%)

Here Erdrich expounds how medicine lodges used to be made of “young bent-over people or birch poles tied together with basswood. Spruce boughs or ferns are tied

along the sides for shade” (26%). She goes back to the time when religion was an inseparable part of Ojibwe life and provides details about a big Midewiwin or Grand Medicine lodge, in which the main religious ceremonies would take place, but which is now “returning to scrub trees and sumac” (26%).

To explain her most close relations, Erdrich does it in a traditional way because “very traditional people are very careful about attribution. When a story begins there is a prefacing history of that story’s origin that is as complicated as the Modern Language Association guidelines to form in footnotes” (28%). The story about her daughter, *Nenaa’ikiizhikok*, therefore, starts with a story about the spirit woman whose name she has inherited: “Her grandmother on her father’s side had this name, and was called Kiizhikok, Sky Woman, or Kiizhik; Sky, for short” (10%). Her husband, the sun-dancer, “was named after low-lying clouds over the water of the lake.” To introduce Tobasonakwut, “I must go back to 1688 when a twenty-year-old French explorer named Jacques de Noyon wrote....” (23%), Erdrich proceeds, telling a story of how the first French raided the territory and were met by an arrow fired straight in front of their feet and a people “taller than any other native people they had met before” (24%). Tobasonakwut’s people

were the lake, and the lake was them. At one time, everyone who lived near the lake was essentially made of the lake. As the people lived off fish, animals, the lake’s water and water plants for medicine, they were literally cell by cell composed of the lake and the lake’s islands. Tobasonakwut’s father once said to him, *The creator is the lake and we are the waves on the lake.* (25%)

This “image of complexity and shifting mutability of human nature” (55%) is clearly depicted in the paintings. The first one to be described is a dozen foot wide painting of the wild rice spirit, *Manoominiskeshii*, composed of “several spirit figures as well as diagrams of teachings” (36%). The figures are described in warm colours of golden red. What to some other eye may appear to be a sign of a primitive human, to Erdrich is “economically imagined” (36%) interconnectedness between the plant, *Kiimaagoogani* and the people, which is both physical and spiritual: “[t]his particular spirit... is invoked and fussed over, worried over, just as the plants are checked throughout the summer for signs of ripening” (36%). The first human expressions of their relationship with nature were always hierophantic and erotic, and so is this one: “Everything is sexual,” Erdrich explains, “the way of the world is to be sexual, and it is good (although often ridiculous)” (37%). It is now time for Erdrich to introduce the great Ojibwe and Anishinabeg teacher, to the European mind unconceivable, liminal, and amoral, Nanabozho, or Wanabojo, who “gave medicines to the Ojibwe, one of the primary being laughter” (37%). In a similar manner, the sacred Horned Man in Christian interpretation stands for the devil, but actually the “horns connote intellectual and spiritual activity” (38%). This figure is also connected with the ancient symbolism of the cross, as it holds the cross over a water drum. To Erdrich it signifies a higher degree of spiritual knowledge, especially as the painting also points to some traditional means of praying and medicine, as is the Mide lodge, the sweat lodge, *maddoodiswan*, or the shake tent:

I quickly grow fond of this squat, rosy, hieratic figure. His stance is both proud and somewhat comical, the bent legs strong and stocky. His arms are raised but he doesn't seem to be praying as much as dancing, ready to spring into the air, off the rock. When this rock was painted on a cliff, the water below was not a channel but a small lake that probably flooded periodically, allowing fish to exit and enter. Perhaps it was a camping or a teaching place, or possibly even a productive wild rice bed. Very likely it was a place where the Mide lodge was built, like Niiyaawaangashing. The painter may have been a Mide teacher, eager to leave instructions and to tell people about the activities that took place here. (38%)

Because the horned man also beats a water drum, we are told that these “drums are extremely resonant, and their tone changes beautifully according to the level of the water and the player's skin at shifting the water in the drum while beating it” (38%).

A few other teaching symbols and religious means are communicated on another rock:

[H]igh above Obabikon channel, a rock painting gives instructions to the spirit on how to travel from this life into the next life. Such a journey takes four days and is filled with difficulties. For that reason, loved ones provide the spirit with food, spirit dishes, and encouragement in the form of prayers and songs. (43%)

Erdrich experiences these paintings as alive because they are capable of evoking powerful spirits. “Thunder is the beating of their wings. Lightning flashes from their eyes,” Erdrich tells us. Ojibwe have to be careful in treating them. For example, “[w]hen a storm approaches, traditional Ojibwe cover all the shiny objects—mirror and cooking pans—so as not to attract the attention of the Binessiwag. A feather over the door lets them know Anishinsabeg are at home” (51%). They are regarded likewise by other natural beings; yet, their only enemies are the great underwater snakes called *Ginebigooog*. They are said “to travel from lake to lake via an underground network of watery tunnels that lies beneath northern Minnesota and Ontario” (51%).

