



UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS, INDIGENOUS PRESENCES: DECOLONIAL MATERIALITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE SENTENCE*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Indigenous materiality in Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence* (2021) as a decolonial response to settler materiality, a form of cultural domination which sustains the colonial logic of conquest and settlement, and which is exemplified with an encounter with Charlotte Brontë's moccasins in the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth. Through a close reading of the novel, the article shows how Erdrich represents haunted settings—like an Indigenous bookstore and the city of Minneapolis—and unexpected objects—such as books and a Catholic confessional—to enact relationality, a key ethical onto-epistemological value. In order to do so, it draws on theories of Indigenous materiality and Place-Thought which unveil how the haunted spaces point to unresolved trauma and become sites of resistance, and unexpected objects disrupt the colonial logic of extractivism and asserts reciprocity as an alternative. All in all, this reading underscores the need to attend to Indigenous materiality as a site of survivance where colonial erasure and appropriation are resisted and Indigenous presence is asserted. The novel—and the article itself—invites readers to reckon with the stories that objects carry, and the ones that remain untold.

Keywords: Indigenous literature; Decolonial theory; Indigenous materiality; Place-Thought; Relationality; Reciprocity; Settler materiality.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2026.7.3155

1. INTRODUCTION: INDIGENOUS OBJECTS UNSETTLING SETTLER MATERIALITY

The origin story of this study of decolonial materiality in Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians)'s *The Sentence* (2021) has its roots in an unexpected encounter with an object that could be interpreted as an intruder—both in its context and in this essay—but which I evoke here as a meaningful incongruence. During a research stay at York University in July 2024,¹ I was visiting the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth with a close friend and her family. We were remembering old times as undergraduate

¹ Research for this article was funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by the European Regional Development Fund (FEDER; EU) (code PID2021-124841NB-I00), together with the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code Ho3_23R), as well as the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (PID2023-149915NB-100).

students of English Literature at the University of Oviedo (Spain), not thinking about work, particularly, when we saw a surprising object amongst Charlotte Brontë's possessions: a pair of beaded deerskin moccasins, notably wider—and I am sure, much more comfortable—than the celebrated writer's famously petite shoes. A colorful anomaly standing out amongst Brontë's gloves, shawls, parasols and writing paraphernalia, the pair of moccasins sparked my curiosity with a mixture of shock and intrigue. What were those moccasins, identified as Mohawk in the showcase, doing there? They spoke to me of untold stories, of unexpected connections across time and place, of mysterious cultural exchanges across continents apart. They certainly transformed the way I viewed Charlotte Brontë, making her even more interesting, more complex, and more real.

Unsurprisingly, the moccasins also brought me back into my Indigenous literature scholar mode, drawing me into conversation with the museum staff, and later, motivating me to do a bibliographic search which led me to Eleanor Houghton's 2020 article "Charlotte Brontë's Moccasins: The Wild West Brought Home." Houghton explores the cultural, historical, and emotional significance of the moccasins once owned by Brontë, and left behind in Scarborough in 1849, after her sister Anne's death. She identifies the moccasins as Mohawk, and interprets them as a result of global trade and the ensuing cultural exchange of the 1840s. She hypothesizes that Brontë may have acquired them as a gift from her American publishers, Harper & Brothers. She also argues that the moccasins probably inspired aspects of Brontë's imaginative world, and that her exposure to Native American culture through both literature (e.g. in James Fenimore Cooper's novels) and traveling exhibitions (like George Catlin's Indian exhibition, on tour between 1843 and 1847 in the UK) influenced her novel *Shirley*, which includes references to "the wild West" (Houghton 2020, 189) and Native peoples. Houghton's article thus tells a fascinating story that broadens our vision of Charlotte Brontë and her world. But what does it tell us about the object itself?

While Houghton identifies the moccasins as Mohawk-made and describes stylistic features such as floral beadwork and materials linked to Haudenosaunee women's artistry, this cultural analysis remains somewhat secondary to the biographical and literary narrative centered on Brontë. The moccasins serve mainly as a vehicle for exploring her literary persona, her grief after the death of her sister Anne, and her legacy as a Victorian celebrity. The identity and agency of the Indigenous maker are given little attention, and the moccasins' political and cultural specificity are largely unexplored in their own terms. In all, the moccasins are not so much analyzed as Indigenous objects as they are reinterpreted through the lens of settler subjectivity—a gesture that arguably reproduces the very colonial dynamics the article acknowledges but ultimately does not critique.

This story resonates with Sonia Dobroski's definition of settler materiality as "a hegemonic practice of object intervention and material replacement that reflects the national and/or conquest thinking of settler society" (2024, 272). Settler materiality functions as a

form of cultural domination, for it both mirrors and sustains the colonial logic of conquest and settlement. It also plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of American identity (274). Moreover, many Native American objects—such as headdresses, medicine bundles, and ceremonial items—acquired by collectors, curio dealers, and hobbyists were obtained through asymmetrical power relations. This was especially true during the reservation era, when Indigenous people, facing restricted access to resources, were often compelled to exchange sacred items for necessities like food and medicine. As Dobroski notes, “when cultural belongings were acquired under the conditions of unequal power dynamics, they were not returned” (278), a fact that underscores extraction as one of the open wounds of settler colonialism. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson compellingly states, colonialism and capitalism operate through systems of extraction and assimilation, reducing land, knowledge, culture, and even Indigenous bodies to exploitable resources. Extracting is not only taking, she writes: “Actually, extracting is stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts” (2017, 75). Moreover, this mindset strips away the relationships that give meaning to what is taken, for “every part of our culture that is seemingly useful to the extractivist mindset gets extracted... without regard for the people and the knowledge that created it” (75).

