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OF TRAVELS AND TRAVAILS— IMAGINATION, LANDSCAPE AND NARRATIVE

Ari Berk

The storyteller keeps the stories
all the escape stories, she says,
“With these stories of ours
we can escape almost anything
with these stories we will survive.”
The old teller has been on every journey. . .
—Leslie Marmon Silko

For myth is at the beginning of literature,
and also at its end.
—Jorge Louis Borges

Artifacts are alive. Each has a voice. They
remind us what it means to be human—that
it is our nature to survive, to create works
of beauty, to be resourceful, to be attentive
to the world we live in.
—Terry Tempest Williams

INTRODUCTION

There have always been migrations. Travels, journeys, movements of people and artifacts across the landscape have always been known and are at the foundation of myths and histories. Even in our own modern lives, experiences deriving from travel and interaction with a variety of environments are at the foundation of shifting notions of identities. Identity is not fixed then but responsive, changing through the relationships we form with landscape.

Historically and archeologically, migration stories have been a part of nearly every human culture. Central to many myths and histories are narratives of travel and travail and, indeed, the development of many cultures may be traced by examining the accounts of such journeys. Experiences derived from a progression of landscapes is a defining process. Cultures and narratives rise out of the land in response to deep engagements between people and place. These narratives may be expressed at both the level of language and symbolically, through the creation of artifact.

Certain objects may either be the product of a narrative or may embody a particular story, thus giving rise to myth. Objects may serve as the ideological boundaries defining a space or experience; create or reflect cultural landscapes; map systems of belief by providing symbolic clues and associations related to a given landscape; and express connections between landscape, people, animals and the creative process.

Exploring the motifs of landscape, migration, identity, and artifice, I have constructed a narrative, set in archaic time, in which a (fictional) culture leaves one landscape for another and, in the process of migration, experiences (and is affected by) a variety of geographic and intercultural events.

The voice of the storyteller is deliberately ambiguous. At certain times, it may be assumed that it is the voice of someone from this culture group.

Other times, it may be conceivable that it is the voice of the land speaking, or a spirit, or an animal. It was important to me to allow the reader to “move around” within the narrative and be able to wonder and imagine about voice and identity. This narrative ambiguity is a vital part of the oral tradition wherein various storytellers may tell the same or similar stories throughout time, each individual rendition specific to their culture, yet retaining aspects of all its previous tellers and tellings.

Used as foundations for the story, several objects associated with this culture (and its travels) are described. Each object discussed in this piece is used as a touchstone for each branch of the narrative. Indeed, the narratives are reflected in the symbolism of the individual artifacts. In some cases, the object informs the story; other times, the object is the direct representation/result of a narrative having been recorded artistically. In all cases, the objects reflect aspects of movement and experiences within/upon different landscapes. The objects, while representative of “pre-historic” art from a variety of regions, are nonetheless fictional.

The descriptions are evocative, but brief. Again, it is important to realize that part of understanding storytelling as a process is accepting that while each person hears (in this case, reads) the same words, the story they come away with becomes personalized to their own experience and imagination. Some people may see the artifacts as belonging to or resembling the material culture of one group of people (the Inuit, for example); others may imagine something completely different. The imagination of the reader is a vital part of the story, and I wished to allow for this within the narrative structure.

The narrative contains elements evident and essential in both ancient European and indigenous American mythology. Indeed, these motifs (migration, hunting, agriculture, masks, animal kinship, etc.) are fundamental in numerous mythological systems. Yet, in this narrative, I have avoided specific cultural identifiers. It may be considered that the narrative takes place sometime towards the end of the last Ice Age and might have happened in

northern Europe, North America, Siberia, or nearly any other location that suits the purpose of the reader. While I recognize that most myths are, by definition, tied to specific places, my intention is to render the narrative applicable to a variety of geographic possibilities since, in fact, similar stories may be found around the world. I do not imply that all such stories have the same origin or are related, merely that I wish to explore the motifs and landscapes in a creative way without the reader feeling as if I am co-opting the story or stories of any specific culture.

