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# NEW TRENDS IN NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES: *THE ROAD BACK TO SWEETGRASS* AND THE PALIMPSEST APPROACH TO NATIVE FICTION[1]

The reflection on the positioning of Native American Studies within the U.S. and European academic contexts, which this special issue is devoted to, is particularly relevant — if not altogether urgent — at the current time. In the second half of the 2010s, the political climate is rapidly becoming more and more unstable, with a worrying turn to radical conservatism and the closure of geographical boundaries. The refugee crisis, the backlash of feminism, or the endangering of the rights of minorities, sadly indicate that equality, freedom and justice are far from being generally granted to millions of people around the world. In spite of this extremely discouraging context, however, and clearly as a direct reaction to it, activism is growing strong: The Black Lives Matter actions, the Women's March Movement, or the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests are just three examples of the current reengagement with civil rights on which people are laying their highest hopes for a better future. Needless to say, in parallel with action, it seems compelling to also examine the theoretical implications of cultural manifestations, their objectives and motivations, as well as their connections to the global socio-political context. In this line, this article is aimed at reflecting on recent developments in the broad category of Native American Studies, and at offering a particular proposal of analysis for contemporary Native literature which is based on the assumption that literature functions as a form of activism.

In recent years, we have witnessed interesting developments that revise and go beyond the discussion, predominant in the last two decades or so, on the best way to conceive and apply Native American Studies as either connected to or separated from non-Native theories and trends.[2] One such developments is the dialogue of Native Studies with the Turn to Ethics, which became a productive trend of western criticism in the 1990s and 2000s. This connection seemed a logical and expected one, since, as bell hooks accurately put it, "[w]hen we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our actions, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination" (1989, 43). As a Spanish scholar working on Native Studies since the late 1990s, I have always tried to follow hooks' call to reflection, making it a condition through which to filter my own essay and paper writing. Additionally, to quote my own older words, I have argued that

> [e]thnic creative writing often incorporates a critical response to Western authority, reminding us that so-called minorities have not usually had the same access to theoretical voice as those in power do. Furthermore, we also need to take into account the specific origin of Native authors, in whose ancient traditions it was common for performances to include a commentary on themselves, thus practicing metafiction and self-reflexivity long before (post)modernism. On the other hand, Native writing has a primary ceremonial motivation, broadly understood as an

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[2] I am here referring to the controversial choice between the cosmopolitan or "mixed blood" approach, focused on the dialogue of indigenous and Western understandings and theories, on the one hand; and the nationalistic approach, centered on the vindication of Native difference and sovereignty, on the other. For an overview of such debate, see Andersen 2009, Johnson 2007 and Kidwell 2009, as well as Martínez-Falquina 2017.

> opening of the possibility of transformation for the participants in the process. (Martínez-Falquina 2009, 191-92)

The engagement in creative, transformative dialogues with Native writing derived from this ethical positioning have marked my analyses of contemporary Native fiction, as has the conviction that, when approaching Native texts, originated in cultures which have been the object of stereotyping and appropriation for centuries, one needs to be particularly committed and responsible. Starting from the principle that there is not one truth which will prove valid for everyone, at every time and place or for every situation, an external view on the literature produced by a culture so distant from one's own should never claim to be more final or authoritative than an internal one, but, if sensitive to cultural difference and power dynamics, it can also provide illuminating visions which will contribute to the transformative, ceremonial value of the writing/reading ceremony.

