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Cartographies of the Self: Indigenous Territoriality and Literary Sovereignty in Contemporary Native American Life Writing

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Native American Life Writing, Territory, and Sovereignty

“The events of one’s life take place, *take place*. How often have I used this expression, and how often have I stopped to think what it means? Events do indeed take place, they have meaning in relation to the things around them,” writes Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday in his autobiographical *The Names*.¹ Momaday’s reflection on the relation between the events of one’s life and place, his insistence that they “take,” that is, “claim” place, and by so doing have meaning in relation to that place and to other events points to the general relevance of spatial categories in autobiographical narrative. Concepts of “home” (lost, left, returned to, never had, claimed, or created anew) and notions of origin as bound to both genealogy and place that continue to shape autobiographical narratives of various historical and ethnic backgrounds attest to the general importance of place and space in narrative self-construction. However, when read in the context of Native American life writing, Momaday’s attention to the events of one’s life “taking place” harks back to yet another framework of reference, namely, to the importance of “place” in Native American literature on the one hand and Indigenous understandings of community, culture, and sovereignty on the other.²

While frequently asserting the strong connection between the storyteller (including the writer) and the land, Momaday has also highlighted the imagination as a central component of autobiographical reflection. Arguably, Momaday’s and other contemporary Indigenous autobiographers’ attention to place, space, and geography is not a self-evident and mimetic reflection of the cultural and political importance of “the land” to Indigenous individuals and communities but a narrative choice. The emphasis on the land, on place and space, is inextricably intertwined with temporality and

storytelling, not only with the—doubtless important—actualization and modification of an oral tradition, but with an understanding of the self-in-relation as a narrative construction in transgenerational time. In a paratextual comment preceding the prologue of *The Names*, Momaday writes:

In general my narrative is an autobiographical account. Specifically it is an act of imagination. When I turn my mind to my early life, it is the imagination part of it that comes first and irresistibly into reach, and of that part I take hold. This is one way to tell a story. In this instance it is my way, and it is the way of my people. When Pohd-lohk told a story he began by being quiet. Then he said Ah-keah-he, “They were camping,” and he said it every time. I have tried to write in the same way, in the same spirit. Imagine. They were camping.³

As David Carlson has argued in reference to this passage, Momaday “redefines the autobiographical act (much in line with recent autobiography theory) as an imaginative act of self-creation (of storytelling)”;⁴ at the same time, Momaday is careful to present his own models for writing in reference to the oral tradition within his family, and hence as specifically Kiowa.⁴ Self-authoring happens within a particular framework, creating a “situated self,” as Paul John Eakin has called it.⁵ As Momaday puts it in another context, “the storyteller’s place within the context of his language must include both a geographical and mythical frame of reference.”⁶

As I set out to argue, Momaday’s and other contemporary Indigenous autobiographers’ narratives present careful investigations of territoriality as a category of selfhood. They engage with and counter hegemonic territorial inscriptions of “America” and American citizenship and explore alternatives that often connect to but are not identical with tribal–nationalist notions of territoriality in their insistence on individual as well as communal sovereignty. “Sovereignty” is a crucial term not only in contemporary Native American political debates about territorial integrity and control, but also as a notion pertaining to cultural agency: Concepts of “rhetorical” (Scott Richard Lyons), “intellectual” (Robert Warrior), and “literary” (Gerald Vizenor) sovereignty have proliferated in complex relation to questions of political self-determination and land rights.⁷ Even more complex is sovereignty’s intertwinement with notions of territoriality: Concepts of cultural sovereignty have been formulated both in concrete terms with regard to Indigenous territory as well as in metaphorical terms, and they are contested among scholars and activists as potentially imbued with hegemonic notions of statism and state territoriality.⁸ Often oscillating between very concrete questions of territorial and treaty rights on the one hand and a broader—frequently also strongly metaphorical—conceptualization of Indigenous space on the other, the relation of such concepts to US territoriality thus highlights how notions of “sovereignty” question not only specific circumscriptions of territory, but also what counts as “territoriality” in the first place.⁹ Indigenous understandings of territoriality, as much as they

are presently linked to questions of land rights in a colonial context, tend to exceed a narrow understanding of access to and control of land in the context of settler colonialism.¹⁰ So while “territoriality” has been defined as “a way of organizing and talking about power,” meaning control over access to and use of space and resources, I suggest that in the context of Indigenous life writing it can be more broadly understood as a land-based relationality contested with regard to physical and political boundaries as well as discursive authority, and that the latter manifests itself in and through self-reflexive storytelling—storytelling that draws its own authority from reference to earlier storytelling and to storytelling conventions, but also from its orientation towards an individual and collective future.¹¹

This specific referentiality implies questions regarding the distinctiveness of Indigenous life writing when compared to other, particularly European-based traditions of self-narration. In this context, the question of genre dominated the discussion in the 1980s and early 1990s. Arnold Krupat and Hertha Dawn Wong in particular have discussed the inaptness of the term “autobiography” when applied to Native American life writing; with varying emphases, they attribute this to the different understanding of selfhood in Native American contexts. As Wong argues, “[i]nstead of emphasis on an individual self who *stands apart* from the community, the focus is on a communal self who *participates within* the tribe.”¹² And Krupat distinguishes a Native American sense of self as synecdochic, manifesting itself in a “narration of personal history [that] is more nearly marked by the individual’s sense of himself in relation to collective units or groupings” from a metonymic (non-Indigenous) sense of self “where personal accounts are marked by the individual’s sense of herself predominantly in relation to other distinct individuals.”¹³ In this line of argument, Native American self-conceptions are expressed in a range of autobiographical manifestations (both pre- and postcontact) that cannot be captured by “autobiography” understood as an expression of an autonomous self, a notion associated with the emergence of the genre during the Enlightenment period.¹⁴ In Wong’s and Krupat’s influential concepts, the relation to place, land, and territory depicted in Indigenous texts is indeed an expression (as opposed to a construction) of a particular sense of self-in-place and self-in-relation. There is no claim that this remains unchanged; both critics pay close attention to how autobiographical forms have continued to evolve and new ones emerged through cultural contact. Yet, both scholars largely retain a framework of biculturality to account for the intersection of different cultural models of self and self-narration in Indigenous life writing. At least with regard to contemporary life writing, more recent theorizations tend to shift away from a stark juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous forms of life writing. For one, the genre debate has moved away from its earlier focus on “autobiography” and towards a broader understanding of Indigenous life writing as a form of “situated response” and an active engagement with and transformation of available models of selfhood.¹⁵ While paying close attention to autobiographical self-construction in the texts under discussion, my own reading of N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko,

