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People, Place and Politics: D'Arcy McNickle's (Re)Valuing of Native American Principles

John L. Purdy

¹ Contemporary discussions of issues that revisit the links between environment and socioeconomic conditions often draw upon historical comparisons. Recent financial woes, often referred to as “the Great Recession” in the media, drive comparisons with the Great Depression, the notable, seminal, global economic event of the early 1930s that had such profound formative effects upon the world, history, and our own lives by shaping a generation’s values, ideals and actions.

² Since it had such myriad effects upon our world, the Great Depression also had an equally profound effect upon literature, where current events and issues were explored and evaluated, and, at the best of times, alternative ways of thinking and living were posited. One of the great works of U.S. literature emerged from this moment: John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. This classic is concerned about contemporary culture and community, but also the environment, which in the 1930s of the Dust Bowl had been severely damaged through the drive for short-term gain and the achievement of the “American Dream” for a few to the detriment of the many.

³ It is not the purpose of this article to revisit the broad body of literature from the 1930s and the extensive corpus of historical and critical studies that has emerged from it. Instead, it is to explore a “non-canonical” literature that offers other possibilities, and, by doing so, to raise questions for further consideration and discussion using one author’s alternative vision, which emerged from that historical era. Simply put, the readership of the 1930s in the U.S. is not the same as it is today after all the social changes that have transpired since Steinbeck published his novel, and this includes the Civil Rights movement, the “culture wars,” the environmental movement and the expansion of the American literary canon. Therefore, I would like to look at one writer from the 1930s whose work is largely unknown, but whose canon cuts across many of the issues that

consumed public discourse in the latter half of the twentieth century, including discussions of the environment. At moments of crisis like the Great Depression, there is an enhanced danger of placing an increased burden upon our natural resources and therefore ecosystems, and this impulse is, at its core, an issue of cultural values and social justice.

⁴The subject of this study is the author D'Arcy McNickle. Born in 1904 in St. Ignatius, Montana, McNickle descended from cultures that have lived in North America for tens of thousands of years through “sustainable” means. A Métis (mixedblood of Cree/French and Irish descent), he lived in that rural Montana ranching and farming community until 1913, at which time he—like so many other Native children across the country—was shipped off to federal boarding school in Oregon: the Salem Indian Training School, later known as Chemawa Indian School. After finishing his three-year enrollment, he returned home for a short time to live with his mother and her second husband. In 1918, he moved with his family to Langley, Washington, where they lived for three years before returning, once more, to Montana.

⁵The year of their departure is an interesting one as a barometer of the political climate of Montana in the era in which McNickle came of age. In 1918, 79 Montanans, largely from rural areas and the working class, were arrested, tried, and convicted under the state's infamous sedition law.ⁱ Some of those imprisoned were members of the Industrial Workers of the World. All were critical of the government, three of these in print, and many were of German or Austrian descent. Since the country was at war with Germany, this reactionary law reflects that historical moment and public sentiment, but also—like so many others in the country's history, perhaps the present included—it provides an event that brings into sharp relief the tensions between differing visions of the country and its citizens, one staunchly conservative and nationalistic and the other liberal and egalitarian. For this discussion, it also marks a moment when a government's laws were imposed upon a marginalized population as the result of military conflict. At once citizen and not-citizen, whose first culture and language marked them as “different,” those immigrants imprisoned would, ironically enough, find much in common with the populations of Indian reservations throughout the West, or with other immigrant communities today.

⁶Like the German immigrants/activists, McNickle's family was not native to Montana. His grandfather, Isidore Plante Parenteau, moved his family from an area of Canada that had been embroiled in an armed conflict between the Métis and the Canadian government for quite some time. Various referred to as “The Northwest Rebellion” and “The Riel Rebellion,” the fighting ended in 1885 with Louis Riel's capture and execution, and this is when Parenteau crossed the international border into Montana where, in 1905, McNickle, his mother, and sisters were officially adopted by the Salish, if not the larger Anglo community. Refugees from war and dispossessed of the region of their birth, the family attempted to fit into their new surroundings, which were undergoing a dramatic transformation at the flute end of Manifest Destiny as the West was brought into the twentieth century and modernity was embraced. The landscape of Montana was being “settled,” with all its implications of extractive economies and radical transformations of place such as hydroelectric projects and “modern” farming practices.