Looking back at that moment in Haworth, what started as an unexpected encounter with an object which I first perceived as incongruous, an intruder of sorts, ended up confirming the usual settler colonial structures. As an example of settler materiality and subsequent extractivism, Brontë’s moccasins embody the ways Indigenous artifacts are appropriated and displayed within colonial frameworks, serving settler identity while muting the voices of Indigenous peoples. They thus promote a reflection on the critical role of objects in settler colonial formations—not merely as symbols, but as active instruments in the ongoing processes of appropriation and erasure. Moreover, they prove that Native American material culture is crucial to understanding how settler colonialism continues to shape ideologies of conquest and national identity. Yet, in spite of all this, the moccasins are there, and they do preserve the power of the unexpected. Calling out to visitors from their showcase, they retain their strangeness and refuse complete absorption. They may not have a voice within the dominant narrative of settler colonialism, but their mere presence speaks worlds about which stories remain unspoken, and who is left to tell them. Hence, they act as decolonial agents, disrupting settler narratives and reasserting Indigenous presence.

For generations, Indigenous writers and scholars have worked to recover the voices of those silenced or overwritten by colonial histories. They have done so through the resurgence of traditional ways of knowing based on relationality, reciprocity, and balance. In line with such motivation—which is essential to Native American literature in general—in this article I explore how Erdrich’s *The Sentence* mobilizes unexpected objects and settings to challenge colonial assumptions about paganism and savagism, opening

space for Indigenous sovereignty and onto-epistemologies within—and against—the very material frameworks that have long sought to contain them. While relationality has become a central concept in Indigenous studies (LaDuke 2015; Coulthard 2014; Coulthard and Simpson 2016; Martínez-Falquina 2023), critical attention has largely focused on being-with the land and with other humans. Comparatively, less emphasis has been placed on the agency of material objects, an aspect that remains central to many Indigenous onto-epistemological frameworks. Bringing to the fore Indigenous theories of relationality and materiality, this study explores how objects challenge settler materiality and vindicate Indigenous sovereignty. In Erdrich’s novel, material things like a confessional in the middle of an Indigenous bookstore, or books that can both save and kill function as a Trojan horse of sorts that invites us to reconsider our assumptions about what belongs where, and who belongs when. Beyond serving merely as symbols, these objects participate in a relational worldview grounded in Indigenous onto-epistemologies, specifically, an ethics of reciprocity (Simpson 2017) which offers a counterpoint to colonial extractivism. Such objects invite us to look again, to look deeper. And they make us reconsider the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and cultures in a way that can make a real difference in how we relate to the past, to the present, and to one another.

2. INDIGENOUS MATERIALITY AND RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

In recent Indigenous studies, there is a growing body of work that emphasizes the ethical and onto-epistemological importance of relationships with land, place, and material worlds. Most significantly, theorists such as Vanessa Watts (Mohawk and Anishinaabe, Six Nations of the Grand River), Glen Coulthard (Yewllowknives Dene), and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) have developed frameworks in which places, material presences, and non-human beings participate in relational systems of meaning and responsibility. This renewed attention to Indigenous materiality challenges persistent Euro-Western binaries—including, but not limited to, subject/object, spirit/matter, animate/inanimate—interrogating both such colonial impositions and the suppression of Indigenous presence involved in them.

Within this framework, Watts’ theorization of Place-Thought offers a particularly illuminating and influential articulation of Indigenous land-based relational ontology. She argues that “Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (2013, 21), thus challenging Euro-Western separations between ontology and epistemology, and restoring agency to more-than-humans. As Watts explains, land, stories, and beings act in dynamic and reciprocal constellations of relationship where humans are part of a network of sentient and thinking participants. Yet, “colonization has disrupted our ability to communicate with place and has endangered agency amongst

Indigenous peoples” (24). In the process of undoing settler colonialism, then, reclaiming Indigenous agency requires re-establishing the original relationships of all beings.

Extending this relational understanding of land into the political sphere, Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson conceptualize Indigenous material relations as sources of what they call “grounded normativity,” that is, place-based ethical frameworks generated through long-standing reciprocal practices of relation with land (Coulthard 2014; Coulthard and Simpson 2016; Simpson 2017). In their words, “Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitative manner” (Coulthard and Simpson 2016, 254). In works like *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson further develops these insights by framing land—understood in a broad sense to include nature as well as all of its beings, animate and inanimate—not only as a site of knowledge and ethics, but as the ground of Indigenous resurgence, where material relations sustain practices of collective responsibility, understood as part of what Simpson describes as “an ecology of relationships ... based on deep reciprocity, respect, noninterference, self-determination, and freedom” (2017, 8).