and Louise Erdrich in the following sections is concerned primarily with questions of these autobiographers' engagement with models of selfhood as they are connected to questions of place, land, and territory, and with their specific narrative choices.

Models of Selfhood: Self-Narration, Law, and Territoriality

In his important study *Sovereign Selves* (2006), Carlson has shown how Native American autobiographers from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries engaged with colonial legal discourses in the US that profoundly circumscribed the available models of "Indian selfhood" and codes of autobiographical utterances for Native American writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but that were also used by these authors for their own political purposes.¹⁶ In his conclusion, he argues that the ways in which these texts engage with such models of their time also provide a new perspective on the Indigenous autobiographers, for the changing laws and legal discourses particularly in the second half of the twentieth century "focused increasingly on defining what constitutes 'authentic' Indianness, what is a tribe, and who is entitled to claim rights and privileges laid out in past treaties. Reading the autobiographical writings of contemporary literary figures such as Gerald Vizenor and N. Scott Momaday against the background of this legal history reveals what may be a radically new phase in the history of colonial engagement."¹⁷ In agreement with Carlson's ensuing reading of Momaday's *The Names* as a text that seeks both to subvert Western notions of individualism and to celebrate the power of autobiographical imagination,¹⁸ I regard Momaday and other Indigenous writers of the so-called Native American Renaissance as sharing with the early Native American autobiographies analyzed by Carlson a keen awareness of how Native American identities continue to be framed by US American law. The "radical new phase" that Carlson identifies after the end of the termination policy in the late 1950s is then characterized by a different type of—at times explicitly confrontational—engagement with the law and its circumscription of Indigenous identities and territory.

Two different examples will illustrate such an engagement: One—Momaday's text—juxtaposes legal concepts of Native American identity as both separate from and belonging to the United States with an understanding of Indigenous self grounded in story and a notion of place as predating its colonial territorial circumscription—in a narratological sense, a confrontation through *discours*. The other example—Silko's text—narrates the confrontational engagement with American law as part of an ongoing struggle for territorial sovereignty, a confrontation through *histoire*.

Early on in *The Names*, Momaday quotes the notarized document issued by the US Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs that certifies his birth in 1934, his parents' names, tribal enrollment, and his Native American blood quantum—that is, official categories of identification as "Indian." It also confirms his US citizenship, for "by Act of June 2, 1924 (43 Stat 253), all Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States were declared to be citizens of the United States."¹⁹ Momaday's

choice to quote the document's text seemingly in full at the beginning of his autobiographical narrative is significant: It highlights the clash between different understandings of territoriality for Indigenous identity, for the quote of the document is seamlessly followed by a passage referring to "the first notable event in my life," namely "a journey to the Black Hills. When I was six months old, my parents took me to Devil's Tower, Wyoming, which is called in Kiowa Tsoai, 'rock tree.'"²⁰ This passage is significant both autobiographically and, in its juxtaposition to the previous paragraph, strategically. "Tsoai" is part of the Kiowa name Tsoai-talee, "Rock Tree Boy," that the autobiographical narrator receives from the storyteller Pohd-lohk.²¹ The passage from the book's beginning starts by equating name and identity: "My name is Tsoai-talee. I am, therefore, Tsoai-talee; therefore I am."²² The reference to the Kiowa name is thus at least implicitly juxtaposed with the legal name put down on the document, "Novarro Scott Mammedaty."²³ The place the young boy is taken to, Devil's Tower in the Black Hills and a sacred mountain to a number of Indigenous groups, was, according to legend, the place where the Kiowa, having migrated from the mountains, became Plains people in the eighteenth century and where the autobiographical narrator of Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* begins his journey tracing the Kiowa migration south and east to Oklahoma.²⁴ Place is part of a relational web that forms Kiowa territory, not understood as "controlled land," but as land-based, story-connected relation between places across generations; while these places lie within US territory geographically, discursively they are placed outside its boundaries.

These two passages, in what they each convey, but particularly in their sequence and interplay, present a juxtapositional montage of two different concepts of Indigenous identity: one legally circumscribed, the other narratively constructed. Both relate to territory: one in its reference to the application of the 14th Amendment and its promise of *jus soli* as the basis of American citizenship to Indigenous peoples in 1924 by way of law; the other in its narration of a journey to a sacred place and to the link it creates between that place, the process of naming, and community. The seeming juxtaposition of "legal" and "narrative" is, of course, misleading: In effect, Momaday's story of a journey, of naming as the basis of the understanding of self, reveals the official definition of "Indianness" as a legal fiction, the attempt to narratively homogenize a heterogeneous population into a legal category.