⁷As a result of their adoption, all four received land allotments on the reservation under the Dawes Act, often referred to as the General Allotment Act of 1887. For the purposes of this discussion, this event is of note. The Act had several purposes, including

the continued appropriation of Native lands, but also the establishment of *individual* property rights in communities that were, more often than not, based in a communal sense of ownership.ⁱⁱ In other words, at its core is the concept of private property, so fundamental to capitalist ideology (as well as the American Dream) and central to the colonized history of the West. And, as we see historically, there is often a push-pull between those who consider ownership as free license to make use of land in any way the owner wants and those who call for a long-term stewardship of place. In effect, though, the Act fragmented many Native communities, as most federal policies had previously and would again later, most notably during the 1950s and the era of “termination.”ⁱⁱⁱ

⁸ However, the sale of his allotment provided McNickle with the funds, in 1925, to travel to Europe. Although he had completed most of his undergraduate degree in English at the University of Montana, he hoped to receive his degree from Oxford. Instead, he found himself living in France for a time. Returning to the U.S., though, McNickle settled in the east, ultimately finding employment in the Bureau of Indian Affairs under its new Commissioner, John Collier, who was appointed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt whose policies brought the country out of The Great Depression.^{iv} It was in this milieu that McNickle published his first novel, *The Surrounded*. Moreover, the novel (published in 1936, three years prior to *The Grapes of Wrath*) is a radical departure from its earlier draft, and some of the differences underscore McNickle's revised thinking about the politics of people and place.^v

⁹ Finally published in 2007, thirty years after McNickle's death, the earlier draft—*The Hungry Generations*—originates in the time before the Great Depression and it describes the development of a young, mixedblood Salish man as he matures into a model of respectability in the fictional community of St. Xavier, Montana: a wealthy, educated and prudent landowner.^{vi} Archilde Leon is a model of the success story of the American Dream, which at its heart is the colonial dream: prosperity and ease for the individual through the exploitation of place and people.

¹⁰

In *The Hungry Generations* Max, Archilde's father, persuades him to leave for college and thus avoid the consequences after his mother, Catherine, kills a game warden immediately after the warden has killed her son, Louis. This is how Archilde comes to be in Paris, and how he meets Claudia, the only person from these Paris days who returns to the West (and the plot), ostensibly to marry him. Like many of his generation, this expatriate explores the center of western culture of the post-WW I era, as the title suggests with its slant allusion to the Gertrude Stein term for Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, et al., “the lost generation” of young radicals who questioned contemporary American society and social values. Unlike those notable writers, though, Archilde does not like what he finds, with one exception: Claudia.

¹¹

The daughter of an American railroad pensioner, a pioneer who helped “open” the West for the masses, Claudia and her family are the embodiment, perhaps the stereotype, of the regional (western) American trying to acquire cosmopolitan culture, the ultimate goal for those who “settled” the West and shaped it to conform to the social land-use paradigms that immigrated from Europe.^{vii} Much like the well-to-do of American society who traveled to the Continent to “enrich” their lives, westerners who aspired to climb the social ladder of class followed the same convention. The American novelist Henry James built a career interrogating this phenomenon, and Mark Twain by satirizing it, but

McNickle, as an indicator of his emerging perspective, attempts to deconstruct the myth of high culture, but from a distinctly western point of view.

12

Archilde resists the urge to become a member of the upper class, as it was manifested in the eastern U.S. and Europe in the era; Claudia Burness' family is the embodiment of the convention, but it is dysfunctional. At once the result of an overdomineering mother and reluctant children, it is also one that shows the ways the West has rewritten the psyche and identities of those who have lived there. When Mrs. Burness questions Archilde's intentions, alleging that he has some diabolical plan to harm her family by befriending her husband, he reveals a sense of kinship based in a shared valuing of the western experience: "Your husband has become interested in me because I'm from the West; ... and he seemed tickled to meet someone from the West—it was almost as if he had known me before—he was so enthusiastic" (236). It becomes obvious that she is the only family member who wants to live this American fairy tale of privilege and cultured affluence. The children, it seems, do not want to become the sophisticated artisans their mother wishes them to be. This does not mean, however, that they are immune to the mythos of Paris with its freedoms and exotic charm. It is just that they do not want to work or study while they explore the city's potential for the individual. For Archilde, however, this mythos becomes an object of study.

