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WHERE STORIES ARE ALIVE
Traveling into Wolverine's Territory in Eowyn Ivey's *To the Bright Edge of the World*

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Eowyn Ivey's novel *To the Bright Edge of the World*, published in 2016 and set in 1885, traces the beginnings of the US American impact on the native cultures of Alaska by following a group of government-appointed explorers to the Alaskan interior. Loosely based on Lieutenant Henry Tureman Allen's historic exploration of the Tanana and Copper rivers, Ivey's novel departs from historical accuracy to bring the colonizing agenda of the exploration party into conversation with the individual perspectives and sensibilities of its members, exposed as they are to a world where old stories are alive and where nonhumans or not-quite humans are intentional, agential beings. How will the explorers meet the dual challenge—as well as the moral dilemma—of navigating an older world that resists comprehension (a world they learn to respect) and mapping the terrain for potential military invasion? In my analysis I will attempt to foreground the paradoxes and challenges of travels and travel narratives. Employing Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro's theorization of Amerindian perspectivism, I want to argue that *To the Bright Edge of the World* decolonizes the literary genre, as well as the experience of traveling between worlds.

It is believed that the first Europeans to discover Alaska were Russians (Grinëv and Bland 52). In 1741, during Vitus Bering's Second Kamchatka Expedition, Russians made a landing on the northwestern coast of North America and brought home a wealth of high-quality pelts. The discovery of fine fur-bearing animals gave an impetus for the development of the lucrative Alaska fur trade and the successive commercial colonization of the area. When Alaska was transferred to the US, however, the most enduring legacy of Russian America

was Orthodox Christianity, the "new medicine," felt by many Alaska Natives to be more potent than shamanism (Znamenski 12), powerless as the latter had been against the advances of European newcomers. Since 1867 the US carried on its own extensive colonization program, eradicating the old shamanistic ceremonies and supplanting them with militant versions of Protestantism. It is in the early stages of the American colonization of Alaska that Ivey sets her novel, fictionalizing the groundbreaking, five-month-long expedition of Lieutenant Henry Tureman Allen, often depicted as the Alaskan equivalent of Lewis and Clark's. A freelance journalist Mike Coppock pinpoints Allen's epochal achievements in the following words: "[he] had cut a 1,500-mile trail through the heart of a mysterious land, mapped three major river systems, made first mention of what would be called Mount McKinley, discovered a valuable pass from coastal Alaska to the interior and located vast mineral wealth." The party's official goal was to gather ethnic and geographic data in the area of the Copper and the Tanana River drainages. The second task was military. The contiguous US was still fighting the so-called "Indian Wars" and the federal government was bracing itself for similar developments in the newly acquired territory.

In Ivey's novel the main male character is named Colonel Allen Forrester, and the Copper River is thinly disguised as the Wolverine River. Other major departures from Alaskan geography also focus on that mysterious fur-bearing animal; thus, between the Wolverine and the Tanana rivers Ivey places the haunted Wolverine Mountains, with Wolverine River Indians (Midnooskies in Russian) inhabiting the upper reaches of the eponymous river. Traveling up the Wolverine from the coast, the exploration party moves away from a world already modified by the colonial encounter toward an unmapped territory, never previously seen by European travelers. This is the old, mythical world of constant realignments and transformations where old stories are alive and the old medicine still works. Local inhabitants insist that the Wolverine Mountains are the mountains of the dead: the area is "a kind of spirit world" (161) where "nothing follows white man's rules" (187).