If Momaday's text engages with American law by way of his montage of two opposing notions of (narrative) identity, Leslie Marmon Silko's confrontation of American law works along different lines. In her memoir, *The Turquoise Ledge* (2010), a non-linear interweaving of family and personal stories, history, and detailed descriptions of place, Silko at one point relates how in the mid-1950s the Laguna Pueblo—with her father serving as the Tribal Treasurer—filed a lawsuit regarding land that had been taken from them in the early 1900s as national forests and public land.²⁵ She narrates this episode as epitomizing the clash between the institutional logic of the nation-state and

its control over territory on the one hand, and the competing claim to prior land ownership through occupancy and story by the Laguna people on the other. The latter is substantiated by different types of narrative that are conventionally considered at odds with one another in Laguna history: anthropology and oral storytelling.

The Pueblo hired archeologists and anthropologists to testify to Laguna's ancient, continuous occupancy use of the land at issue. After all the intrusions, theft and trouble that anthropologists had previously caused at Laguna, finally the people got some satisfaction out of anthropology. The stories and accounts of the old folks were important evidence in the lawsuit. The elderly Laguna traveled one hundred miles round trip day after day to testify in the Laguna language in Federal Court. [...] What had lasting impact on me was that the old folks told their stories in their own words, in the Laguna language, and that together they stood the test in a high court of an alien culture.²⁶

In the narrative, it seems to be of secondary importance that the Laguna eventually won the lawsuit, albeit with a ridiculously minimal monetary compensation; central here is the process of successfully challenging the state on the issue of territory and landownership by way of not only expert narratives recognized by the law (the anthropologists), but also by the use of transgenerational oral storytelling in the Laguna language. Silko does not go into the details of the testimony, but it can be assumed that oral storytelling was recognized as evidence attesting to land occupancy pertaining to time periods before any of the witnesses was born; stories thus come to function as history, a significant step in acknowledging Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge that run counter to the institutional logic of the courts' reliance on historical and legal documents as well as on eyewitness testimony.

But the episode is also assigned a specific autobiographical function, for the narrator concludes: "Maybe this is where I got the notion that if I could tell the story clearly enough then all that was taken, including the land, might be returned."²⁷ Storytelling is an effective instrument in the contemporary struggle for Indigenous land and treaty rights, and it is potentially a powerful tool in the process of reclamation and restitution of past tribal losses. Silko has revisited the function of storytelling for political and cultural resistance time and again in her fiction, and it assumes the utmost importance in this memoir, in which she establishes herself as a storyteller early on. As such, like in Momaday's text, stories counter American law not exclusively, on the level of the narrative's *histoire*, but also serve to establish discursive authority.

As both examples illustrate, the law and legal discourses present one framework for Indigenous self-narration in the context of increasingly diversified models of Indigenous selfhood. As Wong points out, "[a] complicated sense of self; the altered, often circumscribed, possibilities for life; and a substitute language contribute to the

complexity of twentieth-century Native American autobiography,” without fully replacing earlier models of collaborative and transitional autobiographies.²⁸ And while these developments redefine the “literary boundary culture of contemporary Native American autobiography,” Wong does not regard this redefinition as a challenge to cultural distinctiveness. Wong sees a continued “internalized biculturality” at work in the texts by writers like Momaday and Silko, but her notion of “biculturality”—similar to concepts of hybridity so prominent since the 1990s—implicitly juxtaposes a “pure” Indigeneity with “mixed” identities.²⁹ As Jace Weaver has commented, “[s]uch a position fails to account for the fact that Natives and their cultures had always been highly adaptive, appropriating and absorbing anything that seemed useful or powerful.”³⁰ In line with such an understanding of cultures—including Indigenous cultures—as always already hybridized (without thereby becoming “less Indigenous”), I would like to offer a different reading of the multiplicity of cultural references in both content and form that characterize contemporary Indigenous life writing and understand it as dynamic and processual explorations of Indigeneity, constituted by complex relations to other beings as well as a variety of places and territories.

In the following section, I want to turn to this dynamic process of self-construction as it relates to the land and to notions of Indigenous territory. Contemporary Native American autobiographies reflect on Indigenous life worlds as shaped by a complex interplay between place and movement, often deploying the trope of the journey to construct a self in relation to territory and place as inscribed by language and story, an inscription that explicitly links the individual’s self-construction to transgenerational memory and its overriding of US American territorial boundaries.

Storied Land: Journeys in the Present and the Past

Mapping territory and self through the narration of different types of movement is a crucial strategy in life writing. In Indigenous self-narratives, such mapping often tends to be connected to the exploration of overlying stories—familial, ancestral, and frequently also mythical/spiritual—that inscribe places of autobiographical significance. Storytelling—both the relation of stories within the story and the autobiographical narrative itself—is a spatial, even spatializing strategy that relates place, different layers of time, and self in a complex and dynamic constellation. The continued importance of legal frameworks is a backdrop to understanding Indigenous autobiographers’ explorations of material and discursive territoriality; in this context, the ways in which these autobiographers “story” the land tends to be a crucial element of narrative self-construction. In the following reading of texts by Silko, Momaday, and Louise Erdrich, I want to highlight the role of movement—as a walk, as a journey—across space in the actualization of story and place and argue that, in the texts, movement is decisive for how these autobiographers explore conceptions of land and place in an engagement with competing notions of territoriality in the United States.