The ability to treat with general cultural themes in meaningful, creative, and specific narratives allows us to enter into imaginative dialogues with both place and the past. Such hypothetical (and even multi-vocal) narratives, based on real sociological, mythological, and cultural phenomena allow us to view—like numerous rooftops along an avenue—the pageant of human history and events from a variety of critical and creative vantage points.

General Description of Artifacts as a Group

A collection of five (secondary) bundles are contained within a large, brittle hide (hereto referred to as the “primary bundle”) apparently fashioned of pale bear skin unto which a few tenacious white hairs still cling. The hide is delicately painted with pigments (now mostly faded) and is tied together with long thongs of elk and caribou skin. On top of the primary bundle, where the leather thongs are knotted, there is a walrus ivory carving consisting of a base piece (approximately one meter long), forming a path upon which a dozen small figurines appear to travel in a rough line. The legs of the figurines are all in slightly different positions and give a very reasonable and natural appearance of a group of people traveling. Some of the figures carry spears. Five of the figures carry small bundles, one each, held out reverently in both hands before them.

The five (secondary) bundles each contain either a single artifact or a related group of artifacts. Brief descriptions of the secondary bundle artifacts

form the introductions to the narrative.

I. A Carving of Starvations

An ancient piece of Caribou bone (scapula). Evidence seems to indicate that the bone was quite old even at the time it was carved upon as it pre-dates the last Ice Age. Deeply incised on the bone are three scenes. The first shows a group of people and dogs in pursuit of a large caribou herd. Seals are indicated in the distance. The second scene is partially obscured by a large crack running through the center section of the bone. Notwithstanding, a small hunt group is discernible. There is one caribou carved in minuscule so as to (possibly) imply distance and the figures have dropped their weapons to the ground. The final scene is a detailed and gruesome depiction of the hunters devouring their dogs.

There is a place, near to where we began, where many graves may be found. One of these graves holds no bones at all. It is grave of days and it is full.

All about this place are reminders of our leaving. Animal bones—dry with no meat on them—falling to dust. The land itself is a reminder. Blasted, worn, low, and barren. What animal would roam here now? Why did we not see this? Why did we remain so long?

There was a time when things were better here and scarcity was unknown. Many of the great beasts moved upon the land and we hunted them like gods. Our Story Makers painted these deeds upon the rocks and the rocks told our story. Now those marks have worn away and we must leave. Perhaps the Story Maker's signs were not strong enough to hold us here. We were like gods in those ancient days, but no longer.

There is a season, a place, the Old Men say, informed by fire. Some of the people have dreamed of this Summer land, but even in a dream, it is hard to imagine such a place. The ice here is deep and never-melting—cold and sharp—and our lives and

dreams are carved from it. We do not know how this came to be or why the ice stayed. Frozen stones tell a scant tale.

II. A Sign of Setting Out

Tracks are painted upon a piece of brittle caribou hide. Human footprints are indicated behind those of the animals. Towards the right side of the hide, the painted tracks become blurred and ultimately indiscernible, due to a large tear in the skin. Upon lifting this artifact from its bundle, two-thirds of it dissolved utterly. Fearing for its preservation, it has been decided not to touch this piece again.

Many believe that everything is meant to happen at a certain time. But you know, too much of this thinking can lead to trouble. This was how it was with our people. Some said a sign would show us when to move—perhaps when the sun reached the end of its road beyond the great mountain of ice. Others thought this was not right. The Sun would be jealous of all the animals we might catch in the Summer Land. We could not trust the Sun. He might deceive us, some of the people said. Besides, the animals had already moved and did not need a sign to tell them when to go. Of course, the animals did have a sign. But we did not discern it.

So we waited. We waited too long and the season of Flying Ice came and buried our thoughts of movement. Many of The People died. Some insisted on leaving but lost their way in the land. A few made it back; most were not seen again. Their bones and flesh, lying deep beneath the snow, inform a different story.