Critics like Watts, Coulthard, and Simpson provide a much needed Indigenous perspective to the debates on Indigenous materiality that have recently been taking shape across multiple disciplines. Early anthropological work such as Irving Hallowell’s account of Ojibwa ontology (1960) engaged with Indigenous concepts of non-human personhood, later reworked by Nurit Bird-David into a kinship-based framework that foregrounds relational practices and understandings of personhood (2018). From the perspective of new materialist philosophy of science, Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt observe how Indigenous scholars and writers have long affirmed “an ontology that includes non-human agency as well as a conception of ethics including more than human-to-human relations” (2020, 332). Parallel conversations in geography and environmental humanities similarly stress relational landscapes and more-than-human environments shaped by Indigenous epistemologies, thereby reinforcing the centrality of material relations within decolonial thought (Mason and Riding 2023). In rhetorical and memory studies, Indigenous material culture has likewise been theorized as an active site of memory, with objects and landscapes participating in practices of memorialization that unsettle colonial frameworks of historical meaning, therefore functioning as resources for decolonial documentation and identification (DeLucia 2019; Robinson 2021). In Indigenous art history and museum studies, Alicia Harris (Assiniboine) theorizes “kinship materiality” in contemporary Native exhibitions, demonstrating how objects participate as relational agents embedded in ancestral and communal networks rather than as inert aesthetic artifacts (2019).

While this interdisciplinary body of scholarship attests to the broader relevance of Indigenous relational ontologies across multiple fields, it is particularly important to

approach Indigenous materiality—and all Indigenous manifestations, for that matter—from the specific tribal context where they are produced. The focus on Indigenous materiality takes on particular depth and specificity within Anishinaabe epistemological traditions, for the relational ontology of Place-Thought here extends to language and storytelling. From an Anishinaabe perspective, Eva Marie Garroutte (Cherokee Nation) and Kathleen Delores Westcott (Anishinaabe/Cree) describe stories as living beings with agency and engaged in reciprocal relationships with human communities. They argue that “The story is a living being. It’s alive” (2013, 63), emphasizing an ethics of reciprocity in which “[s]tories work together with humans to realize their life purpose” (72). In this sense, language is both material (embodied in books, voices, gestures) and immaterial (with agency independent from those material forms), which disrupts not only Western notions of language as mere representation or signification, but also stereotypical narratives about savagism.

In *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being*, Lawrence Gross (White Earth Band of Ojibwe) conceptualizes Anishinaabe ontology as an ethical practice grounded in *bimaadiziwin*, which translates as “the good life” and refers to the responsibility to live well within networks of human and more-than-human relations. In this view, the whole world is spiritualized, which means that “there is nothing that is inanimate. All things are alive and acting alive” (2014, 102), and because they are not passive, they participate in relations as well. This includes instruments, rocks, music, and even songs and stories, all understood as animate insofar as they have the power to influence the world (90). Reflecting this view, Anishinaabemowin—the language of the Anishinaabe—complicates the notion of a strict animate/inanimate divide by articulating degrees of agency (103-105). The language uses verbs as opposed to adjectives, expressing that “the world is alive ... doing all kinds of things” (113). In this sense, matter is agentive, the spiritual is not separate from the material, and human and non-humans participate in shared relational webs.

Recent literary criticism has also explored how these relational ontologies operate in narrative practice, reshaping the interpretation of Indigenous texts and objects. For instance, Samantha Majhor reads Susan Power’s *The Grass Dancer* through what she describes as Dakota material philosophies, tracing a blue beaded dress as a participatory and performative object-being that sustains kinship relations transgenerationally across time and space.² Similarly, Janet Dean’s work on Louise Erdrich’s *The Painted Drum* examines Indigenous animistic traditions in which “other-than-human persons” (2010, 210) coexist with humans in complex relational networks. The drum and beadwork in the novel do reparative work, redressing wrongs, and gathering people together. These

² See also Martínez-Falquina’s 2026 analysis of Indigenous materiality in Power’s more recent novel *A Council of Dolls*.

objects thus emphasize interdependence and reciprocity across human and nonhuman worlds, foregrounding an expansive notion of personhood that challenges anthropocentric subject-object binaries (212).

Together, these critical approaches demonstrate how Indigenous narratives mobilize material entities not only as symbols but as relational agents situated within ethical and epistemological frameworks. Rather than functioning as inert elements, material objects in these texts participate in meaning-making processes and ethical relations. This makes Indigenous materiality inherently decolonial: it expands notions of personhood and situates humans within networks of reciprocal relations that include land, stories, and cultural objects.

3. HAUNTED RELATIONALITIES: INDIGENOUS MATERIALITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE SENTENCE*

Anishinaabe writer Louise Erdrich is one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Native American literature. Her fiction consistently engages with Indigenous worldviews grounded in land, story, and community. She is known and praised for her poetic prose, her wealth of narrators and characters, and her blurring of borders between Euro-Western opposites such as material and spiritual, human and more-than-human. The recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich is also the founder of Birchbark Books, an independent bookstore in Minneapolis that extends her literary practice into a community-centered space. Specialized in Indigenous literature and non-fiction, in addition to Native-authored art and crafts, the store regularly hosts events featuring Indigenous authors, as well as reading and art exhibitions, positioning it as a key site of contemporary Indigenous cultural production.