Walks

Leslie Marmon Silko is best known as novelist, particularly as the author of *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*, but she has also published numerous texts that fall into the broader category of life writing.³¹ Her multigenre *Storyteller* (1981)—combining autobiographical reflection, poetry, short story, and photographs—interweaves the stories of numerous people and is a prime example of writing a relational self.³² As Paul John Eakin has argued, “Silko’s transmission of other people’s stories, stories that are in turn versions of a shared body of myths and legends, is properly understood as an act of self-definition. In *Storyteller*, there is a radical equivalence between self and other at the level of narrative: Silko’s own story and the stories of others are one and the same. *Storyteller*: this is what she does and who she is.”³³ Storytelling also characterizes Silko’s other works of life writing such as *Sacred Water* (1993), a collection of brief autobiographical stories, accompanied by photographs; her published letter exchange with poet James Wright, *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace* (1986); and the essays collected in *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit* (1996).³⁴ The latter are not personal essays in a strict autobiographical sense, but they clearly fall into the category of what Deanne Reder has called “writing autobiographically” as an Indigenous intellectual tradition.³⁵ The relation between land, humans, and story has been crucial throughout Silko’s fictional and non-fictional work; “[t]he landscape,” she writes in one of her probably best-known essays, “sits in the center of Pueblo belief and identity.”³⁶

In 2010, Silko published the previously referenced *The Turquoise Ledge*. The text is advertised as a memoir; while “memoir” is a notoriously slippery term used in a variety of ways and taking a range of narrative forms, it nevertheless signals the focus on a particular time period in the autobiographical narrator’s life rather than the entire life span up to the time of telling. The temporal scope of Silko’s memoir is simultaneously wide (including the Pueblo communal past) and narrow (narrating a relatively short time period of the narrator’s life), and it intertwines personal memory, family history, Pueblo history and oral stories with elaborate passages about geology and botany and with detailed descriptions about interaction with animals and communication with what she calls “star beings.”³⁷ Like Momaday’s *The Names*, Silko’s memoir thus is characterized by the interplay of various autobiographical traditions; one reviewer attests it “the loose feel of a journal.”³⁸ Unlike Momaday’s text, its narrative focus frequently returns to the time of memoir writing, combining narratives of several pasts—individual, familial, communal, cosmological—that are predominantly set at Laguna in New Mexico, with the narrative present outside Tucson, Arizona. This focus on the present of memoir writing is important for the narrative strategy of spatialization that is of interest for my argument, for the autobiographical narrator constantly walks the land surrounding her house in the mountains around Tucson, exploring and revisiting her immediate surroundings.

On foot I can see the ant palaces, some in solid rock, others
with starbust circles of stone they’ve mined and somehow

moved up from below. The star pattern reminded me of the Star Being images incised into sandstone thousands of years ago.

Eventually the trail descends and crosses the bog arroyo and continues; but here I turn and follow the bog arroyo back home. The sandy bottom of the arroyo is criss-crossed with bird and animal tracks that make the trail that humans have used for thousands of years. In rough steep terrain arroyos may provide the only access to an area so the arroyos are “right of way” for wildlife and humans on foot.³⁹

I cite this early passage at length since it is characteristic of how Silko links the narration of individual movement to description of landscape, memory, and thoughts on time as manifest in place. The land is inscribed by tracks and rock patterns as well as her own steps, but also, as the reference to petroglyphs suggests, by human hands ages ago. This passage is followed by a reflection on what the autobiographical narrator learns on her walks—to look closely, to move in a certain way, but also to engage in further research about stones, the relationship between turquoise and water, or the role of iron in the variations of color. This learning process is part of the overall narration of inserting herself into the landscape, a process of frequent reaffirmation of an interdependence, which in this memoir is put forward as ecological as well as spiritual, diachronic as well as synchronic.

Maybe not surprisingly, then, the landscape that the narrator walks is marked by a transgenerational human presence, manifest in old grinding stones used for grinding beans, but this human presence is largely one of the distant past, not of the present.⁴⁰ Silko’s narrative landscape is inhabited predominantly by animals—snakes, spiders, bees, packrats—as well as by rocks, plants, and clouds, all equally presented as sharing in the same space; in contrast, with few exceptions other human beings appear mainly as a disturbance in the narrative present, a destructive force that unsettles the ecological and spiritual balance of place.

In light of such broad understanding of relationality, Annette Angela Portillo in her reading of Silko’s memoir insists that it can be classified as neither nature writing nor travelogue but as a form of *testimonio* in which the narrating “I” is not individual but collective.⁴¹ While I generally agree regarding the memoir’s overall categorization, I nevertheless see it utilizing elements of both, nature writing and the travelogue, to outline a relation between self and land in which the human voice speaks on behalf of the natural environment and its fragile balance without shedding its individuality. The complexity of this memoir lies in its oscillation between different autobiographical conventions and in the autobiographical voice that shifts between different reference points and expansions, from the very individual to the cosmological. Despite Silko’s statement that she did not intend “to write about others but instead to construct a self-portrait,” this memoir clearly exemplifies the relationality of life writing.⁴² The challenge to the genre lies in its insistence that relationality exceeds human relations

to include animals, rocks, and spirit beings. This understanding of relationality clearly impacts the notion of place and territory put forward in this memoir. Earlier in this contribution, I preliminarily defined “territory” as a land-based processual relationality the boundaries of which are constantly negotiated through narrative and story. Silko’s frequent “walking the land” suggests a narrative of on-going discovery, not just of details about the environment, not “information” or “control,” but the discovery of an ever-growing complexity of relationality. While this is a narrative of self, it is also narrated as an ecological and spiritual lesson to the reader.