13

McNickle critiques the Parisian expatriate culture: once more, the American drawn to the hub of the culture and art of the colonizers. Archilde functions much as a cultural anthropologist as he walks the streets of Paris and shadows the life of the expatriates as described in the works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, et al. At one point, he and Claudia, who is fully engrossed by the mythos, debate the relative merits of the city:

'Paris is more than the capital of France—for two centuries, at least, it has been the capital of wit and learning. All the scapegraces in the world come here—and most of the brilliant minds. You've heard that, haven't you?'

'Yes, that is what I heard when I came east. I heard nothing else, in fact.' He hesitated over his next words. "Is it so wonderful then? Is it worth sacrificing a great deal to be here?'

'Yes, some people will give everything—do you know what I mean by *everything*?—just to linger on.'
(221)

- 14 As one can see in this seemingly innocuous conversation, McNickle's prose is layered, as it is throughout his canon. The linking of scapegraces and brilliant minds is of note, as is the dialogue's revelation that Claudia has internalized the mythos of Paris wholly.

15

Archilde's reply to her is equally telling because it appears to reverse the path of colonialism and Manifest Destiny and the concepts of wealth and ease derived from the exploitation of the environment that are embodied in them. As presented, this exchange replicates the discourse of western expansion. The lure of the West developed a similar mythos of potentiality, where rogues rubbed elbows with cultural heroes and the possibility for the dramatic reinvention of self existed in an atmosphere of freedom and relative anonymity. However, once the land had been "settled," the attempt to construct community called for a settling of identity based upon social paradigms of the east and

Europe, including enforcement of laws and rules to protect the private ownership of lucrative resources. While this may, at first, seem a stretch, the interrogation of Manifest Destiny and the potential the West presented to those in the east is found in several places in McNickle's canon and it is the basis of the American Dream.

16

His short story "The Hawk is Hungry" is a good example. Set in Montana in the settlement era, the story describes a visit from the protagonist's sister, who has remained behind in Connecticut as her brother goes west to build a ranch. Through her inquisitiveness about her brother's life, we find a fit description of the region and its "new" imported lifeways, but through their visit to the farm of fellow settlers from the east, the Brown sisters, McNickle provides his commentary on Manifest Destiny writ large. At the end of the story, the sisters' prize chicken—the rugged individualist "Molly" who roams free and is, for the sisters, the "idea of personal integrity" (*Hawk* 62)—is struck and hauled away by a hawk as they helplessly watch, unable to intervene. The intention of living an idealized, romanticized lifestyle by moving to a "new" land and rewriting one's lot is deflated in quick fashion; reality strikes home through something as mundane (but also naturally fit for its environment) as a hungry hawk feeding itself—to the detriment and chagrin of the colonizer. Here, the pastoral ease of a gentrified life cannot be realized, nor can it withstand the natural world's systems; the Brown sisters try to make the land conform to their dreams rather than shape their expectations and understanding to the land and its ways.

17

As the brother and sister return to his ranch, she ruminates on the Brown sisters' subsistence lifestyle and bleak prospects, and then articulates McNickle's point: "Anne stirred one sceptic thought, however, which has stayed in my mind ever since. She said, 'I wonder—was it worth it—if that's the way the West was settled?'" (*Hawk* 64).

18

The same question drives the conversation between Claudia and Archilde in Paris: is living here worth it? What, exactly, is the "everything" that people will sacrifice to "linger on" in this intelligentsia colony? To try to answer that, Claudia takes Archilde to meet another expatriate, a well known writer who has lived in Paris for years.