Another important recent development of Native American Studies is the connection to Trauma Studies — which is partly derived from the aforementioned Turn to Ethics — and more specifically, to the new discipline known as Postcolonial Trauma Theory.[3] As I argue in "Re-Mapping the Trauma Paradigm: The Politics of Native American Grief in Louise Erdrich's 'Shamengwa'," there have been various attempts to adapt trauma theory to the Native American condition — trauma being too familiar a presence among Native Americans — like the works of Jennifer Lemberg or Nancy van Styvendale. However, the connection remains problematic and more work still needs to be done in this respect. A very useful term, which originates in Native American contexts, and which was first introduced and developed in the 1990s by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Lemyra M. DeBruyn, Bonnie Duran and Eduardo Duran, is American Indian historical trauma. This culture-specific idea is particularly relevant for the way it examines racism and oppression as the origin of historical unresolved grief. In order to try to solve the problems brought by both the attempt to adopt mainstream trauma theory to refer to Native traumas, and the articulation of an independent, differential theory — including the respective dangers of theory colonization and the re-victimization of Native Americans — in the aforementioned chapter I propose a re-mapping of the paradigm by theorizing Native American grief and its political implications when expressed in literature. This re-mapping starts from Native American narratives as a source of theoretical reflection, and it points to an emphasis on suffering and healing as both individual and communal, to an idiosyncratic understanding of place and time, and to the simultaneously culture-specific and hybrid nature of the process of mourning.

These conclusions can be related to several recently articulated developments of Native storytelling. Firstly, they are directly connected to the dialogues between storytelling and theories offered by the contributors to the volume *Stories Through Theories/Theories Through Stories: North American Indian Writing, Storytelling, and Critique*, edited by Gordon Henry, Nieves Pascual-Soler and myself in 2009. The book starts from the premise that the relationship between stories and theories is a contentious but also a creative one, and that Native American stories can function as theory, for

> in our interpretation of Native texts, we can and should establish creative dialogues between storytelling and criticism, assuming that theories incorporate narrative patterns and show traces of stories in their articulation, and that stories imply and show a familiarity with theory, or can be theory, functioning as critique, especially in terms of their redefinition of the relations between writer, text, reader, and critic. (Martínez-Falquina 2009, 191)

This approach resists "the either/or forces of essentialist, or theoretical, categorization in favor of a both-and/or-neither approach, creating engagements between storytelling and critique in view of American Indian texts" (Henry 2009, 21).

[3] In 2008, Michael Rothberg's call for a "decolonized trauma theory" (251) became a turning point in the Trauma Studies and Postcolonial Studies relation. Since then, critics like Michela Borzaga, Jo Collins, Stef Craps, Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué, Silvia Martínez-Falquina — "Postcolonial Trauma Theory in the Contact Zone" — or Irene Visser, to name but a few, have contributed to the discipline, which moves beyond Eurocentrism and the focus on individual psychic trauma, to expand its analysis to other cultural-specific ways of experiencing trauma and healing.

Secondly, LeAnne Howe's concept of "tribalography," another cornerstone in recent Native Studies developments, becomes particularly relevant too for this view on storytelling. The concept originates in the idea that "story creates attitudes and culture, the very glue which binds a society together" (1999, 121), and that "Native stories are power. They create people. They author tribes" (118). In Howe's words,

> Native people created narratives that were histories and stories with the power to transform. I call this rhetorical space "tribalography." […] [T]he power of Native storytelling is revealed as a living character who continues to influence our culture. The study of tribalography is advanced by first looking at how Indian people made story from events and non-events. (118)

This conception, which requires a broad and fluid understanding of fiction and history, allows us to see America as "a collection of stories" (Howe 2002, 46), and it emphasizes "the Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another" (42).
And thirdly, the focus on theory, which comes to the fore always in connection to one of the essential elements that define Native American cultures, that is, storytelling, is contextualized in recent vindications of theory. In *Theorizing Native Studies*, Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith propose to center the importance of theory, and they argue that "[w]hile there may be a backlash against theory in other fields […], Native studies has made an explicit turn toward theory" (2014, 1):

> In countering the call for intellectual isolationism, it is therefore important to engage rather than reject conversation with schools of thought that may have compatible intellectual and political goals, in particular Marxist theory, feminist theory, ethnic studies, and postcolonial theory. Native studies has often focused on the incompatibility and conflicts with these fields. And while these critiques are essential, they should not be used to inhibit engagement with aspects of these fields that might be beneficial for Native studies projects. (12)

