



Where I Ought to Be

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The Work

In this essay, Louise Erdrich explores the ways in which a sense of place changes the ways in which people think of themselves. Using examples from American authors of the last hundred and fifty years, she carefully compares and contrasts the approaches of European Americans and of Native Americans to a sense of place.

She begins the essay with a description of the Tewa Pueblo people's creation story. In that narrative, Grandmother Spider shows the people the Sandia Mountains and tells them the mountains are their home. Erdrich explains that the Tewa listening to that story would be living in the place where their ancestors lived, and the story would be a personal story and a collective story, told among lifelong friends and relatives.

In contrast to this view of a timeless, stable world, that of pre-invasion Native American cultures, Erdrich suggests that European American writers are invested in establishing a historical narrative for their landscapes. European American writers are interested in recording place, even predicting destruction, before their world changes again.

Erdrich proposes that the threat of destruction of place, such as in the extreme case of nuclear obliteration, may be one reason that writers catalog and describe landscapes so thoroughly. She takes the reader into a world of complete destruction, where nothing is left, and then she asks the reader to consider that this unthinkable thing has actually happened to the Native American population. "Many Native American cultures were annihilated more thoroughly than even a nuclear disaster might destroy ours, and others live on with the fallout of that destruction, effects as persistent as radiation—poverty, fetal alcohol syndrome, chronic despair." She points out that because of this, Native American writers have a different task. They "must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of catastrophe."

She ends her essay with a description of her own sense of place, the area of North Dakota where she lived as a child. She points out that it is truly knowing a place that provides the link between details and meaning. A sense of place is, then, at the foundation of a sense of identity.

Suggested Readings

Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

Beck, Peggy V., and Anna Lee Walters. *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*. Tsaile, Ariz.: Navajo Community College Press, 1977.

Chamberlin, J. E. *The Harrowing of Eden: White Attitudes Toward Native Americans*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975.

Hobson, Geary, ed. *The Remembered Earth*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981.

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Ortiz, Alfonso. *The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being, and Becoming in a Pueblo Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

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