19

They track Dave Marsh to a café. At first, Archilde is attracted to the man, apparently due to his size and thus commanding presence. "He was tall and stoop shouldered. Indeed, he would have been an exceedingly big man but for his shoulders, which were rounded and stooped to such an extent that he gave the impression of being a cripple" (223). Although Archilde at first warms to him, it is this first impression—"stooped" linked with "cripple"—that provides Archilde's final judgment of the poet, but also the mythos of Paris. "He was no longer interested in Marsh" (226). And what is it that results in such a sudden reversal? In a word, decadence, but not in the usual sense. In this world, ease leads to atrophy. The poet is no longer a poet but an inconsequential hack. "[His] poem was stupid" (227).

20

It is difficult to ignore the potential allusion to Ernest Hemingway whose first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, was published while McNickle lived in France, and his protagonist, Jake Barnes, lives a lifeway in Paris very similar to Marsh. And, like Marsh, he is "crippled," in this case due to a war wound that drives much of his character; he is impotent. While

Hemingway explored the implications for American senses of masculinity, McNickle extended his critique to the milieu of the author. Marsh suffers from a self-inflicted wound; he lives a life of his own choosing, and that makes a difference for the fledgling Archilde.

21

In Europe, the western spirit is lost in this place where Americans “linger on” and even a man of stature lives with no effort or drive. “What should a man do, then, with a big body and powerful shoulders? Let them rot?” (226). This early incarnation of the character Archilde subscribes to the concept of the self-made man of the West and this concept is incongruous with the cosmopolitan lifeways to be found in the East and Europe, which have nonetheless propelled numerous events over history that have had dire consequences, the subjugation of indigenous nations, the Great Depression and Dust Bowl included.

22

While there are qualities to this first manuscript that carry the seeds of the first published version, one can see Archilde's alignment with the popularly held ideals and values of the West of the time and thus the environmental issues that have emerged from them. Despite the potential for challenging the class structures and power differentials of the era, though, *The Hungry Generations* falls short. As mentioned, at the end of the novel Archilde is a successful citizen: well educated, well to do, and well worth the non-Native damsel. Although the idea that her daughter is attracted to an Indian is vexing for Mrs. Burness, Archilde waits for Claudia to arrive “back home” in Montana, underscoring McNickle's valuing of the West over the decadence of the Old World, but also reaffirming the social structures of both. Archilde may seem to be driven by an egalitarian ideal, but it is muted by the fact that he lives within the social framework that has worked to supplant the earlier egalitarian values of his homeland and the Salish as expressed in the social structures, economic system, and cultural practices McNickle describes in his final draft.

23

The Surrounded is a very different story. While McNickle retained the plot about the killing of the game warden, which at its basis is a conflict between colonizer and colonized but also two views of land/resource use, and keeps many of the characters, he dramatically transformed them. One easy illustration is found in Archilde's extended family, particularly the character Modeste (his uncle) and Mike and Narcisse (his nephews). In *The Hungry Generations* the former has a cameo appearance and the latter provide a conflict over private ownership of the ranch. In *The Surrounded* Modeste is a central character, a respected elder who retains the crucial elements of his culture, and the nephews grow close to Archilde and begin to practice that culture. In essence, this reclaims the ancient convention of the role of uncles (Modeste and Archilde) as the mentors for the young, the next generation. The earlier draft describes the fragmentation of the family with the rise of the successful individual property owner; the first published version describes the growth of that individual into a central element of a tribal community reclaiming its culture and right to self-determination in an environment made sustainable through the practicing of ancient values.

24

It is important to reconsider that all the action of *The Surrounded* takes place solely in Montana. The long section in the earlier draft set in Paris is gone. The novel opens with

Archilde's homecoming, after living in Portland, Oregon making a living as a musician and underscores Archilde's plan: to visit home for a short while and then to go forth into the wide world and make it on his own.