In *The Sentence*, Erdrich's recurring concerns with relationality and survivance take a distinctive form. The novel is told from the first-person perspective of Tookie, a witty, resilient, and at times cynical-yet-hopeful Ojibwe woman who, after serving a prison sentence, rebuilds her life by working at Erdrich's Minneapolis bookstore. Tookie is married to Pollux, the Potawatomi former tribal police officer who once arrested her, and she struggles to connect with his daughter Hetta. Tookie is close with her co-workers Jackie, her former seventh-grade teacher who now manages the bookstore; Penstemon, a young and artistic member of the "Indigerati"; and Asema, an intellectually and spiritually engaged Native woman who practices traditional medicine and activism. The novel's central events unfold between 2019 and 2020, as the store becomes haunted by the ghost of Flora, a problematic but well-meaning customer obsessed with Indigenous culture. As Tookie tries to understand and expel the ghost—in part through a mysterious, possibly cursed captivity book Flora was reading when she died—she and the other characters navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the uprisings in Minneapolis. The novel makes questions of materiality and activism especially visible, thus enacting the Indigenous and Anishinaabe relational ontologies outlined above.

3.1. INDIANS IN HAUNTED PLACES

Through reversals, irony, and ambivalence, the primary settings of Erdrich’s narrative upset persistent stereotypes about Native Americans, who are often frozen in the past—portrayed as incapable of change or confined to the role of victim—in the popular imagination. In both the bookstore and the city of Minneapolis, Indigenous characters may be understood as examples of “Indians in Unexpected Places”—to borrow Philip Deloria’s phrase (2004)—that disrupt settler colonial expectations and open up new ways of seeing Indigenous presence.

Most of the action takes place in the independent bookstore based on Birchbark Books & Native Arts, which is located in the Kenwood neighborhood of Minneapolis, and owned by Louise Erdrich. With its eclectic, interesting decoration—including a Catholic confessional and a canoe hanging from the ceiling—and shelves full of handwritten staff recommendations, this is the perfect setting for the novel, whose main characters are united by their deep love of books, and Erdrich actually dedicates it “To everyone who has worked at Birchbark Books, to our customers, and to our ghosts.”

As a setting, the bookstore in *The Sentence* functions as a decolonial space that challenges dominant narratives about Indigenous absence and marginality. Surrounded by books—rather than cast as pre-literate or vanishing—Native characters engage in intellectual, artistic, and spiritual work that affirms survivance. As described from Tookie’s perspective,

The bookstore was a modest little place across from a brick school building in a pleasant neighborhood. The sheltered blue door opened into a sweetgrass-smelling, scuffed-up eight-hundred-square-foot space stuffed with books, with sections labeled Indigenous Fiction, History, Poetry, Language, Memoirs, and so on. (Erdrich 2021, 27)

Characterized as having “the romance of doomed intimate spaces about to be erased by unfettered capitalism” (38), the store is a site of cultural resistance. When renovated, it was made into a sacred place by putting tobacco, sweetgrass, cedar and sage, and the walls were painted blue “to keep out malignant energies” (82). For Louise, the store “was more than a place, it was a nexus, a mission, a work of art, a calling, a sacred craziness, a slice of eccentricity, a collection of good people who shifted and rearranged but cared deeply about the same one thing—books” (155). During the COVID-19 lockdown, the bookstore receives official designation as an “essential business,” allowing it to continue operating under restrictions. Louise responds with excitement, telling Tookie: “It means books are essential” (155). In times of uncertainty, they are vital to human survival, and as Tookie later reflects, humorously, “As it turned out, books were important, like food, fuel, heat, garbage collection, snow shoveling, and booze” (176).

Flora, a frequent visitor of the store, and one of Tookie’s “most annoying customers” died on the second of November, All Souls’ Day, “when the fabric between the worlds is thin as tissue and easily torn. Since then, she has been here every morning” (Erdrich

2021, 32). She was a book lover, as well as “a very persistent wannabe” (32). In spite of its spectral nature, this ghost is strongly connected to materiality, and as usual in her fiction, Erdrich blurs the borders between alive and dead, physical and spiritual:

The material she'd worn was always of the sort that made slight noises—silk or nylon jackets, quilted this time of year. There was also the barely perceptible tap-clink of earrings in her double-pierced lobes, and the muted clatter of her many interesting bracelets. Somehow the familiarity of these sounds calmed me enough to go on. I didn't panic. (31)

Flora visits the store every morning, and through the perceptible movements and sounds she makes, Tookie can draw the map of the store and its various sections. Flora's ghost “left a trail” (55), and usually started the day by “rustling around in the confessional” for a bit, after which she visited “her favorite section, Fiction, then slipped to Nonfiction and Memoirs, and conducted her hushed investigations along Indigenous Fiction” (55). She finished her tour of the store in the confessional again, and “Eventually more rustling noises would occur in the confessional. Then silence. Flora had been an extremely devout Catholic and maybe the confessional, now labeled a Forgiveness Booth, gave her comfort” (58).