When the Flying Ice had ended, everyone agreed. Here is what was sung by the people at that time:

Now we know what must be done.
Now the way ahead is clear.
Now we walk the way of animals.
Now we move towards that land.
We are already on our way.

It will not take long to get there.
The place of animals. The place of fire.

III. Masks of Migration

Perhaps the most interesting of all the secondary bundles, certainly the largest—a piece of bear hide—holds several smaller skins containing masks of various animals and certain unidentifiable anthropomorphic forms. A Raven mask has its own highly decorated box which also contains the remains of a necklace made from the foot bones of a large canid.

We left that land and took many things with us, many things necessary for the long journey. All of the masks were taken along. They could not be left behind. Each mask held a spirit and it was decided not to anger those spirits by leaving them. The spirits of those lands were our kin; we could not leave them behind.

On the day of leaving, a new mask was made. It was very plain with eyes fashioned out of the blue stone. This was not a hunting mask, though it had animal power in it. This mask was like a prayer, a prayer to lead us to the other place, and its face was seen in a dream about that land. So we would not hunger on the way, bones were put upon that mask. A simple mask with blue eyes and pieces of the white bone set in. Bone of seal, bones of antlered creatures, bones of the great tusk animals, all these bones were set in that mask. We would not leave any of those animals behind. We would find them again in the place of fire. We had not eaten the meat of some of those animals in a long time, but their bones could still be found scattered on the land.

There were also masks for each one of the hunt animal spirits. Seal, Elk, Caribou, Great Tusk Animals, and all the rest. These were kept in a special hide, and only a few of us were allowed to handle these things. There is great power in a mask, and if you do not know the song of that spirit, it is dangerous to touch such objects. If you do not know the song, the spirit will not listen. Or worse, it might

become angry and change itself into a fearful thing.

One day, at the place where the trees bend in towards the land, the Seal Mask was danced near the water's edge. The people were hungry so that seal mask was taken out. The old man who knew the Seal songs had died in the ice, and it was decided that his son should take up that mask. So his son put it on. But the song he sang was too short. Some of the people said he did not learn that song right. In the old days, before the setting out, when the old man wore the mask, the song was longer, some said. You know, that young man who wore the mask, he fell into the sea and the mask fell off him and was lost in the dark water. The people were scared, for this was a terrible thing. That mask was lost. The people were fearful—fearful because they knew that in the new land there would not be seals for us. That spirit had gone back to the water.

We turned forever away from the sea and traveled along the foothills of the mountains. There we knew the depths of the forests, and the ice, at last, began to melt from our minds.

Now most of the masks were for the hunt animals. But there were others spirits in the land below the ice, spirits well known to the people. Raven was one of these.

Raven was a great talker in those days. If you knew the right songs, he might tell you where the game was. He might lead you to those other animals if you'd share the meat with him. Raven was a greater talker and knew all the stories of the deep forests. So it was that when the people came down out of the ice lands into the woods, Raven was waiting for them.

We moved slowly during this time. The deep forests seemed to stay our journey and would not allow us to leave. Darkness was our frequent companion. Days slept, dark as night, beneath the canopy of giant trees. The shadows made it hard to see Raven when he came among us, but always there was his voice, just ahead among the branches.

Raven told us many stories about the land, many things about the doings of animals. And he has warned us—in the deep forests, there are wolves that do not fear men.

Wolves change during winter. Hunger and cold change them, put a boldness in their blood; during cold times when the trees burst, a wolf will hunt a man.

At this time, a woman killed a wolf. This was a remarkable thing, for it had never in the memory of the people happened before. The meat was shared among the women and prepared for the people. Then, the Story Maker took the bones from the wolf's foot and made a necklace from them. The woman wears this necklace still. And you know, when the dogs will not quiet or run from camp, if this woman speaks a certain word, those dogs will listen. No one can explain this thing, but it is so.