25

The plan is never realized, and the complicating factors that defer it are given in subtle fashion, beginning with the very opening scene. As Archilde walks the lane to his father's ranch, he comes to a fork in the road: one leads to his European-immigrant father's affluent ranch house—a sign of the material change that has come to the land—and the other to his mother's rustic cabin. There are several binaries suggested by this divergent path—modern/primitive, American/Salish, male/female and all their variations—but for the young man who is trying to find his way in the West as it transforms itself after “settlement,” it also denotes assimilation/resistance. The latter is not unique to Archilde or to the Salish themselves; it is the same dilemma that indigenous individuals and nations have faced since 1492. In clever fashion, McNickle interrogates that dilemma and then deconstructs the binaries to offer a reevaluation of the assumptions that determine the valuing of one over the other, including people/place. Archilde takes the path to his mother's cabin. And that has made all the difference.^{viii}

26

Archilde's visit comes as his father, Max, anticipates his wheat harvest. As he prepares for this event, one common to the region in modern times, he shares with readers his good fortune as a settler, for he sold his timber interests in time to avoid financial ruin, and his crops will continue his prosperity, apparent in his home but also his new car. He lives the American Dream of the colonist turned settler, the modern self-made man, with one exception. He is alone.

27

Although a daughter, Agnes, tends house for him, and her sons, Mike and Narcisse, live with her, he is alone, and without an heir to his holdings. He has driven his sons away. He consoles himself in the belief that, as he tried to make them develop a good western work ethic and a sense of responsibility, and thus demonstrate their worthiness to inherit what he has built with his own hands and good sense, they appeared inherently lazy, shiftless and without morals: the recurrent stereotypes of “improvident” Natives found throughout American literature from James Fenimore Cooper and Henry David Thoreau to contemporary graphic novels such as *Scalped*. He tries to beat them into submission to the Euroamerican value systems he represents—the lens through which he ascribes value to the land and its people—thus driving them further and further away. As Archilde returns home, the last, Louis, has turned into a horse thief and is hiding in the mountains with a herd he hopes to sell.

28

One must remember the historical context for the release of the novel, and the lingering tensions within the region, particularly those between Native and nonnative, and conflicting views of sustainable futures for all people. Considering this tension, there are two things to note in this plot summary. First, Max represents the “modern” values that have immigrated to this region through Manifest Destiny, and that adhere in the popular perception of “America” to be found in McNickle's audience of the time. Inherent in this is the idea of private ownership of property, as transplanted from Europe, the self-centered use of the land in ways that were also transplanted by the colonists, and the passing of ownership, following the concept of primogeniture, through the male line. Max

does not value women in the ways the Salish do; to do so would seem less than masculine and masterful in the social paradigm he represents.

29

Second, Max's sons resist this paradigm and follow an older tradition of conducting business in this land. The two societies' value systems are obviously in conflict and although McNickle carefully avoids declaring that Louis' thievery is laudable, he certainly toys with two conflicting conceptions of correct behavior: Salish social mores that shaped behavior in the past, and the "law and order" the settlers now impose upon everyone. This comparison of what was with what is in a landscape transformed by the radical trauma called colonialism can be found several places in the book, and slowly—for an audience that subscribes to the idea that the change has brought prosperity and civilized society to the region—the point of view McNickle would have us consider accrues, and it is one at odds with this popular ideal.

30

For instance, in the opening of Chapter Four, McNickle describes the town of St. Xavier as belonging "to two ages" but as he compares the "Townsite" of the new immigrants to the "Indiantown" of the Salish, he makes a curious valuation, for the latter is left to its own devices: "Its lack of plan and sanitation *saved* it" (35; emphasis mine). He goes on to note that there is, indeed, a plan to the order of the houses, since they all center on the church, but that the new arrivals cannot perceive it.

31

Also in the opening chapters, Archilde's mother, Catharine, thinks back to the day the priests came sixty years earlier, and looks around to find "her sons developing into creatures such as had never lived in her childhood (a son might steal horses but a mother was respected)" (22). And one of the original missionaries to the region, Father Grepilloux, has returned to the valley to die, but as he looks at the aftereffects of his ministry, he sees dissolution, chastising Max for his self-centeredness: "You lose your sons, but these people have lost a way of life, and with it their pride, their dignity, their strength." He then shares the one thing that, in his cultural framework, may mitigate that loss: "Of course... they have God" (59). McNickle's irony is subtle. Grepilloux dies before the resilient strength of the Salish is revealed as they reject his teachings and return to their old lifeways, with Catharine leading the way. She was the first one baptized when the priests arrived but the night before the Salish summer dance, Catharine recounts to the Salish elders a dream she's had that calls her to renounce her baptism. The Salish reclaim a lifeway that had sustained them for millennia before the priests' and the American's arrival.