Furthermore, Flora's white ghost haunting the Indigenous bookstore enacts an interesting reversal: that of the common horror narrative of Indian ghosts haunting white spaces. She ironically subverts the “unquiet Indian” trope, with Flora haunting the store thus mirroring her appropriation of and obsession with Native culture. Tookie reflects on this reversal thus:

Many books and movies had in their plots some echoes of my secret experiences with Flora. Places haunted by unquiet Indians were standard. Hotels were disturbed by Indians whose bones lay underneath the basements and floors—a neat psychic excavation of American unease with its brutal history. (Erdrich 2021, 49)

She is well aware that “plenty of what was happening to [her] happened in fiction. Unquiet Indians” (49). Yet, she wonders, pointing to the unfinished business of colonization, “What about unquiet settlers? Unquiet wannabes?” (49). With Penstemon, she looks for answers in the earth's magnetism, which “directs many actions in an unseen world” (49). She ponders, “Maybe the bookstore itself was located on some piece of earth crossed by mystical lines. These invisible runes had touched during what... a shift, perhaps cosmically... a solar storm—something had jostled reality” (49). Tookie later reframes the haunting entirely:

Think how white people believe their houses or yards or scenic overlooks are haunted by Indians, when it's really the opposite. We're haunted by settlers and their descendants. We're haunted by the Army Medical Museum and countless natural history museums and small-town museums who still have unclaimed bones in their collections. (72)

The reversed haunting caused by cultural domination and settler materiality—with extractivism of Indigenous bodies and resources still largely unsolved—clearly points to

American Indian Historical Trauma. Erdrich not only critiques historical and present injustice but also turns the lens back on the persistent legacy of settler colonialism.

If the bookstore operates as a site of Indigenous intellectual life and spiritual continuity, the city of Minneapolis functions as its broader urban and political counterpart. This is a public space where Indigenous presence asserts itself through a vindication of daily life and community engagement. For Tookie, Minneapolis was once a site of confinement and trauma, a cityscape marked by prison walls and a past of poverty, addiction, toxic relationships, and petty crime, which would fit in the trope of the urban Indian shaped by trauma and loss. But upon her release and her re-encounter with Pollux, Tookie's life changes, and the city becomes a space where she reclaims routine, pleasure, and possibility. In her words,

Now I live as a person with a regular life. A job with regular hours after which I come home to a regular husband. Even a regular little house, but with a big irregular beautiful blowsy yard. I live the way a person does who has ceased to dread each day's ration of time. I live what can be called a normal life only if you've always expected to live such a way. If you think you have the right. (Erdrich 2021, 30)

Once she is free, the city becomes for Tookie a space of renewal, the source of ordinary pleasures, natural spaces, and daily life, as well as the multicultural foods—like her “tour of world soups” (29)—she enjoys tasting. Thus, in contrast to how Native American identity is often frozen in the past and trauma in the popular imagination, Erdrich brings Indigenous life into the present tense, making it embodied, mobile, and urban.

Towards the second half of the book, starting in the chapter “Minnesota Goddam,” Minneapolis is transformed once more and depicted as a site of grief and upheaval following the murder of George Floyd. Masses of mourners and protesters are out on the streets, and they are soon violently confronted by police, who respond like “full-out soldiers in battle gear” (Erdrich 2021, 219), with tear gas and rubber bullets (204). The city shows “a lawless exuberance” (204). It is on fire, as described by Tookie:

We stayed up watching familiar places burn. Every so often one of us would murmur as we recognized a box store, grocery store, restaurant, liquor store, pawnshop. There was scene after scene of people silhouetted against flames... . There were all sorts of people out there now. Black white brown. Ordinary. Sorrowful and infuriated... . The fires were across town but close by there were fireworks, sirens, helicopters, the incoherent roar of conflict, pops of gunfire, engines revving, tearing through streets, motorcycles, more fireworks and shots, sometimes near and sometimes far. (202)

The moment is apocalyptic, for “[e]verything seemed to be cracking: windows, windshields, hearts, lungs, skulls” (224). Yet, even in this fractured landscape, Erdrich re-inscribes Indigenous presence as key to the contemporary struggle. The city is “boiling with emotion” (223), full of rage and confusion, but also solidarity and activism. Minneapolis

becomes not only a site of loss but also of resurgence—a public space in which Native grief and agency emerge in line with broader movements for racial justice.

Importantly, the description of Minneapolis as a “Haunted City” (Erdrich 2021, 192) goes beyond this particular event, and connects it to a long history of injustice. As Tookie notes,

[l]ike every state in our country, Minnesota began with blood dispossession and enslavement. Officers in the US Army bought and sold enslaved people, including a married couple, Harriet Robinson and Dred Scott. Our history marks us. Sometimes I think our state’s beginning years haunt everything: the city’s attempts to graft progressive ideas onto its racist origins, the fact that we can’t undo history but are forced to either confront or repeat it. (65)

Expectedly, the apocalyptic vision of Minneapolis in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder is not an isolated rupture, but part of a much deeper and older pattern of violence and resistance, of histories of Indigenous dispossession and racial terror that haunt the present. Tookie’s reflections connect the contemporary uprisings to the brutal treatment of Dakota people after the US-Dakota War of 1862, when over 1,600 Dakota women and children were imprisoned in lethal conditions at Fort Snelling. The largest mass execution in US history followed, with 38 Dakota men hanged on the day after Christmas, while others were exiled to the barren lands of Crow Creek. Further pointing to the layers of history on the land, Erdrich notes that Minnesotans now ski over burial grounds where Indigenous women once slept on their relatives’ graves to protect them from body collectors. The novel also invokes a long continuum of Indigenous resistance, remembering how the American Indian Movement was born in Minneapolis to protest police brutality and other forms of discrimination against Native people, and the impact of the Standing Rock movement (#NoDAPL). The hauntings in the city thus parallel the ghost in the bookstore, and both serve as vehicles to foreground the violent, unfinished legacies of settler colonialism.