Journeys

If Silko’s walks in *The Turquoise Ledge* present the autobiographer’s movement across a specifically circumscribed place, movement with a broader geographical scope presents another frequently deployed spatial practice. The journey is a strong and recurrent metaphor in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous life writing. While often used to designate the “life’s journey” as such, the account of physical journeys also serves to epitomize turning or culmination points in self-understanding. Some of these narratives structurally intersect with travel narratives that, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued, tend to subordinate “other aspects of the writer’s life.” They “typically chronicle or reconstruct the narrator’s experience of displacement, encounter, and travail and his or her observations of the unknown, the foreign, the uncanny” and thereby “become occasions for ... resituating the mobile subject in relation to home and its ideological norms.”⁴³ This resituation is culturally embedded. Contemporary Indigenous written accounts of travel, argues Kimberley Blaeser, tend to “seek to understand their placement within a long tradition of tribal movement in the Americas,” the individual travel narrative often presenting not a “single isolate destiny” but “braided accounts that entwine themselves with the destinies of communities, generations, tribal nations, the ecosystem of a region, the spiritual inheritance of a people.”⁴⁴ The narratives discussed below focus on the journey and thereby indeed subordinate other aspects of the writer’s life; they also contribute to the resituation of the subject. However, the structural displacement of the journey (leaving the familiar for the potentially unfamiliar) is rather a refamiliarization than the defamiliarization of displacement; the journey is part of an attempt to counter, even symbolically reverse, earlier historical displacement of the authors’ respective cultural groups. As such, Indigenous travel narratives that pertain to the specific heritage of the autobiographer in question complicate the genre’s basic structure. As Gerald Vizenor has argued, “Natives of the Americas have lived in virtual exile for more than five centuries,”⁴⁵ and arguably, there are both structural and experiential intersections with diasporic narratives of return against the backdrop of historical displacement and “physical disruptions that inform Native ideas of place.”⁴⁶ However, despite such obvious overlaps between diasporic and Indigenous autobiographies, there are also obvious and decisive differences, particularly pertaining to place and territory, that connect Native American life writing

strongly to Indigenous life writing in other settler colonies, most immediately to that by First Nations writers in Canada such as Maria Campbell, Terese Marie Mailhot, or Wab Kinew.⁴⁷ These journeys have to be read in light of historical dispossession and displacement *as well as* contemporary struggles for territorial sovereignty and land rights, a central and shared concern of Indigenous peoples in various settings that requires a firm placement of texts in their specific locale without losing sight of the “complexity of the relevant Indigenous global,” as Chadwick Allen has argued.⁴⁸ In this context, the reclamation of place and physical as well as spiritual territory tends to be directed towards communal (re-) embedding of the individual. In this regard, Indigenous territory as a “storied” landscape plays a paramount role: It is both through transgenerational stories and the way in which they are inscribed by and in turn inscribe the land as well through contemporary Indigenous literature that notions of Indigenous territory as countering hegemonic American territorial claims are affirmed.

A central text of this kind is Momaday’s previously referenced *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, published in 1969. Structurally innovative, it traces the autobiographical narrator’s journey to Rainy Mountain in Oklahoma by combining three levels of narrative throughout the book, mythological, historical, and personal. Each page visually juxtaposes these three types of narrative, all of which explore a particular theme from the perspective of legend, history, and individual perception. With regard to its narrative structure, Wong has argued that in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* “Momaday constructs and narrates a Kiowa personal identity that can come into being only in relation to Kiowa myth and history.”⁴⁹ If much of the extensive criticism of this important book has centered—like Wong’s reading—on questions of identity, more recently the text has also been discussed as a “geohistoriographical text that, in its central form, grapples with the historic transition to allotment” and thus can productively be read as an intervention into allotment discourse.⁵⁰ My own concern here is not so much with this doubtlessly important but much discussed text as such or with its specific involvement with the legal sphere, but with the kind of precedent it set for Indigenous autobiographical writing about place and territory in the second half of the twentieth century: It combines the journey narrative as autobiographical self-construction not just with the depiction of landscape but with the very exploration of what constitutes Indigenous place, space, and territory in the past and the present, and how it relates to community.

If Momaday’s text is paradigmatic for a type of narrative that takes the grounding of individual self-conception in a transgenerational community and place as its starting point, the trope of the journey has also found manifestations that deploy very different narrative modes to relate self, territory, and movement. Louise Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country: Traveling Through the Land of My Ancestors*, originally published in 2003 by the National Geographic Society and reissued in 2014, is an example of a different approach. Erdrich is known primarily for her novels set on a

Chippewa (i.e., Ojibwe/Anishinaabe) reservation in North Dakota, with a range of characters frequently returning throughout her work. She has previously published a memoir entitled *The Bluejay's Dance* (1995), a meditation on pregnancy and motherhood and a metaphorical journey in its own right. Like the earlier text, *Books and Islands* also foregrounds the relationship between mother and child, but the journey in this later text is literal as well as metaphorical. A largely chronological account of her trip from Minneapolis to Lake of the Woods in Ontario with her baby daughter to see petroglyphs and of the return journey via a stay on an island on Rainy Lake in Minnesota, the text presents more than a “journey through” a landscape but instead combines the narration of this journey with an account of a self-in-relation as well as foregrounding the land’s Ojibwe inscriptions. While the autobiographical subject in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* can only be understood in relation to a collective Kiowa history and legends, *Books and Islands* self-reflexively sets out to explore and create the link between the autobiographical subject as negotiating her relationship to Ojibwe culture and language. Critics have pointed out that the text combines characteristics not only of the travel narrative, but also of diasporic narratives of homecoming and the *bildungsroman* as well as elements of a pilgrimage and forms of nature writing;⁵¹ it also draws on ethnographic materials and dictionaries, and it engages in detail with exploration and captivity narratives. In all of these genres and works, “place” is a crucial category; in all of them, it tends to be both literal and metaphorical. Erdrich’s account, I want to argue, explores the possibilities and limits of “reading” as a metaphor for the autobiographical engagement with place and as a basis of a gender-specific imagining of “territory”; territory in Erdrich’s text is a land- and language-based relationality across the boundaries of national space as well as across time and generations.