IV. A Weapon of Wandering

A black stone blade, perfect but for a small break at the tip, is hafted into a handle made of bone. On the handle, deep incisions form intricate designs like lightning.

Oh, how a sharpened stone will beg to bite.

It was as though our weapons smelled the meat, for they sat anxiously in our hands in those days. An arrow shot into the sky would likely strike an animal on its return. That is how plentiful the animals were. During this time, the people became great carvers of stone and flint and began to fasten words of power to the flaked rocks so that they would kill swiftly and always go to the heart. And once again, there upon the low hills and plains, away from the forests, we were great hunters and moved swiftly upon the land, like wolves.

Even far in the north there were stories of her, but these were brief and broken tales. Those stories were of a different land. Out among the hills

and plains between the mountains, the stories of Flint Woman grew more frequent, and her path became bolder and easier to follow.

Many times the people saw her, an ancient woman dressed in layers of soft skins, the bundle of stones upon her back, bending her form forward under its weight. Her path was described by a trail of flint and chipped stones that fell from her pack. These stones may be found by the people, and we know what to do with them. Flint Woman has shown us how to haft these stones into spears and set them carefully into arrow shafts. These stones will strike like lightning and bring down an animal swiftly. Indeed, Lightning gives her these stones, and he is glad that she leaves them for the people.

Many times the people called to her and made offerings, but she has never spoken. Thunder, her husband, speaks for her. When the great animals fall, sometimes Thunder can be heard singing to the people. And after the call of Thunder, Flint Woman scatters those stones upon the earth. It is said also that she made the mountains in this way, but this was long before the coming of the People to the land.

As we moved deeper into the Summer Land, large rocks marked a steady carving of canyons and deep, painted vistas. Here, in this place, a great change occurred.

V. A Rune of Arrival

A piece of banded stone is deeply etched and scored with round designs, resembling shields. About these, there appear to be mountains indicated in pale red and ochre pigments. The bundle is packed with seeds.

In the canyons of the Summer Land, Flint Woman has become even more ancient and remote, and she clutches protectively her tattered winter mantle of marmot fur. Indeed, now she is only seen during the cold times when animals and people are the most hungry. It is then, when snow covers the hills, that she appears to guide the animals to our hunting places.

Though they are now far behind us, we still travel to her sacred mountains and leave meat upon the summits as an offering. She is seldom seen among the canyons, but there are others.

Here, far up in the cliffs above the canyon floor, the gods of the Summer Land reside. They are great keepers of knowledge and know the movements of the stars and the sun and the moon. They reckon the movement of the seasons and may discern the turning times of the year. Frequently, they wear masks bearing no resemblance to any animal.

Their speech is strange to us, and while a few words may be understood by practice, their knowledge is given to us through gesture and through paintings on the canyon walls which are full of intricacy and wonder. They know the way of plants and are kin to the spirits who dwell below the ground.

Their spells are powerful and can call rain without ice. Their chants cause plants to emerge from their seedcases and break the crust of the earth. They have shared their songs and words with us. We will know the way of growing things and make our signs upon the land. All about the hills surrounding these canyons, shields are painted on the rocks to protect these words from the foolish.

Though the ice has fallen from our blood, Winter is still known to us, but as a brief time before the plants again emerge. Stories define the season of Winter now. Our stories hold that time in place so that the ice does not roam. In remembrance of that first land, we speak of these things only in the cold days after the first snow has fallen. And when the growing time comes, we bury Winter in the warming ground and sing over its grave.

OF ANCIENT OBJECTS

Adorned—Yet Myth is said to have fled from the form of artifacts secreted from the grave.

Hollow—Containers for the song and cant of elder memory that years may still dissolve.

Wonder—when words cannot explain
The silent hymns and histories
Of shapes that yet remain.

About the Author

Ari Berk, a writer, poet, artist, and assistant professor of English, teaches mythology, folklore, and American Indian Literature at Central Michigan University.