Additionally, Erdrich connects the lives of Indigenous peoples to the broader crisis of systemic police violence, underscoring how both communities are entangled in the same tragic patterns that drew national outrage after George Floyd’s murder. The narrator reflects on the deaths of both Black and Indigenous people, naming victims such as Jason Pero, a 14-year-old Ojibwe boy from Bad River who was shot by police during a mental health crisis, and Zachary Bearheels, a 29-year-old Lakota/Kiowa/Apache man with schizophrenia who died after being repeatedly tased and dragged by officers (Erdrich 2021, 234). Through the voice of Tookie, Erdrich points out that “you rarely hear about police killings of Indigenous people” (234), not because they are rare, but because they often happen on remote reservations where the police do not wear cameras. The novel thus underscores a recurring pattern of state violence—“Indian after Indian and Black after Black and brown after brown person” (234)—, a reality that contemporary protests and movements must reckon with.

In sight of all this, and through the awareness of Tookie, we bear witness to how the characters of the novel become active parts of a community protesting against state violence and structural racism. The role of Indigenous voices in the collective response to the death of George Floyd testifies to the fact that Native people are not relics of the past, but participants in the crises of the present, including the struggle against violence and injustice through community and solidarity. Hence, the novel describes Minneapolis, like the bookstore, as a site of contemporary Indigenous resistance in response to settler colonial power. By centering Indigenous characters in both literary and political spaces, and by drawing links between personal survival and collective protest, Erdrich enacts a decolonial narrative logic that refuses disappearance and demands visibility.

3.2. INDIGENIZED OBJECTS, AGENT OBJECTS

Alongside the haunted places where the action is set, the decolonizing motivation of *The Sentence* is also enacted through materiality, understood from the perspective of Indigenous onto-epistemology. Certain objects associated with the Christian colonial narrative are reappropriated and resignified, and they thus become charged with emotional and spiritual power. Among the most compelling ones are particular books—including an English dictionary and a reversed captivity narrative with the capacity to kill—and a Catholic confessional, reimagined as an Indigenous spiritual center. Reflecting Indigenous understandings of matter, these objects operate not as inert symbols but as participants in a relational world.

Subverting the ignorant savage trope, books are omnipresent in the novel, and Tookie treats them as both companions and antagonists, always remembering that they saved her life while in prison, and gave her a life once back from it. To start with, the novel is a love letter to reading. Books are mentioned to reflect Tookie's emotional journey, to celebrate Indigenous and world literature, and to comment on personal and political issues. Through Tookie, Erdrich recommends powerful works by Indigenous, Black, and women authors, but also classics, perfect short novels, or anthologies. In the "Totally Biased List of Tookie's Favorite Books" (Erdrich 2021, 297) at the end of the novel, the different sections include Indigenous Lives, Indigenous Poetry, and Indigenous History and Nonfiction, but also Ghost-Managing Book List, Short Perfect Novels, Sailboat Table, Books for Banned Love, Sublime Books, Tookie's Pandemic Reading, and Incarceration. The novel's last words are a note by Erdrich with her bookseller hat on, telling us that if we are interested in the books on these lists, we should seek them out at our local independent bookstore (304).

Amid the strong presence of books in the whole novel, two in particular are prominent. One is the 1969 *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, sent to Tookie while in prison, and the book she claims she would take to a deserted island. The dictionary becomes a lifeline, and Tookie reads it obsessively, not just for definitions, but

as a way to anchor herself, build meaning, and resist the dehumanization of prison. She also uses it as a form of “bibliomancy, or dictionariomancy, to give me a clue as to what in the foggy blue hell is going to happen next” (Erdrich 2021, 138), by placing her finger on a random word to divine the future. Moreover, using her dictionary, Tookie offers the following definition of the central motif in the novel, which becomes a rich, multilayered metaphor throughout the narrative:

Sentence n, 1. A grammatical unit comprising a word or a group of words that is separate from any other grammatical construction, and usually consists of at least one subject with its predicate and contains a finite verb or verb phrase; for example, The door is open and Go! are sentences. (24)

This definition of the grammatical sentence as a unit of language becomes the key to Tookie’s transformation. Earlier in the novel, she receives a prison term: a sixty-year sentence for a bizarre crime involving the transportation of a corpse. The novel also explores historical and cultural forms of sentencing—the systemic violence and legal erasure imposed on Indigenous people. Ultimately, Tookie finds salvation in reading and discovers that language, once a source of punishment, can also be liberating.