Structured in five parts—entitled “Books and Islands,” “Islands,” “Rock Paintings,” “Books,” and “Home”—the narrative highlights a process in which the experience of nature and place is analogized to a process of reading: “So these islands, which I’m longing to read, are books in themselves.”⁵² Reading is an act of constant interpretation; through the process of reading, the reader—the autobiographer—places herself in relation to her environment. The narrator “reads” the land like a book; at the same time, by relating the process of writing to marked birch barks, she creates a continuum of what “book” may mean: “Ojibwe people were great writers from way back and synthesized the oral and the written tradition by keeping mnemonic scrolls of inscribed birchbark. The first paper, the first books.”⁵³ Books thus are an Indigenous form of knowledge production and dissemination: the frequent juxtaposition of “orality” and “writing” is not dissolved, but, by way of metaphor, suspended, with significant consequences for Erdrich’s conceptualization of territory. For as important as “books” clearly are throughout the travelogue, I suggest that they are both objects of desire and shorthand for a process of reading that serves to create a complex and processual web of relations in and through place. When the autobiographical narrator explains that “[t]he books we bring to strange places become guides and prevailing

metaphors, catch-alls, lenses for new experience,” they become frameworks to interpret experience and make connections.⁵⁴ In his discussion of *Books and Islands*, Robert Warrior calls books “vehicles” and suggests that “[a]s vehicles, books are an important modern conveyance, as important as the well-worn Ford Windstar that Erdrich travels in with her infant daughter. Books help us get where we want to go. In this way, they are maps.”⁵⁵ If in the previously discussed texts by Momaday and Silko “storytelling” is the keyword to understanding one’s role and position in the world, in Erdrich’s text, “oral storytelling” is supplemented by books as a form of storytelling disseminated by different means. That Erdrich owns a bookstore, Birchbark Books, in Minneapolis, becomes an important narrative element of the text upon the narrator’s return home, but it also adds to the autobiographical significance attributed to the book as object and metaphor.

But this process of cultural reading is not merely metaphorical and independent of historical and political constellations. The narrator’s visit to the petroglyphs is a case in point: on the one hand, they emphasize an age-old tradition of spiritual imagination and its written manifestation. As the narrator remarks, “[t]hey refer to a spiritual geography, and are meant to provide teaching and dream guides, to generations of Anishinaabeg,” and as such highlight both the legacy and the continuity of Ojibwe cultural presence; “survivance,” to put it with Gerald Vizenor, is an “active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion. Survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent.”⁵⁶

On the other hand, combining her reflections on the petroglyphs with the Ojibwes’ reliance on wild rice, the narrator also draws attention to the destructive provincial policies and hence to the realm of politics: “When the pictures were painted, the lake was full nine feet lower, and as it is nearly four feet higher this year than usual, some paintings are of course submerged. The water level is a political as well as natural process—it is in most large lakes now. *From the beginning, that the provincial government allowed the lake levels to rise infuriated the Anishinaabeg, as the water ruined thousands of acres of wild rice beds.*”⁵⁷ Wild rice, as the narrator’s companion and father of her child, Tobasonakwut, explains in an earlier passage, is affected for years to come when the crop is weak; wild rice being a staple of Ojibwe diet and economy, the effect is also cultural. When he says that “if your parents had no children, you can’t have children,”⁵⁸ he uses the family metaphor to point to the centrality of generational continuity, a frequently reiterated trope throughout the text, and this applies to humans, plants, and cultural practices of both subsistence and environmental stewardship.⁵⁹

So, in many ways, the text is not only about literary sovereignty but connects literary sovereignty to material questions of Indigenous sovereignty. Highlighting Erdrich’s use of and reference to elements that have been seen as crucial for producing the nations as an “imagined community” in Benedict Anderson’s understanding—such as her use of a map of Ojibwe country (spanning across the nation-state border between Canada and the US) as a frontispiece, her reference to Ojibwe museums, her

emphasis on genealogical and cultural continuity, and her foregrounding of the Ojibwe language—Joëlle Bonnevin has made the compelling argument that Erdrich’s text can be seen as a tool for the “cultural (re)construction of the Ojibwe nation.”⁶⁰ I would like to add an aspect of *Books and Islands* that resonates with this reading but so far has not received much attention in the critical reception of this book and its cultural agenda, maybe because it seems such an indisputable autobiographical element: The narrator is travelling with her infant daughter. My reading here rests on the narrative choices made by Erdrich, who centers her narrative around the mother–child relationship; on the child’s Ojibwe inheritance particularly through her father, whose genealogy is crucial for the lines of cultural and political continuity emphasized in this book, and whose mother’s name, Nenaa’ikiizhikok, is given to the narrator’s daughter. And while clearly, as critics have pointed out, the narrator highlights both the importance of Ojibwemowin in the autobiographical narrator’s life and the difficult process of learning the language, it is the *transmission* to the next generation that is crucial.