32

Conflicting culturally defined senses of right and wrong, law and order abound in McNickle's canon. One example might prove illustrative here, since it deals directly with the concepts of private ownership that are explored in the novel. McNickle's short story "Hard Riding" begins with the Indian Agent to the Salish riding hard to a meeting with their elders. He whips his horse as he does so, thus providing one sense to the title, but also reflecting Max's behavior toward his sons in the novel as well. The agent, a patriarchal authority figure, has the goal to "ride hard" on the Salish, too, so that he can coerce them into establishing a court and appointing judges to deal with the rash of cattle thefts from the herd that threaten to derail his economic plans for the tribe. As we come

to find out, the thefts have purpose. Tribal members have taken the cattle to feed poor people in the community who are starving.

33

This communal obligation—a residual element of Salish culture despite the imposition of federal laws/policies and new ways of doing things that focus upon the individual—is fundamental; it defines the community and its core values, and it runs counter to the economic interests of the agent and the government. Responding to the power structure imposed by the government, the elders agree to establish the court, thus satisfying the letter of the request, but certainly avoiding its spirit: they appoint judges who are mentally incapable of judging and who have no stature in the community. The court exists, but it is dysfunctional. No one will listen to it.^{ix} Their resistance is ironic.

34

Communal obligations to others and to place are found throughout the novel. In fact, at one point during its creation, McNickle wrote to Professor William Gates, whose work on the ancient civilizations of the Americas attracted him. Offering to work for Gates, McNickle assures him that he does not want to obtain materials from the effort, because he has his own study underway: “a fictionalized study of the development of an Indian boy.”^x Archilde’s development is, once again, very different from that of the original draft in which he becomes the quintessential capitalist, self-centered landowner.

35

As noted, Archilde returns in time for the harvest, which takes place in the early chapters. In *The Hungry Generations*, this is how the book concludes, with him harvesting the wheat on the ranch he now owns after Max’s death. Harvesting is, of course, symbolic of the culmination of the western dream, the realization of profit after the hard work is done. In *The Surrounded*, McNickle reverses the linear process with its attendant goal. To Max’s astonishment, Archilde works with the hired hands to bring in the wheat, thus establishing him—at least for the father whose pride in a son is a new emotion—as an effective participant in the economic enterprise that “tamed” the West and brought fruit from the “barren wilderness,” as the rhetoric of the time would have it. However, the plot that follows takes Archilde further from his father’s ideal and more into the center of another American dream that predates it and ultimately resists its basic underlying assumptions: from his father’s values to those of his mother.

36

In the concluding chapters of the novel, as Archilde makes preparations for his final departure from the valley, he returns from a trip into the mountains to find his mother dying. McNickle’s description of the moment is telling:

He knelt at his mother’s head.... It was a different matter now. People grew into each other, became intertwined, and life was no mere matter of existence, no mere flash of time. It was time that made the difference. The time that was consumed in moving one’s feet along the earth, in learning the smell of coming snow, in enduring hunger and fear and the loss of pride; all that made a difference. And a still greater difference was this entangling of lives. People grew together like creeping vines. The root of beginning was hard to find in the many that had come together and spread their foliage in one mass. (258)

37 This is but one articulation of the recurrent motif of tribalism in McNickle’s canon after the years of the Great Depression, here driven home by the passing of a woman who has renounced the religion that for decades had worked against her society and its inherent sense of communal ownership of land, resources, and—in this instance—souls. Moreover,

its metaphoric use of the environment underscores what, at this moment of crisis, is to be valued: people and place.

