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A Woman Reading the River: the Saskatchewan as a Contact Zone

Une femme lisant la rivière: La Saskatchewan comme zone de contact

Natalija Stevanović and Vesna Lopičić

articles — **articles**

Abstract
This review article offers an interpretation of Myrna Kostash's travelogue *Reading the River: A Traveller's Companion to the North Saskatchewan* (2005) as an exploration of the contact zone as defined by Mary Louise Pratt (2008). The North Saskatchewan River is seen as "the space of imperial encounters" between Indigenous Peoples and European settlers, observed by a female traveler across the barrier of time. The aim of this piece is to point to a particular geographical feature as a zone of cultural contact within a chronological approach.

Keywords: Myrna Kostash, North Saskatchewan River, contact zone, Indigenous Peoples, European settlers

Résumé
Cette synthèse propose une interprétation du récit de voyage de Myrna Kostash *Reading the River: A Traveller's Companion to the North Saskatchewan* (2005) comme une exploration de la zone de contact telle que définie par Mary Louise Pratt (2008). La rivière Saskatchewan Nord est tenue pour « un espace de rencontres impériales » entre les peuples autochtones et les colons européens, observé par une voyageuse à travers la barrière du temps. L'objectif de cet article est de relever une certaine particularité géographique en tant que zone de contact culturel par le biais d'une approche chronologique.

Mots-clés : Myrna Kostash, rivière Saskatchewan Nord, zone de contact, peuples autochtones, colons européens

Introduction: Myrna Kostash and the Saskatchewan

Reading the River: A Traveller's Companion to the North Saskatchewan (2005) is a travelogue in which Myrna Kostash explores the history of Indigenous and settler relations around the North Saskatchewan River. As Kostash notes in the introduction to the book, she has spent the majority of her life along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, when she realized that she could talk about it the way Claudio Magris does in his book *Danube*, as he takes a trip (whether real or imagined) "down the Danube through the heart of Europe and into the Black Sea" (2006, 1). She realizes that the history of her own river is too "European," and that "much of the very earliest history of the river – the story of Aboriginal interactions with it – remains unwritten […] or is at best inferred from European accounts and contexts" (ibid., 2). However, she observes that there has been "history along this river since the first human communities gathered along it; there's been poetry since the first story described its source, its power, and its gods" (ibid., 2). In lieu of this, she takes it upon herself to collect all of the stories, both written and spoken, published and talked about, from the aspects of the First Nations Peoples and the European settlers, making it an instance of intertextual travel writing in the contact zone that is the North Saskatchewan River.

1. Pre-contact period

As she introduces us to the river, to the physical space which will later on be described as a contact zone, Myrna Kostash appears as "a mediating consciousness that monitors the journey, judges, thinks, confesses, changes, and even grows" (Blanton 2002, 3). This change from the first person narration in travel writing, which was present in the earliest literary works which marked the start of travel writing as a genre – that is, from personal accounts to a kind of an objective narrative – is a relatively new aspect of travel literature and of modern travel writing, and the one which added to a potential of change within the genre (ibid.). Kostash's book consists of a balance of two elements necessary for modern travel writing: the impersonal and the personal (ibid., 5). Adding to this is also the intertextual approach which Kostash uses in order to make her book more valid in terms of tendencies in postcolonial travel writing. Kostash includes other voices as she travels down the river, and initially she presents the river as it was before it became a contact zone. In the postcolonial framework, there is a necessity to hear the side of the "Other," the voices of the ones who were not heard when there was an expansion of western travel writing. This is a problem which Mary Louise Pratt investigated when she studied the corpus of travel writing

written by Europeans over two hundred and fifty years (2008, 5). Pratt also noted that there was a gap in the archives, namely, when it came to the thoughts of the people who received the visitors, and their opinion of "the imperial designs they brought with them" (ibid.). She noted that there were ways in which empire was coded by those in whose lives it intervened, "coded in ceremony, sculpture and painting, in dance, parody, philosophy and history; in expressions unwitnessed, suppressed, lost, or simply overlaid with repetition and unreality" (ibid.).

Precisely because of the absence of the voices of the Indigenous Peoples from the places the Europeans visited (and colonized), Myrna Kostash starts her book by introducing the reader to the river before it became a contact zone, portraying the story of its history unsullied by imperial tendencies. As Edward Said claims, "past and present inform each other, each implies the other" (Said 1994, 4). Therefore, in order to understand the present relationship between the two cultures, there is a need to go back to the past – as we can see from the following quotation from Myrna Kostash's book:

> What is a river for? In historic times, it has been primarily an economic instrument of human interests, whether among First Nations before European contact – the Cree, previously a forest people, arrived on the plains via the Saskatchewan River, bearing trade goods for exchange with the Gros Ventre and Blackfoot – or after, between them and the Euro-Canadian bosses of the fur trade. For those who actually labored on the river, the water represented the full spectrum of energies from mind-numbing tedium to deadly maelstrom that swallowed them whole. The river was also the only means of efficient transportation and communication along the east-west grid of the continent [...] In the literature associated with this period, the river is still a force of Nature independent of human will upon it; humans adapted to it, and shared the rhythms of its dramatic cycle. (Kostash, 331)