The narrator’s concern with and investment in Ojibwemowin resonates with the importance of language preservation and expansion of the knowledge of Indigenous languages into the future generations as a central agenda for Indigenous nationalists and communities; Tobasonakwut worked hard at expanding the use of Ojibwemowin in the younger generation.⁶¹ I suggest that the narrative decision to focus on the baby effectively puts the emphasis on genealogical continuity not only regarding the past but also the future; this is a text also about the next generation. Not only does the autobiographical narrator relate how she removed the English words from her child’s books, replacing them “with Ojibwe words written in Magic Marker.”⁶² In the afterword added to the 2014 edition of *Books and Islands*, she also reflects on how her older daughter Persia had become “the Ojibwe language leader in the family. For the past four years, she has been doing all she can to become fluent. This is her third summer as coordinator of an immersion Ojibwe language program held at the Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College.”⁶³ For the autobiographical narrator, her own engagement with the language in the text is a complex search for connection. “Anyone who attempts Ojibwemowin,” she says at one point, “is engaged in something more than learning tongue twisters. However awkward my nouns, unstable my verbs, however stumbling my delivery, to engage in the language is to engage the spirit of the words. And as the words are everything around us, and all that we are, learning Ojibwemowin is a lifetime pursuit that might be described as living a religion.”⁶⁴ As Margaret Noodin has observed, in “Erdrich’s books, Anishinaabemowin is a way home, a source of comfort, a way to know yourself, other people, animals, spirits, and the universe.”⁶⁵ As important as the language is to the narrator herself, however, the future and community orientation lies in the choice of emphasis on her daughters’ increasing immersion in Ojibwe language and space.

I suggest that this strong emphasis on the next generation in the narrative is crucial to its cultural agenda—supporting Bonnevin’s argument that the text is effectively invested in Ojibwe cultural nationhood—but also to its territorial imagination.

The autobiographical narrator does not present herself as “returning home” when she travels to Ojibwe country; as she makes clear early on in the text, “[t]he islands are really incidental. I grew up on the Great Plains. I’m a dry-land-for-hundreds-of-miles person, but I’ve gotten mixed up with people who live on lakes. And then these islands have begun to haunt me.”⁶⁶ While the landscape of the lakes gains in significance, particularly through the language and the books that guide her perspective, homecoming in the final chapter is coming home to Minneapolis or more precisely: her house and her bookstore devoted to Native American literature. Her claim to Ojibwe territory is cultural, linguistic, and metaphorical. Her daughters, however, claim Ojibwe territory also spatially—the next generation, this seems to imply, will be more at home in both the language and the territory.

Cartographies of Selves

The texts discussed in this contribution span some forty-five years, from Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) to Erdrich’s *Books and Islands*, originally published in 2003 and reissued with an additional preface in 2014. They cover a crucial time period in the further diversification of Indigenous experiences and forms of life writing; all of them were written by Indigenous novelists, poets, and playwrights whose autobiographical texts to different degrees intertwine with their fictional work. In this intersection of fictional and non-fictional genres, their narrative self-constructions are not necessarily representative of the wide range and forms of autobiographical texts by Indigenous people available today. More recent texts in the United States and Canada have further diversified the genre, reflecting the heterogeneity of Indigenous authors’ experiences as well as the range of narrative conventions they draw on: Richard Wagamese’s two autobiographical volumes *One Native Life* (2008) and *One Story, One Song* (2011) narrate an individual’s process of reconnecting to family and community in light of the fundamental uprooting of his foster home experiences. Indigenous territory is not band-specific but circumscribed by a ceremonial cycle of healing reflected in the texts’ structure. Deborah A. Miranda’s *Bad Indian: A Tribal Memoir* (2013) writes the autobiographical narrator’s and her family’s story in close intertwinement with the history of genocidal violence and territorial dispossession enacted against California’s Indigenous population. Sherman Alexie’s *You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me* (2017) narrates a life the spatial coordinates of which are marked by “the rez” and “the urban.” In Terese Marie Mailhot’s *Heart Berries* (2018), “the river” is a central point of narrative reconnection to Salish identification for the narrator, while at the same time she struggles to define her own voice to capture the story of a destructive relationship.⁶⁷

So while the autobiographical texts discussed in this contribution are not representative of the whole range of Native American life writing in the past five decades, they do reflect important narrative modes of engagement with notions of territoriality and with self-narration through such an engagement. Robert Warrior has emphasized

the centrality of Indigenous non-fictional writing to the history of Indigenous literature; and when David Carlson argues that “autobiographical acts of storytelling have the potential to enable political resistance and lay a foundation for legal change,” reading their rearticulation of Indigenous identities as part of contemporary struggles for sovereignty, his observations apply similarly to the construction of material and metaphorical territoriality in contemporary Indigenous life writing.⁶⁸ The cartographies not just of “self” but of “selves” discussed in this contribution may not have a direct impact on politics; they are nevertheless political in content as well as in their challenge to normative models of selfhood and self-narration. They are acts of literary sovereignty.

Notes

I would like to thank Jens Temmen and Nicole Waller as well as the two reviewers for their thoughtful feedback.

¹ N. Scott Momaday, *The Names: A Memoir* (1976, reprint, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 142.

² See Robert Nelson, *Place and Vision: The Function of Landscape in Native American Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main et al.: Peter Lang, 1997), 6; Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 82.

³ Momaday, *The Names*, n. pag. (italics in the original, emphasis added).

⁴ David Carlson, *Sovereign Selves: American Indian Autobiography and the Law* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 175.

⁵ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999), 85.

⁶ N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), 112.

⁷ See Scott Richard Lyons, “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?,” *College Composition and Communication* 51, no. 3 (2000): 447–68; Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Gerald Vizenor, *Wordarrows: Native States of Literary Sovereignty* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

⁸ See for instance Taiiakake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 80.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the entanglement of political and metaphoric conceptualizations of Indigenous sovereignty, see Katja Sarkowsky, “Storied

Nationhood: Literature, Constitutionalism, and Citizenship in Indigenous North America,” in *Key Concepts in Indigenous Studies: Nation*, ed. Ganesh Devy, forthcoming.

¹⁰ See for instance Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), loc. 221, Kindle.

¹¹ The initial definition of territoriality is from Milner S. Ball qtd. in Bruce Duthu, *American Indians and the Law* (New York: Viking, 2008), 65.

¹² Hertha Dawn Wong, *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 13–14.