THE WOLVERINE

The wolverine has a mythical status among the hunters of the far north. In *Make Prayers to the Raven*, anthropologist Richard K. Nelson, who had spent a year living with and studying the close connection between the Koyukon of western Alaska and the natural world, describes his first encounter with the wolverine in terms suggestive of an epiphany:

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"I looked directly into its eyes and knew that I understood nothing." Ivey has chosen these words as an epigraph for her novel. Admired for strength and tenacity, the wolverine is a somewhat ambiguous culture hero: mean, spiteful and greedy, he is feared and revered, a trickster who harms more often than helps. Just before Colonel Forrester's party enter the land of the dead, they spot a wolverine and want to hunt him down for food, but the animal outsmarts them and steals their food supplies, leaving the explorers vulnerable in their confrontation with the Alaskan wilderness. Seargent Tillman reads the signs and warns the colonel not to trespass on "that other world the Indians talk about." The rational Forrester, however, answers in character: "I have no use for the occult" (Ivey 368). In the night, as heavy fog descends on the mountains, Forrester scribbles a dramatic farewell note to his newly-wed wife, Sophie: "I do not know if we will survive this night. They are all around us. They scream & cry so that it is hard to think to put these words on the page" (369). The following morning he puzzles: "What is it that we witnessed? The terror, absurd as it seems, has not entirely left us" (371). Struggling with words and trying to make sense of the inexplicable, he reports in his diary how the previous night the scattered bones of humans and prehistoric animals seemed to have taken on flesh, and a throng of shadowy beings, as Forrester puts it, "walked out of the fog […]. Arms, hands, howling mouths. Bitter cold, their touch. Some of human form, while others were great lumbering beasts" (371). Trying to locate Lieutenant Pruitt, the colonel finds himself at the edge of a precipice, cold fingers strangling his neck, he himself longing for death, only to be saved at the last moment by the cry of a newborn infant—was this a ghost from the past or a call from the future? He cannot decide. "The cold fingers at my throat withdrew. I turned to face my enemy, but there were only clouds coursing by" (372). The following morning the landscape is silent and empty save for a raven passing overhead in the direction of the Tanana Valley, the expedition's next destination.

DECOLONIZING TRAVEL NARRATIVES

Throughout the novel, Ivey juxtaposes official and fictional discourses, oral stories and written documents, Russian and American historical records, reports of Russian Orthodox missionaries and Indigenous stories, myth and history, human, nonhuman, and transformational beings' perspectives, male and female voices, the past and present, the frequent use of first-person narrative in the novel's numerous epistolary exchanges and diary entries additionally exposing the sub-

jective nature of perception. The novel's polyvocal narrative questions culturally- and gender-encoded assumptions, as well as asks readers to shift their outlook and their sympathies from the authoritative colonial discourse toward the Indigenous voices usually suppressed by it, the greatest epistemic challenge being probably the native belief that the world is populated by extra-human agencies and intentionalities.

To the Bright Edge of the World opens with a hand-drawn map of Lieutenant Colonel Allen Forrester's Alaskan journey. In the map's center there is a black raven. The bird's outspread wings mark the geographical east and west, while its straight back, made longer by an arrow running through it, marks the remaining two cardinal points of the compass. The presence of the raven, sacred to many North American Indigenous cultures, troubles the authority of colonial cartography, gesturing toward the novel's decolonial ambition, also alluded to in the novel's epigraph. The book's two introductory pages, which precede chapter one, feature a letter written by Walter Forrester, the colonel's great nephew, to Josh Sloan, curator of Alpine Historical Museum and a 21st-century descendant of Wolverine Indians. Walter Forrester wishes to donate his great uncle's private diaries to the museum. In the figure of Josh Sloan, Ivey presents a contemporary Alaskan, whose Indigenous and immigrant roots—he is a member of the Wolverine River tribe on his mother's side and Russian, Swedish, Irish, and Scottish on his father's—have been entwined in the complicated history of Native Alaskans' survivance. Highlighting Josh's Indian origin, Ivey embraces the Indigenous conception of identity by affiliation and of continuity through change over the colonial narratives of the blood quantum and the "vanishing Indian." In consequence, before the novel properly starts, readers are invited to view it through the lens of decoloniality and—along with the novel's characters—to inhabit the border between diverse cosmologies.