Interestingly, in Simpson and Smith's view, "[p]erhaps the important intervention is not to reject theory per se, but to question the perceived ownership of theory" (7). They connect theory to the political engagement to Native communities in a productive coalition that can enhance the impact of Native studies. Needless to say, the connection of theory to storytelling, to Native individual and tribal identity, and to community engagement, provides a promising and productive answer to the debates on the nature and purpose of Native Studies.
With all this in mind, the future of Native American Studies, I contend, as the very stories we read teach us, lies in reaching some level of balance between difference and relation — associated to nationalism and hybridity, respectively — with respect to the colonizers and their ways. Of course, prominence may be given — and will be given — to either difference or relation for particular purposes. Theory, or our approach to a cultural reality, should be understood as mobile and alive, and not necessarily predetermined or good for all. I argue, then, that there is still a need for a theory which articulates *both* difference *and* relation, and which does so in a way that allows for some pollution and ambivalence, as well as some mobility in-between the two. While this might sound too obvious or simplistic, it is actually a complex political move which is by no means universally accepted as desirable or even possible. In any case, it requires an openness to the integration of difference in contemporary structures, as well as a rethinking of difference and relation as not necessarily incompatible or opposed.
Side by side with the reflection on the nature of storytelling and theory, an account of Native American Studies unavoidably has to refer to identity too. As Clara Sue Kidwell contends, referring to Eva Marie Garroutte, "The underlying theoretical question in Native American studies is, What constitutes truly indigenous knowledge? Its corollaries are, What constitutes Native American identity in contemporary society? Who is an Indian?" (2009, 5). In the answer to the last two questions, we need to consider how Natives are defined by other people, and how Native people themselves determine who an Indian is, for there are two dimensions to the issue of Indian identity, namely, "external identity" and "internal identification" (6). Needless to say, the appropriation and objectification of the former, under the shape of discriminating stereotypes, has greatly determined — and is still determining — the latter. Amongst the most perceptive

conceptualization of Native identity so far is still Gerald Vizenor's conception of the 'postindian,' which includes that external identity he qualifies as the *Indian*, in italics to underline the simultaneous necessity and inadequacy of the term, and which is, to him, an invention, the construction of a model through a process of simulation of the other, a hyperreality that takes the place of reality and is characterized by the absence of a real referent. The clearest example of such an invention is the term *Indian* itself, a generalization which does not exist in any native language, and which is a western simulation that substitutes tribal names and perpetuates cultural dominance (Vizenor and Lee 1999, 11). Living after the colonial invention of the *Indian*, which they must confront, present-day Native Americans are postindians: "Postindians create a native presence, and that sense of presence is both reversion and futurity. Yes, and the reversions are tricky and ironic, as they have always been in native stories, but never as easy as cultural victimry" (84). Characterized by what they are not, the key to the definition of postindians is their affirmation of a native presence through the simulation of survivance — a combination of survival and resistance (73) — instead of dominance structures, which Vizenor calls "manifest manners":

> The postindian warriors hover at last over the ruins of tribal representations and surmount the scriptures of manifest manners with new stories; these warriors counter the surveillance and literature of dominance with their own simulations of survivance. The postindian arises from the earlier inventions of the tribes only to contravene the absence of the real with theatrical performances; the theater of tribal consciousness is the recreation of the real, not the absence of the real in the simulations of dominance. (Vizenor 1994, 5)

Postindian identity is fundamentally dialogical, it accepts differences such as those between Native and Western, or *Indian* and postindian, as a matter of degree and not of nature, and it constantly refers back to the conception of the *Indian*, transgressing and revising its implications.
Vizenor is also responsible for the definition of the term 'transmotion,' a useful creative concept that takes the focus on the "trans" metaphor — so common in recent reflections on the transindigenous, the transethnic, or the transmodern, to mention only some[4] — to the specificities of the Native context. In his words,