The North Saskatchewan River "rises at the base of Saskatchewan Glacier in the Columbia Icefield in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta," and the story of the North Saskatchewan River before it became a contact zone starts with the people who originally inhabited the plains surrounding it (Kostash, 21). Kostash offers two sides, both the European and the Indigenous, when talking about them. She quotes Peter Erasmus, who writes that "The Stony Indians were so called because of their preference for the mountainous country where they lived and did most of their hunting" (qtd. in ibid., 35). Peter Lazarus Wesley, grandson of Moosekiller, a First Nations chief, is also quoted; in *A Profile of the Stoney Nakoda Nation*, he writes that early European explorers called the people "Stoney" because they cooked with round stones heated in the fire then placed in water, but the Stoney call themselves îyârhe

Nakodabi, "the people of the mountains" (ibid.). It is difficult to pinpoint the origins of this particular group of people, as "Assiniboine" is the generic name for Stoney groups, and Stoney is the name usually used for groups residing in Canada (ibid.). In *Stoney History Notes*, Chief Powderface and Stoney elders explain their history as written down by Peter M. Jonker: "We are descendants of the Dakota [linguistically] Sioux…. When smallpox epidemics were killing thousands of our people in the mid-1600s, small Bands began to break away and migrate to outlying areas…." (qtd. in ibid., 35). The Stoney Indians saw the North Saskatchewan River as a place of great importance, since their traditional hunting routes arched along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains and the river's banks (ibid., 36). The river is described thus: "The Saskatchewan is a rather shallow river, varying from a metre to three metres deep, but naturally it flows most copiously in June during the rapid melt of the glaciers and the rains in the foothills" (ibid., 10).

The descriptions of the river used in the book come through generations of narration, before and also after the invention of a written language, as "the First Nations reproduced the memory of those primordial events and later historical ones with a concrete vividness akin to the data of professional historians" (Kostash, 9). The oral tradition of transmitting history and stories of origin have great importance in First Nations culture. They are attuned to their words and to their surroundings. Pre-contact Indigenous Peoples of the Saskatchewan River country hunted and traded in natural abundance, following the bison herds, drying the meat and fish, preparing clothing and shelter from the skins, and moving along the "highways" of the rivers to the next fork or ford (ibid., 91). The North Saskatchewan River was their guide; they lived in harmony with it and the changes surrounding it. Another intertextual intervention about this pre-contact history comes in the words of Phillip Coutu, a historian, who claimed that "the Indians' basic needs were met from the buffalo hunt" (ibid., 91). The banks of the river and the surrounding area was for them the "region of plenty," a "prodigiously fertile though slender stretch of land wedged between the southern grasslands and northern boreal forest […] the trench of the North Saskatchewan" (ibid., 178). Before ever the Europeans came to the country, Swampy Ground Assiniboine and Woods Cree "fished and hunted the birds of the river shore, small fur-bearing animals and bigger game in the summer, and hunted buffalo in the winter" (ibid., 178).

This pre-contact period is usually attested to in writings which show how important the river was for the First Nations Peoples, and how it was also a contact zone between different tribes (though not in such a detrimental a manner as the one created with the European settlers). The North Saskatchewan is an essential river, which "has been literally life-giving for over a millennium" (Kostash, 2). At The Forks, or the juncture of the North Saskatchewan and South Saskatchewan rivers where the two branches

form the Saskatchewan proper, travelers came upriver, paddling their way deep into fur country (ibid., 254). These pre-contact travelers included the Cree ("the River People" on the upper North Saskatchewan), who moved from their original eastern woodlands westwards, "in tandem with the fur trade and its traffickers, driving the Blackfoot ahead of them" (ibid., 254). They lived in balance, and in plenty, as they did not take more from the river than it had to offer.

2. Pre-industrialization period

When Mary Louise Pratt defined the term "contact zone" as "the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other," what she had in mind was a place where people encounter each other and establish certain relations which are usually based on conditions of coercion, conflict, and inequality (Pratt, 8). Within the contact zone, people communicate consistently, usually in the context of trade. In her work, Pratt focuses on the importance of improvisation and negotiation within the contact zone and tries to explore how difference may be lived as coexistence, the co-presence of bodies in space (Ashcroft et al. 2007, 211). As Pratt writes in her essay "Planetarity," "Essential to this new art of the contact zone is the willingness to enter into stuttering dialogues where the participants do not necessarily speak the same language" (qtd. in Thompson 2016, 41). She puts forth the idea that "such exchanges must be made up on the spot, and in the embodied moment, by the participants" (ibid., 42). Upon contact between two different cultures, there comes "interdependence," "overlapping territories, intertwined histories," merging of the past, as well as present and future (Said 1994, 61).