¹³ Arnold Krupat, “Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self,” in *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 176.

¹⁴ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 2–3.

¹⁵ Tyra Twomey, “More Than One Way to Tell a Story. Rethinking the Place of Genre in Native American Autobiography and the Personal Essay,” *SAIL* 19, no. 2 (2007): 34.

¹⁶ Carlson, *Sovereign Selves*.

¹⁷ Carlson, *Sovereign Selves*, 174.

¹⁸ Carlson, *Sovereign Selves*, 175.

¹⁹ Momaday, *The Names*, 42.

²⁰ Momaday, *The Names*, 42.

²¹ Momaday, *The Names*, 170.

²² Momaday, *The Names*, n. pag.

²³ Momaday, *The Names*, 42.

²⁴ N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 7.

²⁵ Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

²⁶ Silko, *The Turquoise Ledge*, 26.

²⁷ Silko, *Turquoise Ledge*, 26.

²⁸ Wong, *Sending My Heart*, 154.

²⁹ Wong, *Sending My Heart*, 155.

³⁰ Jace Weaver, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), loc. 719–730, Kindle.

³¹ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1977); Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

³² Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1981).

³³ Eakin, *How Our Lives*, 73.

³⁴ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Sacred Water* (Tucson: Flood Plain Press, 1993); Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright, *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters*, edited by Anne Wright (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1986); *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996)

³⁵ Deanne Reder, “Writing Autobiographically: A Neglected Indigenous Intellectual Tradition,” in *Across Cultures/Across Borders: Canadian Aboriginal and Native American Literatures*, edited by Paul DePasquale, Renate Eigenbrod, and Emma LaRoque (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2010): 153–171.

³⁶ Leslie Marmon Silko, “Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories,” in *Yellow Woman*, 43.

³⁷ Silko, *Turquoise Ledge*, 127.

³⁸ Louise Thomas, “Desert Song,” *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, Nov 28, 2010, BR 15, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2010/11/28/books/review/Thomas-t.html>. Link no longer active.

³⁹ Silko, *Turquoise Ledge*, 5–6.

⁴⁰ Silko, *Turquoise Ledge*, 11.

⁴¹ Annette Angela Portillo, *Sovereign Stories and Blood Memories: Native American Women’s Autobiography* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 87.

⁴² Silko, *Turquoise Ledge*, 1.

⁴³ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 284–85.

⁴⁴ Kimberley Blaeser, “Sacred Journey Cycles: Pilgrimage as Re-Turning and Re-Telling in American Indigenous Literatures,” *Religion & Literature* 35, no. 2/3 (2003): 85–86.

⁴⁵ Gerald Vizenor, *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), loc. 966, Kindle.

⁴⁶ Kimberley Blaeser, “The Re-Membered Earth: Place and Displacement in Native American Poetries,” in *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement*, ed. Alan R. Velie and A. Robert Lee (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,

2013), loc. 5837, Kindle. Blaeser focuses her argument on poetry, but it is equally applicable to life writing.

⁴⁷ Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); Terese Marie Mailhot, *Heart Berries. A Memoir* (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2018); Wab Kinew, *The Reason You Walk* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2017).

⁴⁸ Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), loc. 249, Kindle.

⁴⁹ Wong, *Sending My Heart*, 160.

⁵⁰ Marcel Brosseau, "Allotment Knowledges: Grid Spaces, Home Places, and Storyscapes on the Way to Rainy Mountain," *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 137.

⁵¹ See Joëlle Bonnevin, "Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country by Louise Erdrich: A Nostalgic Move Towards Ancestral Culture?" in *Cultures in Movement*, ed. Martine Raibaud, Micéala Symington, Ionut Untea, David Waterman (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015): 40–41; and Christian Knoeller, "Landscape and Language in Erdrich's *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 4 (2012): 645–46.

⁵² Louise Erdrich, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country: Traveling Through the Land of My Ancestors* (New York: Harper Perennial), 2014, loc. 18, Kindle.

⁵³ Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 92.

⁵⁴ Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 838.

⁵⁵ Robert Warrior, "Indigenous Nonfiction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, ed. James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 192.

⁵⁶ Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 430; Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

⁵⁷ Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 460; emphasis added. David McNab dates the artificial rise of the water level in this area twenty-five years before Erdrich's journey. See David McNab, "The Significance of Place and Indigenous Knowledge in Louise Erdrich's *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003)," *European Journal of American Culture* 25, no. 3 (2006): 214.

⁵⁸ Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 462.

⁵⁹ See Knoeller, "Landscape and Language," 655–56.

⁶⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Bonnevin, “A Nostalgic Move,” 40.

⁶¹ McNab identifies Tobasonakwut as Peter Kelly Kinew, who, according to his son Wabanakwut Kinew, particularly towards the end of his life was deeply involved in the preservation of *Ojibwemowin* (2015), see David McNab, “The Significance of Place and Indigenous Knowledge in Louise Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003),” *European Journal of American Culture* 25, no. 3 (2006): 205–19. 207. On the importance of Indigenous language preservation and expansion, see Scott Richard Lyons, *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 158–59.

⁶² Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 81.

⁶³ Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 1245.

⁶⁴ Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 796.

⁶⁵ Margaret Noodin, *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2014), 47.

⁶⁶ Erdrich, *Books and Islands*, loc. 28.

⁶⁷ Richard Wagamese, *One Native Life* (Vancouver: Douglas&McIntyre, 2008); Richard Wagamese, *One Story, One Song* (Vancouver: Douglas&McIntyre, 2011); Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2013); Sherman Alexie, *You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me: A Memoir* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017); Mailhot, *Heart Berries*.

⁶⁸ Warrior, “Indigenous Non-Fiction,” 190; Carlson, *Sovereign Selves*, 178.

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