38

Unlike *The Hungry Generations* with its happy ending and validation of the American values of the time, *The Surrounded* ends with Archilde—once more in the center of his Salish extended family—fully embodying resistance to the contemporary social systems of the settlers and the governmental mechanisms that protect them and that came to the valley with the immigrants. With the local sheriff dead at his feet, Archilde raises his arms to accept the shackles the Indian Agent orders. Although he did not shoot the sheriff, he is complicit, for as his friend Elise moves to defend her man from the injustice that he will certainly experience, he senses her purpose: “He wanted to stop her. He could have reached out his hand and held her back. He stood motionless, seeming to hold his breath” (294). Despite his arrest—or perhaps because of it—Archilde becomes the symbol of a radical reclamation of a Salish identity and thereby a culture and values of an indigenous lifeway. In an era of assimilation that called for the shedding of old values of communalism and adopting the rugged American individualism of the westerner, this was not a popular message, as those jailed under the sedition law can attest. Tellingly, Archilde is silent at book’s end, while in the manuscript he walks off scene singing.

39

The book did not sell; it dropped out of print after one run; but it was resurrected in the late 1970s and has been in print ever since. In other words, it was reissued after the demise of the “melting pot” metaphor, in an era that gave rise to environmentalism, rights for people of color and women, and a generation that questioned nationalistic overreach after Vietnam. One wonders what it offers for us today.

40

McNickle published only one other novel in his lifetime: *Runner in the Sun: A Story of Indian Maize*. It is of significance in this discussion, even though it was written for a young audience. It is set in pre-Columbian times, and was published in the 1950s. The novel was commissioned by Henry Holt as part of a series for young adults. The fact that it was published in the year 1954, often referred to as the year of “termination” because of the federal policy that would have set aside the government’s treaty obligations with several tribes, is of significance.^{xi} Also significant is the fact that it was written during the Cold War as Senator Joseph McCarthy conducted his communist witch hunts.^{xii}

41

The novel describes the journey of a young man, Salt, whose travels take him from present-day New Mexico through the various ancient cultures that inhabited Mexico and Central America on a quest to find the things necessary to help his people survive a radical change in their environment that, previously, had sustained them for thousands of years. (His journey takes him into the heart of those civilizations McNickle found in the work of William Gates.) With each successive nation he visits, Salt finds cultures that are more and more materialist and as a result more militaristic and rigidly class-structured, qualities that so clearly identify 1950s America during the Cold War. Although subtly presented, McNickle’s point is clear: a society that becomes progressively obsessed with these elements of human experience is doomed for it will ultimately begin to feed upon itself and its environment. Salt rescues a young slave woman, Quail, from human sacrifice and together they return to his village bringing the things the people need for their

survival: new “blood” and a new strain of corn, but also the cautionary stories of Salt’s experiences.

42

In the twenty years since the publication of his first novel, McNickle’s vision had matured and solidified into a philosophy that had at its core a reclamation of the communal qualities of tribal communities, and their empowerment in contemporary times: their right to self-determination as independent societies inside the borders of the U.S. and sovereignty over their environment and resources. This was not a popular message—in the 1930s or the 1950s, or today—but it is a future for which he worked as an activist, as a bureaucrat, and as a writer. And his work was prophetic.

43

The year 1954 was important for the policy of termination, as mentioned above, but it was also the year that French colonial forces were surrounded and forced to surrender at Dien Bien Phu, thus escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam, which would consume a generation of American youth (and produce Agent Orange, the deadly defoliant); within two years, Allen Ginsberg would publish “Howl,” his poem critiquing American materialism and describing the blood god Moloch consuming the youth of America, as did Vietnam.

44

The tensions felt in the country at large were also felt in the region of McNickle’s birth, and these tensions resulted in a fundamental questioning of identity and social order. The changes coming to the region and nation were, in their own way, as traumatic as the change that came with the settlers.

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In conclusion, I would argue that McNickle was seeking a way to survive in contemporary realities—economic, political, social (including gender and racial), and environmental—and to do so he developed a strong sense of identity as a Native individual: an individual who is responsive to a larger community and the place it lives, but also an individual whose actions are driven by a firm commitment to the communal good. Through this process, he became, in a way, an ideological hybrid mediating two sometimes conflicting value systems to produce ideals that are driven by tribal imperatives within a modern, western society.