> [t]he stories of native survivance are instances of natural motion, and transmotion, a visionary resistance to cultural dominance, the practices of monotheism, policies of federal reservations, and the heavy loads of industrial conversions. Regrettably commercial literature about natives has often been structured with the familiar themes of classical, heroic tragedy, and modern victimry, but scarcely classical irony or comedy. Native stories, however, are imagined and related with a sense of natural motion and survivance, not cultural denouement and victimry.
> The discussion of transmotion, a spirited and visionary sense of natural motion, has evolved in my critical studies as an original aesthetic theory to interpret and compare the modes, distinctions, situations, and the traces of motion in sacred objects, stories, art, and literature. (2015, 65)

The sense of natural motion signified in transmotion expresses the way the postindian includes the *Indian* and its negation, Western and Native elements, while escaping the restrictions of stereotyped and romanticized representations of *Indians*. In this way, I contend, postindian identity and the idea of transmotion may be apprehended as working under the dynamic of the palimpsest, understood as functioning in both a vertical and a horizontal axis. This is a productive connection which I am going to explore in more depth in this article, and which I am offering as an approach that might further illuminate all these developments on Native American fiction and theory.

[4] See Allen 2012, Simal 2011, and Rodríguez Magda 2011 for an overview of the "trans" context we are in at present.

As I argue in more depth elsewhere,[5] the palimpsest metaphor, currently recovered by a range of contemporary discourses,[6] becomes useful to refer to the imposition — through patterns of silencing, censorship and domination — of imperial inscriptions on indigenous cultures. The most common view of the palimpsest is celebratory, focused on how previous inscriptions that have been overwritten remain despite erasure, in such a way that dominated voices eventually surface and challenge hegemonic narratives,[7] but as Johannessen warns us, not everything in the palimpsest is preserved: "Sometimes erasures are forever lost, no matter how 'deep you dig'" (2012, 898). Apart from this tension between resurfacing and erasure, recovery and loss, the key to my use of the palimpsest metaphor is the combination of two definitions of the term: the first is Sarah Dillon's use of the term "palimpsestuous" to describe an "involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other" (2005, 245), and which recognizes the intermingling of voices which cannot be seen as separate from one another; and the second is Brecht Der Groote's emphasis on fragmentation, based on the fact that "there is barely any sign of genetic connection in an *actual* palimpsest" beyond the fact that they happen to feature on the same page (2014, 121; original emphasis). Der Groote recovers the original reading of the palimpsest, centered on the separation of layers, and he calls it "the *palimpsestic* palimpsest" (122, original emphasis), but according to this critic, the palimpsestuous and the palimpsestic palimpsests are not to be understood in opposition but in "*non-dialectic competition*" (112, original emphasis). Further, the palimpsestic and the palimpsestuous can be respectively related to archaeology and genealogy. The palimpsest editor's aim is to recognize the clues on the surface story in order to decipher the underlying one (Dillon 2007, 65). In this way he reminds us of Michel Foucault's view of the historian, whose task is "the making visible of what was previously unseen" (1980, 50) and is therefore connected to archaeology. In her characterization of palimpsestuous reading, Dillon notes how Foucault combines the archaeological with the genealogical (Dillon 2005, 253). Drawing on Nietzsche, Foucault concludes that "[g]enealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times" (1984, 76).

The combination of these two inherently different views of the palimpsest provides, I contend, a useful metaphor to interpret contemporary Native American literatures and identity: it can conveniently address the double reference to survival and the threat of disintegration that Native writing is largely based on. At the same time, the metaphor also proves relevant to apprehend the tension between external and internal definitions of Native Americans, including persistent colonial stereotypes, and the way they are contested but not totally erased in Gerald Vizenor's idea of the postindian, which I see as a palimpsest in itself, and which he defines as "a new tribal presence in the very ruins of the representations of invented Indians" (1994, 13). It also contributes to the definition of Native identity and texts as a result of the dynamic, transmotional and postindian combination of archaeology and genealogy. All in all, the palimpsest *modus operandi* addresses the relational component of Native American identity as well as the tension and contestation around which it is articulated in literary texts.