Having troubled the idea of Western universality, Ivey shifts the perspective in the direction of the pluriversality of knowledges, or, to put it differently, toward a world where many worlds coexist. Walter Mignolo, an Argentine semiotician and leading decolonial thinker, defines pluriversality as "the entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential. That power differential […] is the logic of coloniality covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity" (x). The civilizational rhetoric of Western modernity, as Mignolo elucidates, revolves around the idea of religious (Christian) and economic (capitalist) salvation and represses other ways of thinking and being in the world as primitive, barbarian, savage, etc. In other words, the universe of meaning that came into being around

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1500 (the colonization of the Americas) demonized and silenced the multiplicity of co-existing worlds. Decoloniality attempts an epistemic reconstitution of the repressed ways of being and thinking that the rhetoric of modernity occludes.

In his first letter to Josh, Walter Forrester expresses his concern that "[s]everal of [the Colonel's] private journal entries are downright fantastical and don't align with his official reports" (Ivey 1). But he is far from denying their credibility at face value. The letter continues:

> Some who have read these pages write off the odder occurrences as hallucinations, brought on by starvation and exposure to the elements. Others have accused the Colonel of embellishing his journals in order to gain notoriety. But I tell you, he was neither a hysteric nor a charlatan. He was a West Point graduate who fought the Indian Wars and negotiated himself out of capture by the Apaches, yet by all accounts he never sought the limelight. I've chosen to consider another possibility—that he described what he saw with his own two eyes. It takes a kind of arrogance to think everything in the world can be measured and weighed with our scientific instruments. The Colonel started out with those sorts of assumptions, and as you will see, it did not serve him well. (1–2)

Having claimed discipline, rationality, and modesty as his great-uncle's signature characteristics, Walter decides to take the Colonel's diary seriously, even if doing so means questioning the modern binaries. Pointing to the deception of assumptions—those beliefs one accepts as true due to one's cultural embeddedness—Walter chooses to think from the border of cultures and epistemologies. He believes the assumptions of the modern/colonial world do not apply to a world as diametrically different as that encountered by his distant ancestor in the Alaskan bush. Among the challenges most trying for the Colonel, not to mention the readers of his diary, was the Indigenous belief in bodily metamorphosis and the agency of the nonhuman world.

AMERINDIAN PERSPECTIVISM

Diverse characters in the novel ask themselves the same question that haunted Colonel Forrester: What is it that we witnessed? I find it useful to approach this question *via* the theory of perspectivism introduced by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. As he observed in his field studies, in the highly transformational world of hunting-gathering societies, bodies are conceptualized as disposable; they are skin or clothing that can be shed to reveal the inner human essence that all beings share. Thus, humanity—understood as the human condition and not as a species—is the common condition of all. Capable of assuming the position of a subject, nonhuman

beings are intentional, sentient, agential beings. The body, on the other hand, as an assemblage of affects, capacities, and dispositions, is the site of differentiation and the origin of perspectives. In his article "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism" Viveiros de Castro argues that "body and soul […] do not correspond to substantives, self-subsistent entities or ontological provinces, but rather to pronouns or phenomenological perspectives" (481). As he further clarifies:

> Animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies are different from ours. I am not referring to physiological differences—as far as that is concerned, Amerindians recognize a basic uniformity of bodies—but rather to affects, dispositions or capacities which render the body of every species unique: what it eats, how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary, and so forth […] Thus, what I call the body is not a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape; it is an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a *habitus*. (478)

While the Amerindian belief in bodily metamorphosis is based in the socially-constructed, performative character of the body, the crucial "dimension of perspectival inversion," argues Viveiros de Castro, "refers to the relative and relational statuses of predator and prey" (471). This is of special relevance to hunting societies, such as those portrayed by Eowyn Ivey in *To the Bright Edge of the World*. As the Brazilian anthropologist explains, while humans see themselves as humans (the eaters) and animals as prey (the eaten), big predators also see themselves as humans—therefore inedible—and humans and other animals as prey (edible). On this scale of edibility/transformability, spirits are "eaters *par excellence*" (ft. 21, 489); having no visible bodies to be consumed, they are "anthropophagous beings" (ibid.) and frequently assume the bodies of predator animals when they make themselves manifest. It is little wonder that Colonel Forrester reported enormous beastly forms emerging out of the dense fog and felt himself being hunted like a game animal: the spirits of Wolverine Mountains assumed the bodily shapes of predatory beings. Viveiros de Castro sums up the principles of Amerindian multinaturalism in the following words: "there is no doubt that bodies are discardable and exchangeable and that 'behind' them lie subjectivities which are formally identical to humans. But the idea […] merely manifests the objective permutability of bodies which is based in the subjective equivalence of souls" (482). To sum up, Amerindian multinaturalism—the principle that there are many different corporeal states but one common human/cultural condition—entails relationalism, or the idea that everything is constituted through and exists in rela-