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As a budding cultural anthropologist, he recognized that all cultures change over time. This understanding resulted in his commitment as a political activist as he worked to promote Native cultures’ inherent right to determine how to react to and/or direct that change by maintaining their communal values. In any event, his life and attempts to interrogate the events taking place in the region’s environment, but also the U.S. at large, and offer new alternatives based in ancient practices mark him as a visionary whose works certainly anticipate the canon of Native literatures as it evolved through subsequent generations in the last century. His works also foreground the ways humanity has survived over millennia on this continent despite sweeping changes, and thus they provide responses to the social changes that took place in the country as a whole within his lifetime. Perhaps, they also offer a poignant lesson for the country as it seeks the means to survive in a world at times of crisis when natural and social resources are under unprecedented stress.^{xiii}

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NOTES

- i. For a full exploration of this history see Clemens P. Work's *Darkest Before Dawn: Sedition and Free Speech in the American West*.
- ii. Under this Act, each reservation's lands were divided into plots of a certain acreage and families from the tribal community were to sign a tribal roll to receive their allotments. Many refused, since signing the roll would be a de facto acknowledgement that the federal government has the right to dispense with tribal lands and to determine who is a tribal member.
- iii. This will be discussed later in the essay.
- iv. Interestingly, the rhetoric leveled at F.D.R. and his proposals is very similar to that against President Barak Obama's handling of the recession plaguing the country when he took office, both of whom were branded "socialist."
- v. In McNickle's papers, one can find evidence that the original draft had at least gained some positive response from publishers. At one point, in 1934, he had a contract for a version, "Dead Grass." However, there has been no evidence identified to suggest that the radical revisions he undertook in *The Surrounded* were under the direction of an editor. Instead, his diaries suggest his revisiting of the precepts woven into the original, handwritten manuscript of *The Hungry Generations*.

- vi. It is also a phrase from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." McNickle was, after all, an English literature major.
- vii. It is an interesting phenomenon to be found in many "boom" towns of the West, where opera houses, ladies societies, and mansions supplanted the rustic homes and meeting houses of an earlier time. In *The Surrounded*, this is manifested in one scene where Archilde visits his uncle, Modeste. His uncle's place has a teepee, rustic cabin, and modern frame house in close proximity, cleverly acknowledging the change that has come, but also the contemporary theory of social evolution, including social Darwinism. One should also note that McNickle's own father was a railroad worker.
- viii. While in New York, McNickle took a poetry-writing course from Robert Frost, whose poem "The Road Not Taken" carries a similar idea and poetic line.
- ix. This story can be found in *The Hawk is Hungry*.
- x. "Letter to William Gates," 25 March 1934, McNickle Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.
- xi. The U.S. Congress has engaged in the debate of the "Indian Problem" many times over the centuries, as well as today. In essence, the 1950s saw a renewed post-war debate that would renege on the treaties of the past by supposedly shifting funding of indigenous nations' programs from the government. This means it wanted, in a way, to "buy out" treaties and thus avoid the obligations found in them. Several nations fell into this program initially, such as the Klamath in Oregon. Subsequently, the policies were overturned, thanks in part to the efforts of people like McNickle who lobbied intensively against them.
- xii. For a wonderful examination of the direction the careers of many leftist artists took at this time, see Julia Mickenberg's *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States*.
- xiii. One cannot help but wonder what the literature that comes from the current socio-economic conditions and recent historical events will look like.

ABSTRACTS

Today, societies have intensified their discourse about the concept of "sustainability," a term that has expanded to consider the viability of political and economic systems once believed to be inevitable and inviolable. Of course this is not the first time we have searched for a deeper understanding of the interaction between humanity and its surroundings. By looking at the literary production of one Native American author, D'Arcy McNickle, who reached maturity in the 1930s—during the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarian governments—this article considers some implications of the author's vision of the intersections between political power, human rights, and environmental change: the values that drive our decision-making and subsequent actions. By turning to literature, it asks us to listen to the voices of those who may offer alternative ways of understanding what has happened to our world and where we must go to promote its survival.

INDEX

Keywords: D'Arcy McNickle, Environment, Great Depression, Human Rights, Indian Literature, Native American

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