With all this in mind, in this essay — which is part of a larger project aimed at revisiting Native American texts through the palimpsest metaphor as a way to come to terms with the tensions that characterize them — I look at *The Road Back to Sweetgrass*, a 2014 novel by Minnesota Anishinaabe writer Linda LeGarde Grover, from both the palimpsestic and palimpsestuous perspective.[8] In other words, I am focusing on the way previously silenced or marginalized voices are brought to the surface, vindicated and recognized in their individuality, only to be immediately acknowledged as part of a larger whole, as existing in dialogic relation to a series of other voices with which they coexist in tension and competition.

[5] The following definition of the palimpsest has previously appeared in my forthcoming article on the analysis of Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* as a palimpsest, "'How Tough Those Roots Had Clung': Reading Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* as a Palimpsest."
[6] See Dillon 2005 for further details.
[7] See the key conceptualizations of the palimpsest in Alarcón 1988 and Silverman 2013.
[8] A previous version of some of the ideas in this textual analysis were presented at the 2016 MESEA and AEDEAN conferences.

*The Road Back to Sweetgrass* starts with the scent of sweetgrass[9] breathed in by the wild rice harvesters in Mozhay Point Ojibwe Reservation. There would be nothing unusual about this smell, except for the fact that no sweetgrass has been found to grow on that land. The ricers "occasionally stop in their work to wonder about this," but as said in the prologue, "the scent reminds us that we have been blessed by the Creator in all ways, understood or otherwise, here during our time on Mother Earth, and so we accept the mystery for what it is" (Grover 2014, 1). As readers, though, part of that mystery is explained when we are let in on the secret around which the whole novel is structured:

> in the old Muskrat family sugarbush, there near the middle of the land that more than a century ago became the LaForce family land allotment, is where spirits tread so lightly that their feet, transparent as the air, make no more mark on the ground than air itself; with every step the scent, invisibly compressed and released, renews and rises into the LaForce allotment atmosphere.
> Below in the earth that is covered by leaves in fall, snow in winter, mud in spring, and sparse northern moss in summer, a small deerskin bag sewn with red thread and blue beads holds an infant's umbilical cord, an odissimaa, wrapped in dried sweetgrass. (1-2)

Interestingly here, the more the land is trodden on, the more strongly the scent is perceived. There is also a reference to the earth being covered by layers of leaves, snow, mud or moss depending on the season, and hiding a ceremonial bag with strong references to a very specific cultural identity: the thread, the beads, and the odissimaa wrapped in sweetgrass. All in all, this image suggests, from the very beginning of the text, that what is buried prevails and can resurface, and it suggests a connection of this narrative to the palimpsest metaphor.

To start with, the text exposes and denounces the over-writing of tribal people on the part of colonial power: lands are occupied, stories are silenced, western definitions are imposed, and Native bodies are violated. One example of the power of colonial writing being exerted over the Natives is the change of names forced on the Wazhushkag family, "who through *jiibik ozhibii-igewin*, the magic writing of the Indian agent's pen […] became the Washingtons" (177). During the time of federal termination policy, Wazhushkag had already been recorded in its English version, Muskrat, which the agent thought was a humorous name, "not knowing anything about the courage and sacrifice of Wazhushk during the days of the Great Flood, when water covered the entire earth" (178). The agent therefore ignored the meaning of the name, the stories contained in it, as well as the family's polite refusal — "Thank you, no" — to have it changed, and simply wrote "Washington" (178) over it.

Another way in which Native people are written over by whites is by having images of the exotic Indian imposed to them. The most telling example is that of Michael Washington, the first member of his family to set foot in college, and who quits soon after the first encounter with his "Indians of America" class teacher. Wearing a Pendleton blanket and a hundred-dollar weighty Navajo squash blossom necklace, the teacher sees Michael as "an authentic Indian-looking brave" (18), and "a real live Indian of America" (19), and interprets him — and lets him know, too — as a victim "at the hands of American imperialism" (18). She sees in his long hair "a warrior embodiment of rage against the oppressions of the establishment […]; one who has experienced firsthand the degradations and injustices of the military-industrial complex!" (20). Similarly, Dale Ann, a bright young girl chosen by the federal relocation program to work in Chicago as a telephone operator, is received with disappointment by her roommates, who expect an Indian princess in a feathered headband and leather dress (59): "The room stared at Dale Ann, too polite to say their collective thought, too stoned to control their collective body language: she doesn't look like an Indian. What is she wearing? Where are her braids?" (62).