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tions to everything else. Multinaturalism also explains how bodily metamorphosis results in a shift in perspective, since perspectives are located in the body.

Indigenous myths of origin depict how at the beginning of time all beings were human and nonhuman simultaneously, since bodies were still in the state of constant transformation. Subsequent myths show how animals finally separated themselves from humans by adopting other, non-human bodies. In consequence, today "humans are those who continue as they have always been," clarifies Viveiros de Castro, while "animals are ex-humans" (472).

As is well known, the forager cosmologies of the far north assign special significance to shamans as mediators between the world of spirits and the natural world. Shamans are healers, they reveal the location of animals to tribal hunters, and they are believed to be capable of assuming nonhuman bodily forms when need be.[1] Among the first indigenous Alaskans to encounter the Russian explorers in 1741 were the Eyak, inhabiting the Copper River Delta (the Wolverine River Delta in Ivey's the novel), whose shamans communicated with spirits, returned animal spirits to their animal masters, treated diseases. At the time the action of *To the Bright Edge of the World* is set, the Eyak are dispersed, decimated by wars and epidemic diseases, and largely converted to Orthodox Christianity. But pockets of shamanism survive, the old medicine occasionally still practiced in secret.

INDIGENOUS METAMORPHOSES: RAVEN AND MAN WHO FLIES ON BLACK WINGS

In many Alaskan Athabascan origin stories, Raven appears as an important character. In his ethnography *Make Prayers to the Raven*, Nelson uses the following words to comment on the ambiguous status of this bird: "Raven, the contradiction—omnipotent clown, benevolent mischief-maker, buffoon, and deity" (17). The hunting peoples of the far north often portray ravens as tricksters and opportunists, but even mocking them, they stand in awe of their spirit powers. In shamanistic religious practices, the raven is one of the most powerful animals and a privileged bodily form the shaman takes when flying to the spirit world. It is little wonder that the raven plays an important

1 The Copper Eskimo, called in Ivey's novel Wolverine River Indians, believed that "in former times animals in human form were very common. Then they lived just like men as long as they were in human form […] In olden times, too, everybody could easily turn into animals, and until quite recently shamans have had the same powers" (Rasmussen 35).

role in Ivey's novel, appearing and reappearing in its key moments, either in the form of a black bird or that of a crippled Eyak shaman called Man Who Flies On Black Wings.

In his first dairy entry dated March 21, 1885, Colonel Forrester refers to an Eyak Indian—"an old man with a lame leg"—crouching high in the branches of a spruce tree late at night, possibly sleeping there. This sight leaves the Colonel "slightly shaken" (Ivey 5), although his cultural assumptions are to hold strong throughout most of the even more incredible occurrences to follow. When on the following day the old man with the shriveled leg offers his services as guide, Forrester reluctantly employs him, for lack of a better option, only to repeatedly regret his decision: the Eyak proves untrustworthy; he causes troubles, steals food, misleads the men, is vengeful, even though occasionally he can be protective and helpful. Despite his age and bodily deformity, the man is always ahead of the explorers, traverses most difficult territory without much effort, knows where to find food or where the party is heading; he is even unharmed by the lake monster that nearly kills the explorers. Rumored to have had his leg shot when flying from tree to tree (Ivey 198), Man Who Flies is an unpredictable, amoral trickster, an incarnation of the old Indigenous world that is rapidly disappearing, and possibly the last practitioner of the old medicine in the area.