Moreover, the meaning of *sentence* that Tookie ponders on serves as a catalyst for exploring Indigenous relationality. As echoed in the novel’s epigraph by Sun Yung Shin, the book works on the idea that “From the time of birth to the time of death, every word you utter is part of one long sentence” (Erdrich 2021). Adding to this, and in line with Indigenous onto-epistemologies that refuse rigid separations between body and mind, the polysemy of the sentence examined in the text promotes an integration of language and life, material and immaterial. As a symbol, then, the sentence motif in the novel is particularly sophisticated and productive.

Garrouette and Westcott delve into the idea that stories have the power to shape the material world, which they evoke into being. In their words, “Story affects not only the world that people *experience*” (2013, 73), but also “the fundamental reality in which creation happens—is always happening because the mythical moment of origin is not subject to the rules of temporality” (74). Such agency is also found in another book that is central to the plot of Erdrich’s novel, an antique handwritten journal titled *The Sentence: An Indian Captivity 1862-1883* that Flora’s adopted daughter Kateri gives to Tookie, saying Flora died with it open beside her. This book is a rare captivity narrative by a Native woman following the Dakota War of 1862 whereby Erdrich upends traditional captivity narratives, often written by or about white women’s captivities: “This seemed the opposite. A captivity narrative by a Native woman” (Erdrich 2021, 64). Reclaiming a voice erased by settler colonialism, the book is narrated by Maaname (Genevieve Moulin), a young woman of Oji-Cree and French descent who describes how she is rescued from illness by a white family only to be held as an unpaid servant. When she tries to escape, she suffers brutal punishments, she is forced into prostitution, and eventually married

off to a farmer's son. She survives years of abuse and ultimately inherits land, leaving behind her powerful testimony in writing. The book's title resonates deeply with the novel's own, and this connection is made literal in a line that "popped out, sentenced to be white" (64). Here, the term *sentence* becomes a symbol of assimilation and historical trauma, as well as of the narratives imposed on Indigenous bodies and lives. Tookie's colleague and friend Asema, who discovered the book at a farm auction and soon recognized its historical relevance, notes that "some of it was so harrowing that [she] could only take in a few lines at a time before putting down the book" (239). The trauma the manuscript contains proves spiritually powerful as well, so that Asema decides to burn sage "and make an offering each time [she] picked up the book" (240).

For Tookie, who is both intrigued by and afraid of the manuscript, it is connected to the presence of Flora's ghost. Flora stole the book from Asema, and Flora's adoptive daughter Kateri returns it to Tookie after Flora's death, with a bookmark on the page she was reading when she died. The power of language is to be taken seriously, but there is also a place for humor here: when Tookie explains to Louise that a certain sentence of this book is so potent that it killed Flora, the author's response after a few moments of quiet is: "I wish I could write a sentence like that" (Erdrich 2021, 134). According to Asema, the bookmarked sentence contained Flora's name and learning that her ancestry was on the wrong side of history simply killed her: "I think it shattered her to learn where her name originated, and with whom" (241). In this way, the manuscript functions as a historical document that demands to be acknowledged. Haunted by Flora's ghost, Tookie tries to avoid it but, in her words, "The book had its own volition and would force me to reckon with it, just like history" (65). It clearly embodies suppressed stories and cultural appropriation—as seen in Flora's theft of the manuscript, another example of settler colonial extractivism—as well as the unresolved trauma of colonization and systemic violence against Indigenous women. Because Tookie feels the book's energy and dreads the pain it represents, she tries to burn and bury it, but the book always finds its way back to her in uncanny ways, for, like the painful history it describes, it cannot be ignored.

Through its agency, the book inside the book thus enacts the principles of Place-Thought and the Anishinaabe worldview, which, in contrast to Euro-Western ideas, see objects as active agents. The text—both as matter and as language—exemplifies a worldview in which objects are animated by spirit and history. Its insistence on being reckoned with parallels unresolved trauma, which surfaces—often as haunting—when not properly addressed. In the end, confronting the manuscript, as Tookie eventually has to do, is the only way to acknowledge historical unresolved grief in order to transform the present.

Whereas books upset the savage trope, the confessional addresses the colonial narrative of paganism. This piece of ecclesiastical furniture from an architectural salvage store which Louise installed in the bookstore is an ornate wooden booth with touches like

a small electric fan, a tin headphone device labelled “Confessionaire,” and a quatrefoil symbol on the door. The box exists in the book and outside the book—that is, in Erdrich’s Minneapolis store—as well. It is in place, and out of place, far from its intended location in a church. Such incongruity works seriously—the reappropriation and resignification of a meaningful Christian object are important decolonial strategies—and humorously—as shown by the warning aimed at the bookstore customers, which reads: “Do not enter. Our insurance doesn’t cover damnation” (Erdrich 2021, 284). The confessional is also an artistic statement. Regarding the “holy box as the basis of an obscurely motivated art project” (59), Louise hires Pen to make a collage in it, and it thus becomes a creative sanctuary where the artist affixes scraps of symbolic paper to its interior—ephemera gathered from around the world. In addition to Tookie’s foods and the various books mentioned in the novel, the confessional thus exemplifies the motif of collecting as a literary strategy. It signifies multiplicity, hybridity, and the piecing together of disparate cultural fragments into a meaningful whole. Yet, in true Erdrich fashion, solemnity does not last very long, and it quickly takes a tricksterlike turn toward the comic. At one point, Penstemon is working on her collage and, probably high on glue, feels a presence inside with her and starts hearing voices. Tookie and Asema have to open the confessional gate for her to stagger out of the priest’s booth and, after sprawling on the floor, they take her out of the bookstore for her to breathe some fresh air.