Dale Ann is also the protagonist of the most telling example of bodies being raped and treated as property; she is first violated by a white man who comes into her room to "do [her] a favor" (73), forces her and gets her pregnant; then by the health authorities who, during labor, treat her as "the incubator for a baby that would belong to somebody else" (96), and who deal with her body and her future as if it were "the county's

[9] An aromatic herb commonly used by many Native tribes in their ceremonies. Its scientific name is *Hierochloe odorata*.

property" (94). Dale Ann is robbed of the power of writing her own life, and it is only *after* her fallopian tubal ligation has been done while still under anesthetic that she is made to sign to give permission for the Indian Health Service to pay for her sterilization (98). One effect of this traumatic experience is the fact that the motherhood instinct is buried in her until much later in life when she holds baby Crystal, a moment when, she says, "my spirit stirred in the blackness of its dark sleep, and woke" (84).

As we can see, Native voices are silenced by colonial power, their bodies and identities are written over, appropriated, they are simply erased as human beings. However, as the text denounces this, it also emphasizes Native resistance by resurfacing, the past is vindicated, searched for, cherished; the overwritten writes back, as in the hidden original of a palimpsest. One way in which the novel accomplishes this is by incorporating symbols that point to layering and a privileging of the underlying. For example, while in Zho Wash's cabin, young Margie observes the marks on his table; the narrative goes:

> The whole table was marked up with gouges and stains that Margie sanded lightly every few years, but she couldn't bring herself to paint over the marks made by all that living that had gone on in the cabin over the decades before she had moved in, and the decades since. […] Because she loved the blemishes and their memories so, in middle age she protected them by covering the table when she worked with a flowered plastic tablecloth, to keep them intact. (155-56, 159)

Margie, in an unlikely but stable relationship with Zho Wash, who may be the father or grandfather of her baby, is the keeper of those marks of the past, of memory, the marks of the life that has been going on before, and which is still going on.

The text also presents us with different layers of language, which similarly functions on the double dynamic of the palimpsest. In the text, Anishinabemowin — the Anishinaabe language — is often juxtaposed to English, as in "'Gaazhigens, giwi minikwe ina doodoshaboo?' asked Annette." And then, in italics: "*Cat, you want some milk to drink*?" (8). Language difference is marked in italics, which is mostly used for Anishinabemowin, but occasionally for English too. We are often offered an immediate translation, in such a way that the two layers of language are made evident: "*Amanj*, I don't know; *gaye, mnawaa amanjidash*, and again I wonder" (193). But sometimes, we are not — as in "in my daughter's eyes the Anishinaabe ancestors listen and nod *mii gwayak*" (194) — so if we want to know what a specific word or phrase means, we need to dig in the language, look for a translation elsewhere, or try to resort to the textual context. In both cases, an acknowledgement of the language barrier and an active involvement in it is necessary.

There is also a strong emphasis on resilient voices which, although silenced, are still heard, always in relation to the land. Voices are connected to the landscape, like Beryl's, a "soft *mindemooye* old woman voice [which] floated, lighter than air, […] into the sky over Mozhay Point, where it hovered and became the gentlest of rains" (143).[10] Dreams are also a way in which the ancestors are brought back to the present, offering instructions on how to act or how to make the best frybread. It is in a dream that Washushk's grandmother explains to him that his odissimaa is buried near their old house:

> So, do you see? Part of you is here, where someone else is going to live but where you were born and where we have lived. No matter where you go, your odissimaa will stay here, and because of that we will always be a part of this place. Don't cry, now; just remember this, and remember to come back again sometime to this place. You will want to do that. (191-92)

[10] Anton Treuer, Editor of *Oshkaabewis Native Journal*, offered examples of how etymology affects the Ojibwe worldview: "Even the way we think about things in the language is an important part of culture. Like *mindemooye*, it doesn't just mean old woman or elder woman. It means "the one who holds us together." So in Ojibwe when you talk about *mindimooye*, you're talking about the one who holds our society together. In English, when you're talking about an old woman, you're talking about someone who is old, aged, elderly, [which] all have the same kind of meaning" (Littlewolf 1997, 48).