In the quiet of the morning that follows the dreadful night in Wolverine Mountains, the American explorers of Ivey's novel see a raven flying overhead. When on the next occasion the Colonel sees a raven squawk and circle above his head, he fires his carbine. The assumptions he had "started out with" (2) prove false and Forrester finally confesses in his diary: "I know who the raven is" (384).[2] The West Point graduate and veteran of Indian Wars is forced to admit that "truth" may be much more problematic than he thought before entering that other world where "nothing follows white men's rules" (187). Before leaving Alaska, he writes to his wife: "I can find no means to account for all that we have witnessed, except to say that I am no longer certain of the boundaries between man & beast, of the living & the dead. All that I have taken for granted, what I have known as real & true, has been called into question" (423).

This discovery resonates with testimonies of anthropologists taking lessons from tribal elders. Here I need to return to Richard Nelson,

2 A clipping from a local newspaper, dated May 14, 1907, reports that while aboard a whaling ship, an old "Indian witch doctor" with a "pronounced limp" (Ivey 447) killed himself when accidentally triggering the mechanism of a harpoon bomb. The locals, however, insist that instead of dying, the witch doctor has become a black bird and lives in a spruce tree.

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one of the ghosts haunting Ivey's novel. Before writing *Make Prayers to the Raven* (published in 1983), he spent a year doing ethnographic work among the Koyukon of Alaska, learning to see the world through their eyes. During that year he acquired a renewed respect for the living, sensate, animate world. Intended as "a native natural history […] outside the realm of Western science, though it has been organized and filtered through a Western mind" (Nelson xiv), his ethnographic account merges fact and feeling, empiricism and emotion "to better represent the whole reality" (Nelson xvi). Living in Alaska, Nelson acquired, as he puts it, "a different perception not only of the raven, but of every living and nonliving thing in the northern forest" (14).

TOWARD A PLURIVERSE—A WORLD WHERE MANY WORLDS MEET

In the course of their journey up the Wolverine and Tanana rivers, the Colonel and his men are forced to admit that there may be not one reality but a multiplicity of complementary versions of the real. What Westerners believe in, they realize, can be as irrational—or perhaps as real—as Indigenous Alaskans' beliefs. For one thing, if Forrester finally recognizes the old man for a shapeshifting shaman, to the Midnooskies the Colonel seems no less powerful a shaman himself, with all his scientific equipment, his light-catching camera, and his life-saving medicine. No culture is free from projection, and Ivey skillfully shifts perspectives to foreground the double-edged nature of cultural prejudices. She suggests that whatever we learn to accept as real will always be inadequate in confrontation with the teeming profusion of reality. In consequence, there is no one definitive answer to what the novel's characters really saw, because seeing is a never-ending process of educating the eye, of unmasking layer after layer of illusions.

As the novel unfolds, a pluriverse of meanings emerges. On their part, the white explorers no longer deny the possibility of "the occult" (Ivey 368), as Forrester used to call it. Transformations abound: geese become women and marry tribal men; a child is born from a tree root; an otter from Wolverine Mountains becomes human and marries a native woman—who slays him when he resumes his animal skin; one of the trappers who make part of the party takes a fog wife. Still, from non-Western perspectives, the stories of origin Christians accept may seem to be just as improbable and "occult." Samuelson, the other trapper-turned-prospector, lucidly counters Pruitt's initial dismay at hearing the geese story: "a woman from a rib you'll have, but not from a goose?" (173).

Transformational beings, like the otter husband, do not respect the modern/premodern boundary, either. Sophie Forrester is finally ready to admit that her deceased artist father—obsessed with sculpting a marble bear—was sculpting a self-portrait and that what looked like madness (living in the woods, sleeping in the barn, growing his hair and a beard, roaring like a bear) may have been a return to his original bear nature instead. After all, the Western world's pre-Christian cultures abounded in stories of metamorphoses, and so there is no reason why a Bear falling in love with a Quaker woman should not assume a human form to marry her, as Sophie realizes. "That night when I looked upon the marble bear, alive with the setting sun, what did I witness?' she muses; "Was it only sunlight on stone, or Father's spirit, or a reflection of my own?" (Ivey 444). Unable to decide, she nonetheless makes a valid point about the nature of perceptions. Her artistic medium of choice, photography, relies on catching a special effect of light, on arresting a moment of singular intensity. Sophie's art foregrounds the tricks of perspective, the magic of light, and a hunger to approach a mystery.[3] About her award-winning photograph she says:

