

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Heid E. Erdrich, 2020

Speaker: Heid E. Erdrich

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START OF RECORDING

Heid E. Erdrich: Heid E. Erdrich, Turtle Mountain Ojibwe.

[Heid E. Erdrich reads "Peacemaking"]

HEE: In this poem, "Peacemaking," I imagine the quite personal and lasting act of making peace in a way Indigenous people understand and have long persisted in asserting. A relational peace.

For untold years my ancestors on my mother's side, the Anishinaabeg (also known as the Ojibwe and Chippewa) lived alongside Dakota and other people in the Great Lakes-Great Plains area that is my home. We still do. But when Europeans encroached on our lands and our living, our tribes often found ourselves in conflict. We displaced one another as we were displaced.

My earliest known Ojibwe and Anishinaabe ancestors lived in what is now Wisconsin—however, the reservation where I am enrolled is in North Dakota, two states away.

I grew up in a Dakota village, but the Dakota I knew had been displaced to reservation boundaries an hour away in what is now another state.

When I think of place, I think of my tribe's territorial boundaries—grasslands, rivers, lakes, buttes—a huge swath of the richest farmland in the world. This land was taken for ten cents an acre in the 19th century. Over three generations of my people waited for the U.S. government to make good on its treaty and pay up—I was 18 before that happened in the 1980s.

Place is also the whole living earth and every living thing on it displaced by humans who unsettle it all. The future is a place my children will occupy and we have much to make peace over when we get there. Behind my poem, I wonder:

What treaty will we humans make with the future?

How shall we be at peace in a place we can't or won't imagine?

I was struck by the way peacemaking is described by scholars and reporters from the 1870 treaty of peace between the Ojibway and Dakota who met at Fort Abercrombie in what is now North Dakota.

I grew up near the site of the Dakota and Ojibwe "conference" as the 1870 peacemaking was called. According to most accounts, Father Jean-Baptiste Marie Genin negotiated the treaty (rather than government agents as this was a tribe-to-tribe act) and was assisted by his altar boy, our great grandfather. But I will leave that story to better historians in my family.

It was not the narrative of events that inspired my poem, but the language of the treaty itself and accounts of events surrounding it that struck me as poignant and poetic. In one account the Dakota were described as "torn" with grief. Others described with awe the many warriors and horses present, the ceremonies including Christian mass.

It is important to know that an Ojibwe man's murder of a Dakota man (whose name means Burning Hail) had triggered hostilities to be addressed by those gathered.

Honorary Spirit Lake Dakota Tribal Historian Louis Garcia attributes the following passage (somewhat condensed) to a report by Father Genin:

"... the Indians sat in a large circle. The relatives of the slain sat near two flags. One was the flag of the United States of America, and the other Father Genin's 'Mission Flag'. ... The Ojibway began to dance around two of the mourners, Ĥmunyaniyanke (Buzzes as he Runs) also known as Running Yankee, brother to Burning hail, and another man ... The Ojibway dancers began to drop gifts at their feet. Then an Ojibway chief soldier made a speech directed at the mourners, expressing their sorrow over the murder. At the conclusion he removed all his beautiful beadwork and gave it to the two leading mourners. The two Dakota rose quickly and threw the gifts away from themselves, and departed in anger. Father Genin chased after them ... The two men, one on each side of Father Genin returned to the circle and made a speech ... they wished to be excused for at first refusing the gifts and offers of friendship, to make peace, forgive the murderers, and their relatives. Then the pipe ceremony was performed and all smoked in

agreement to sign a document stating their commitment of good will toward each other.

On Monday August 14th, 1870 a treaty of peace was concluded between the Dakota and Ojibway followed by a dance of celebration on the forts parade grounds.”

I wondered about the gifts given and refused and then finally accepted. What were they? I found accounts of typical treaty and trade goods given elsewhere to form the basis of the images of my poem about an intergenerational peace treaty for our times.

The 1870 Dakota and Ojibwe Peace Treaty itself is simply put. But in its wording, I found the tenor of my poem—the call to hold your enemies up as great human beings.

On the website dibaajimowin, author Kade Ferris includes the text of the treaty; the three demands read as follows (with apologies for my Dakota pronunciation):

“... for the purpose of making an everlasting peace and causing the Government officers to enforce the laws already in existence, providing for cases of trouble or war caused to one nation by the other, or to one band of a nation by some band, or bands of another nation.

We therefore want our President to know:

1st That we have this day became friends together forever and will keep our word good.

2nd That we wish the former law which attributes the pay of a murderer who breaks the peace existing among us, to the relatives of the murdered one to be put in force from this day and namely in the case of Nikampines, who last year destroyed the life of two Sioux Indians.

3rd That we desire that the two Sioux Indians Huioyanke and Oncare 1st relations to the murdered ones be held up as great men on account of their readiness in forgiving the murderer for the good of peace.”

With this poem, I want to make visible an Indigenous notion of peacemaking, I want to suggest how we can persist in honoring relatives and the earth, the place of our humanity, our mother. I seek acknowledgment of the history of resistance of ancestors who refused to work only in

transactional terms but required and accepted the work of relational shifts in our highest laws to hold up enemies as great humans.

I acknowledge the wisdom of the past in my hopes for future survival and the honor of our names in our great-grandchildren's mouths.

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