Moving yet again towards the uncanny, the confessional mutates into a liminal place of haunting and ritual where the living commune with the dead, pointing to another layer of relationality. Not without fear, Tookie learns about its symbolism from Penstemon, who tells her that “in the medieval view there were rifts, holes, tears in space and time through which demons and human evils can erupt” (Erdrich 2021, 288). Coincidentally, the “stylized four-petaled flower” on its door (280) is a multi-layered motif:

As a Christian symbol, the petals are supposed to represent the four evangelists. But the quatrefoil is also an Indigenous symbol, Mayan, Olmec. It represents the four directions, the opening of the cosmos. And get this: It is considered a passageway between the celestial world and the underworld. (280)

The confessional is also a spiritual portal in the characters’ efforts to help Flora’s ghost pass on. Tookie begins by performing a mock ritual of absolution, reciting the Latin phrase “Ego te absolvo” (282), which Flora appears to consider. At this, she and Penstemon speak what Tookie calls “one of the loveliest sentences in the English language: *Go in peace*” (282), which still proves ineffective. Tookie then turns to Flora’s favorite line from Proust, which ends with “it was the rain” (282), hoping that literary beauty might succeed where ritual has not. But nothing changes until Tookie senses that what Flora truly needs is not absolution or aesthetic pleasure but gratitude. Tookie recalls that Flora helped her mother while she was pregnant with her, and finally speaks from the heart: “Miigwech aapiji, Flora... . Thank you for saving my life” (283). At this, Flora departs, and

the haunting ends. Tookie's relational act of acknowledgement proves that words can heal.

All in all, in *The Sentence*, Erdrich uses books and the confessional—unexpected objects insofar as they are not traditionally associated to the Indigenous side of colonial relations—to offer an alternative to settler materiality and extractivism. They perform an ethic of reciprocity, “a practice of attending to the way our existence is interdependent with networks of relations of other humans and non-humans” (Rosiek, Snyder and Pratt 2020, 340), helping us to find our true place in the world and forcing us to reckon with the consequences of our actions. After all, as Simpson offers, “The alternative to extractivism is deep reciprocity. It's respect, it's relationship, it's responsibility” (2017, 75).

4. CONCLUSION

Whether by way of a sacred blue-doored bookstore, a city on fire, a relocated confessional, or books with the power to heal and kill, Erdrich constructs a world where unexpected objects resist erasure and challenge settler materiality. Such objects are not merely symbolic but agents engaging in the relational Anishinaabe worldview grounded in Indigenous materiality and Place-Thought, where humans and other-than-humans, animate and inanimate, living and dead coexist in networks of mutual agency and responsibility.

Through the sites of the bookstore and the city of Minneapolis, Erdrich constructs a geography of resistance. The bookstore functions as a nexus of cultural survivance, where Indigenous presence is intellectual, spiritual, and affective. Meanwhile, Minneapolis emerges as a haunted, grieving city, deeply scarred by histories of state violence but also transformed by multiracial protest. Together, these spaces counteract settler narratives of disappearance and reassert Indigenous presence. As for the objects that populate them—a lifesaving dictionary, a powerful captivity narrative, a Catholic confessional remade into a portal—they are not static artifacts but active participants in an interconnected web of meaning. Accompanying Tookie in her journey from incarceration to healing, from haunting to release, these settings and objects embody Indigenous materiality not as a relic of the past but as a living practice of being-with.

Returning to the incongruence presented at the beginning of this article, Charlotte Brontë's moccasins were imprisoned both in a showcase and in the frame of settler colonial narratives. They were displayed but disconnected as well as stripped of context. Yet, they provoke thinking, as does Houghton's investigation on their origins. In turn, Erdrich's book and the objects it contains point to relations and freedom. At the end of the novel, Tookie reconnects with the original meaning of *sentence* as language, choice, and relation. In a powerful moment after the release of Flora's ghost, she reflects: “Ghosts bring elegies and epitaphs, but also signs and wonders. What comes next? I want to know, so I manage to drag the dictionary to my side. I need a word, a sentence. The door

is open. Go” (Erdrich 2021, 297). In Tookie’s experience, healing is an act of recognition and reciprocity, and attending to the lives of objects—observing how they carry memory and meaning through time—offers a path to freedom.

All in all, the treatment of objects in Native American literature warrants close scrutiny because they contribute to the reassertion of Indigenous agency by reanimating material culture within narrative frameworks that challenge the settler gaze. Hence, they become active forces in the struggle for sovereignty. Ultimately, *The Sentence* offers not only aesthetic pleasure but also a way of reading and relating that centers Indigenous presence, and a decolonial ethics rooted in reciprocity, presence, and responsibility.

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