> It is only an effect of a beam of sun glancing off a branch behind the subject and can be explained rationally & scientifically. Yet this cannot account for the remarkable sensation it evokes in me, a trembling, thrilling exhilaration, as if I have set something right, and long to do it again and again. My excitement comes, in part, from the knowledge of how easily it might have slipped past me. (444)

Taking the photograph, she was fully attuned to the moment; she saw in an instant what untrained eyes would not have noticed. This complete attunement to the environment, was it not the explanation why the Alaska explorers saw seemingly unaccountable things? When Forrester urges the Athabascan tyone Ceeth Hwya to tell him what he witnessed when he thought he saw the goose women, the latter loses patience. His answer, as translated by Pruitt, is both explicit and elusive: "You saw them, not him. How can he tell you again what your eyes already told you?" (Ivey 252).

CONCLUSIONS

The official story of the expedition is factual, rational, filled with geographical and ethnographic details, complete with sugges-

3 In his *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes admits that one way of approaching the photograph is "to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality" (119).

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tions on the chances of conducting a potential military campaign against the Alaska Natives. As soldier and government official, Forrester has to obey orders; he has to accomplish the tasks entrusted to him. But he chooses to preserve the other—untold and untellable—side of his travels in the form of diary entries and letters to his wife. As a private man, he admits to having been awakened to the existence of a world which puzzles Western epistemology. Stepping into the Wolverine River Indian world, he enters the fluid, transformational reality of Indigenous myth, in which bodies can be shed, assumed, or transformed, and where everything is alive. Sophie's acceptance of her father's identification with the bear, as well as her recognition of the lame Eyak shaman in the raven who announced the death of her unborn child, in turn suggest that even in the "rational" West that older world—long associated with magic, witchcraft, or superstitions and as such destroyed by the guardians of Christian orthodoxy—may still linger at the edges of modern consciousness. And even though modernity itself arrived in Alaska in the wake of the Allen/Forrester expedition, perhaps there too the old world in which geese turn into women and a deadly monster inhabits a lake is not entirely gone, only changed, preserved in a different form. "Maybe," as Josh speculates, "we don't have the eyes for it anymore" (403). The colonization of imagination shifts the dominant worldview, burying the old beneath the new. But the unfamiliar we face as we travel away from "home" as the site of the safe and tested, the dis-placement—geographical as well as mental/spiritual/epistemic—re-positions us within a world of meanings, testing the supposedly universal truths we have been brought up with and opening us up to the challenge of the pluriverse.

Abstract: In 1885 Lieutenant Colonel Forrester explores the newly acquired territory of Alaska for the US government. His passion to see an unknown world clashes with the mission Forrester has received from his military superiors. How will he meet the dual challenge—as well as the moral dilemma—of navigating an older world that resists comprehension—a world he learns to respect—and mapping the terrain for potential military invasion? My analysis will thus attempt to foreground the manifold paradoxes of travel/narratives. Loosely based on Lieutenant Henry Tureman Allen's historic exploration of the Tanana and Copper rivers, Ivey's novel departs significantly from historical accuracy in order to bring the colonizing agenda of the government-sponsored exploration party into conversation with the individual perspectives and sensibilities of its members, exposed as they are to a world where old stories are alive and where nonhumans or not-quite humans are all agential beings. Employing anthropologist Viveiros de Castro's theorization of Amerindian perspectivism, I want to argue that *To the Bright Edge of the World* decolonizes the genre of travel narratives as well as the experience of travelling between worlds.

Keywords: Eovyn Ivey, Alaska, colonialism, decolonial narrative, multinaturalism, shamanism

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