Zho Wash *will* return to the place where his father's odissimaa is buried, which connects him to his grandmother and, through her, to the earth (192). His daughter or granddaughter Crystal's odissimaa is also buried here and when her own baby is born, they will do the same.

In all these cases, recovered voices, spirits, or memories, are identified, their individuality and differential identity is acknowledged, something that we could connect to the palimpsestic motivation. But at the same time, they are vindicated as entangled with others — land, family, or other tribal members, which is a palimpsestuous move. One basic belief expressed by Zho Wash makes a good example of this dynamic; he mentions "the end of the story that is also the beginning, which is that the dead are, at the same time as they are in heaven, always among the living" (193-194). Here, he is marking the difference between two layers of belief — the western and the Native, heaven and the spirits — and simultaneously recognizing their integration, for both exist and are accepted "at the same time." Another example, from the last part of the text, is the representation of Crystal and her pregnancy as the future, and also as an integration of different layers from the past. "What shall I tell this young woman, whose eyes tell to the world the story of the Anishinaabe people?" says Zho Wash;

> How we were redeemed through the sacrifice of Muskrat's life is recounted in the very color of Crystal's eyes, the blue of water and the brown of earth that, to one who looks more closely, emphasizes the clarity of the shadows *behind the surface*; the past is always with us, and Crystal will carry it into the future when she brings new life into our world. The old Anishinaabeg, the ancestors whose shadows began to awaken once she passed childhood, stir occasionally as they wait for the time that she will begin to understand and to speak. Crystal will tell of our past; that is her destiny, determined by God the Creator; who, in giving her life set her path, uncertain though it has sometimes appeared, in this direction. Before she can do that, she will need to gather the strength that will come from knowing her own story. (171-172, my emphasis)

Needless to say, an acknowledgement of both difference and relation will be part of Crystal's process of knowing her own — and her ancestors' — story.

Clearly, the most powerful presence of surfacing and connection is that of the buried *odissimaa* bag which contains sweetgrass and a newborn baby's umbilical cord, connecting his family — the original owners — to the land for good, and which gives a mysterious smell that smooths people's moods, bringing peace to them.[11] However, the palimpsest is not always an image of recovery; it reveals what is irretrievable, too. Zho Wash's odissimaa is lost, for example, just like his own parents were — they disappeared while walking along the riverbank to trade their pelts — never to be found: "perhaps it is still where it was dropped, covered by years of sumac spread, leaves of summer green and fall red; it could be a part of the decay of leaves and dirt underneath the trunk of a fallen birch tree. *Amanj*, I don't know; *gaye, minawaa amanjidash*, and again I wonder" (193).

In this line, there is also an emphasis on secrets; some are deliberately kept, some are simply unexplainable, at least by ordinary means. Apart from Crystal's father's identity, or Zho Wash's parents' whereabouts, there is the secret of the mysterious smell, or that of Margie's wonderful frybread, which the narrator identifies as unrequited love and the LaForce family land allotment influence on Sweetgrass. It is suggested that the key to the magical recipe is the proper mixing of ingredients, parallel to the acknowledgement of the connection of characters, like Margie, Theresa and Dale Ann, whose stories are entangled since childhood. The narrative also becomes entangled at times, emphasizing connection, often in tension, as in the case of the parallel stories of two generations of ricing partners at two different points in time, Michael and Margie, and Dag and Crystal.