The very paint, *atiskan* is another kind of “book,” or means of communication. We are presented with its various uses—for burial, for bringing people into religion, for teaching, decorating (43%). We are also explained that the paint comes from the Eternal Sands and that it is sacred because it makes a living part of flora and fauna of the lake:

Just down the beach the waves have dragged the sand off the tough roots of a low beach plant. The roots are such a brilliant red that from a short distance it looks as though the leaves are bleeding into the water. This is a component of the sacred paint.... The recipes for paints used by other tribes are often based on vermilion from outcroppings of cinnabar. The Inuit used blood and charcoal. Burnt plum seeds and bull rushes were mixed into a black paint by the Klamath, and many tribes used blue carbonate of copper. (42–43%)

Of other important figures, Erdrich interprets the meaning of simple but symbolical lines that were not only used in the paintings far back in the past but also present a potent part of the contemporary Native American art:

The line is a sign of power and communication. It is sound, speech, song. The lines drawn between things... express relationships, usually between a human and a supernatural being. Wavy lines... signify direct visionary information, talk from spirit to spirit. In the work of some contemporary Ojibwe artists, Joe Heshick, Blake Debassige, and Norval Morrisseau, the line is still used to signify spiritual interaction. Contemporary native art is not just influenced by the conventions invented by the rock painters, it is a continuation, evidence of the vitality of Ojibwe art. (39%)

However, there is an artificial line which the traveller has to face at the end of her journey.

And back

Driving back to the U.S., Erdrich reaches a border crossing, which she, as much as she tries, cannot go through without anxiety: "I am carrying those eagle spikes and although I have a right to carry them and I have my band enrollment card, I hate the questioning, the scrutiny, the suspicious nature of the border guards" (69%). This border marks the return into an inhospitable space and into a historical time that many travellers of colour, especially female ones, have experienced with terror. The history of suppression and relocation, along with the genderized identity, sums up when the narrator is questioned about her parenthood over her daughter and when she must ask herself: "Am I going to be required to nurse my baby in front of some border-crossing guard? I pull over, wishing that I had a copy of the Jay Treaty, which guarantees Native People the right to cross the Canadian-U.S. border without hassle" (69%).

Writing about this forceful confrontation of coloured travellers with their own Otherness, Sidonie Smith gives an example from Leslie Marmon Silko's 1994 essay "Fences against Freedom," which discusses race policies along the Southwestern highways enforced by "'checkpoints,' those quintessential sites" made "to prevent 'illegal aliens' from entering the body politic" using "badges, guns, and search dogs" (Smith 2001, p. 202). Remembering her fear, Silko writes:

We citizens of the United States grew up believing this freedom of the open road to be our inalienable right. The freedom of the open road meant we could travel freely from state to state without special papers or threat of detainment; this was a "right" citizens of Communist and totalitarian governments did not possess. That wide open highway was what told us we were U.S. citizens. Indeed, some say, this freedom to travel is an integral part of the American identity. (as cited in Smith 2001, p. 202)

Unlike the spiritualized lines on the paintings that summoned friendly interconnectedness, border crossing also communicates transit into a reified space,

the world of misappropriations and things. The road signs have the same function, reminding the traveller of her marginalized position in the dominant culture that has been brought on the old narrative of demonization of the natives. Thus, the place that the Anishinaabe call Spirit Bay is written on the white man's map as "Devil's Bay, [which is] so tiresome and so insulting" (45%), Erdrich adds with bitterness. Contrasting the quickness of the movement leading to the Lakes of the Woods, when she remembers that it was expanded from an old Ojibwe trade trail, and that "songs [*nagamonan*], ceremonies.... Medicines, knowledge, sacred shells" (11%) happily travelled this route, the traveller now feels disoriented "by the similarity of gas station stop names and supermarkets. They seem to have the same name in various combinations" (70%). The journey now turns into a reverse travel, one into an abstract technological era, whose signs, flimsy billboards, cheap motels, just as border crossings, look "pathetically superimposed on a region, harsh, mystical, quite beyond the practical efforts of human beings to tame it" (32%). The movement is suddenly slowed when the mother and the daughter have to stop and spend the night in a highway motel, "one of those square tubes of rooms facing the road. The line of identical brown doors and windows, like staring faces, has a sullen aspect" (63%). Having first perceived the highest values of human being in the co-living with natural wilderness, the visual language of this book of travel is now coping with the terrifying meaning, or the loss of it, in the urban wilderness. Staying in her motel room, by her sleeping daughter, Erdrich feels alone and therefore grabs another book as to cope with a sudden sense of loss.

Such a sense of loss, as Youngs claims (2013, p. 90), permeates contemporary travel writing, especially when a geographical journey is also an inward journey. Quest for meaning which happens in a "place of older certainties of group identity" (90), therefore, often has its parallel development on a national level (102). Likewise, returning to the motorized world and aggressive capitalism, i.e. "returning to human disorder" (Erdrich 2003: 64%), the narrative suffers from a friction, as if its intention has suddenly changed from illuminating the timelessness of Ojibwe spiritual world to a historical mission of delineating "the unattractive nature of the towns and buildings" (64%). Yet, after the peace of Ojibwe country, for the traveller this ugliness is even threatening, as it "seems purposeful. There is a belligerent streak to ugliness" (64%). Finally, Erdrich's feeling of being forcefully dispossessed of the meaningful and sacred finds an unpretentious metonymy through her discussion of Winfried Georg Sebald's *Austerlitz*, the tragedy of Jews, and, irrevocably, the tragedy of the whole alienated humanity. She thinks "how the smallest building-cottages, little pavilions, bring us peace," but when "we contemplate vast buildings, overdone buildings," we experience "a wonder which is also dawning horror" (66%). And she quotes from *Austerlitz*: "for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins" (66%).

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