As the text suggests, the resurfacing of the old engages in a complex relation of competition and involutedness with respect to the superimposed, which can be connected to the palimpsestic and the palimpsestuous dynamic, especially in connection to Native and Western discourse. *The Road Back to Sweetgrass* pays a lot of attention to land ownership, and the conflict arising from opposed conceptions of it. When around 1900 the Mozhay Point Indian Reservation was cut in half by the US government, the people

[11] On example is that of the Dionne sisters, for "the intake calmed their demeanors, which became nearly consistently pleasant for the time that they were on the LaForce family allotment" (7).

of the Miskwaa Rapids Band of Chippewa Indians lost a considerable amount of land and were relocated into allotments that they had no connection to or particular interest in. Those who, like the LaForces, had not signed the 1854 treaty, and were therefore not considered a part of the Band in the eyes of the government, who treated them as "unallotted Indians" (Grover 2014, 180), had to leave their lands and the four seasonal camps that had set the pattern of their lives — the wild rice camp, the winter camp, the maple sugar camp, and the summering camp — and live elsewhere, *aandakii*. Although disempowered in the face of governmental policy, these Natives still have their pride, and they refuse to accept western definitions of ownership and be severed from this place, as expressed by the burial of the *odissimaa* bag which makes them "bound eternally and blessedly to the land" (192). This Anishinaabe idea of "real" ownership comes to the surface to counter the damages of allotment policy, motivated by the western idea of ownership, but its presence is always a reminder of that western overwriting on people's lands and lives.

Clearly, we are in the presence of an ongoing process of recovery of Anishinaabe voices that takes the form of an excavation and this is, to a large extent, the reason for the very existence of Native American literature. In this sense, authors become archaeologists of sorts, bringing the past to the present, uncovering the hidden, voicing the silenced. This reading, illustrated by the palimpsestic metaphor, argues for the need to differentiate the dominant from the overwritten, and to vindicate the latter. But the traditions, stories, understandings of truth, ways of looking at the world, of acting in the world, recipes, or dreams that come to the surface when digging in the past are also subject to a process connected to genealogy, or a recognition of relation and entanglement. Just as in a palimpsest, layers affect one another, so clear distinctions between past and present, old and new, even Native and western, prove somewhat inadequate, for each of these elements is infected and transformed by the other, becoming something different in the process.

The text makes an effort, valued in a palimpsestic approach, to rescue the hidden meanings of the Anishinaabe tradition from silence and invisibility. As a result of the involutedness recognized in the palimpsestuous approach, Western and Native voices are both confronted by and encoded in each other, so that each of these discourses needs to be acknowledged both separately and in unison. Even though we particularly value the persistence of those that have been previously hidden from view, we have to remember that the strength of roots, related to family, community, and indigenous traditions, also coexists with the real threat of loss brought on by (neo)colonial domination. The textual imagery, though, suggests that, like the scent that gained strength when the land was trodden on at the beginning of the text, so the colonized are not erased or dissolved by the evils of colonization, but on the contrary, they gain at least part of their strength precisely in the process of responding to it.

As I argued at the beginning of this article, Native American literature can be read as a form of activism. Not only does literature reproduce what perceptive authors observe in reality; but texts can — and often do — anticipate the changes in the cultural paradigm, and call for transformation in the world. Texts like Grover's *The Road Back to Sweetgrass* vindicate Anishinaabe difference — something that is still necessary, even urgent, in the contemporary context — while pointing to the need to acknowledge elements of relation and of the common humanity of Natives and non-Natives. This should be helpful when trying to come to terms with the best way to conceive ethnic texts and studies, and calls for a deep reflection on how we understand our relation to the Other. Thus, by looking into the palimpsest dynamics, we recognize the basic motivations in texts: on the one hand, there is a need for recovering, digging, denouncing; on the other, there is a vindication of belonging, equality, our common humanity. In this sense, contemporary Native literature announces a complex but extremely productive combination of not-so-opposed concepts — difference and relation — which should be taken into consideration in any discussion of the contemporary situation. If we manage to let works speak to us, and we recognize creative dialogues with Native and non-Native theories, literature can raise consciousness, it can teach us how to better think of ourselves and the Other, and this is of course a basic element of action.

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