That was how the initial contact between the Indigenous tribes and the Europeans started on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, which can be taken as their physical contact zone – as an attempt at co-existence. It all started at the mouth of the river, or at Grand Rapids, where the fur trade was launched into the heart of the continent in the eighteenth century (Kostash, 311):

> The Saskatchewan was also the route that brought European traders into the continental heartland, looking for [...] fur. The beaver top hat, a social necessity in Europe from the mid-1600s to the 1830s, was a felt hat made from the pelt's underlayer of fur wool, and the demand for it at the London fur auctions drove entrepreneurs up the western rivers of Canada. (ibid., 10)

The first contact of Europeans and Indigenous Peoples of the Canadian prairies was made through the agency of the Hudson's Bay Company, the fur-trading consortium of wealthy investors established by Royal Charter in 1670 that possessed exclusive trading rights in the whole territory whose rivers drained into Hudson Bay (ibid., 13). Henry Kelsey, dispatched from York Factory on Hudson Bay by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1690 and tasked with finding the "Indians" in their western camps and persuading them to trade at the Bay, was quite possibly the first European to move up the great Saskatchewan waterway onto the western plains (ibid., 13). Kostash quotes William Henry Withrow from his *Our Own Country* (1889), who described the life of a trapper that Henry Kelsey was trying to come into contact with:

> About the month of August, the Indians of the great North-West procure a supply of pork, flour, and ammunition, generally on trust, at the Hudson's Bay posts, and thread their way up the lonely rivers and over many a portage, far into the interior. [...] In the spring he (an Indian trapper) returns to the trading-posts, shooting the rapids of the swollen streams [...] to smoke the pipe of peace with their white allies. (qtd. in ibid, 16)

At this time, both the First Nations people and the white settlers saw the river as an opportunity to connect, at least from the perspective of a white writer. However, a descendant of the people who "still endure the ravages" of the effect of the fur trade and the contact of the First Nations people with Europeans, Ralph G. Steinhauer, in a foreword to Jon Whyte's *Indians in the Rockies* in 1985, tried to awaken the reader "to the hardships inflicted on Indian people through the 'forced transition from a beloved way of life to one so different'" (Kostash, 18). And the transition was the fur track, the initial reason for the contact. With white settlers also came disease, alcohol, mass slaughter of the bison, the signing of treaties, and the removal of the Indigenous populations to the reserves, not to mention the forced Christianization, really "a total upheaval" in their lives – and it all came up the Saskatchewan River (ibid., 18). The discrepancy in the stories of the contact could be seen in the imperialist way of thinking. Even though the Europeans thought that they were helping First Nations Peoples by involving them in trade, they were still exploiting them, as "the imperial European would not or could not see that he or she was an imperialist [...] the non-European in the same circumstances saw the European *only* as imperial" (Said 1994, 162). The initial contact was not always friendly. In 1809 Joseph Howse, a trader for the Hudson's Bay Company, crossed over the Rockies through a pass with a view to establishing posts west of there the following year; however, Pikuani [Peigan] hunters blocked it to prevent the trade in rifles to their Kutenai [Kootenay] enemy, threatening that "if they again meet with a white man going to supply their Enemies, they would not only plunder and kill

him, but they would make dry Meat of his body," as is related by Fred Stenson, who wrote a history of Rocky Mountain House (Kostash, 23).

The contact zone also entailed the introduction of Christianity by the European settlers. Reverend Robert Terrill Rundle, a Methodist chaplain for the Hudson's Bay Company, lived among the Aboriginal people of Rocky Mountain House (Kostash, 57). In his journal dating from 1841, he copied a letter he wrote to John Rowand, Chief Factor at Fort Edmonton, in which he complained about the behavior of his mixed-blood interpreter, James "Jimmy Jock" Bird, a man who was obviously torn between his obligations to the fur company and "his fierce loyalty to the local Aboriginals among whom he lived" (ibid.). According to the reverend, his interpreter refused to interpret the prayer for the Aboriginals, and "pushed through the crowd and out the flap of the tent" (ibid., 59). The missionaries, having come to Canada with the goal of saving souls, were not open to defiance against their faith. Thanks to the intertextual nature of this book, it is possible to see the perspective of those people who, according to the Europeans, needed saving. Chief John Snow, who wrote *These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places* in 1977, described the long relationship between the Stoney First Nations, their ancestral hunting lands, and the European-Canadian "interlopers" (ibid.):

> Throughout the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century my people, the Stoneys, lived as we always had, little influenced by the whiteman.... We hunted and lived in family groups, coming together in larger bands for special occasions and ceremonial purposes [...] trading had changed our way of life a little because of the need to trap fur-bearing animals for barter, over and above what was needed for daily use. But trade with the whiteman never became a basis for our economy as it did for some tribes. (Kostash, 59–60)

3. Post-industrialization period

Industrialization began with the steamboat; however, the Saskatchewan River was hard on the steamboat, due to its rapids, streams, and swamps (Kostash, 282). Ted Barris wrote that "To be marooned up the Saskatchewan River became a genuine fear among rivermen in 1882 [...] the very season the Saskatchewan fleet appeared ready to steam into high gear" (qtd. in ibid., 282). The beginning of the "industrial" city in the West was marked in 1882 with the operation of the first cable ferry to cross the North Saskatchewan (ibid., 106). And thus begins the history of the river as an obstacle, "an acknowledgement that the river was not so much useful as the highway of trade as an obstacle to its development" (ibid.). As the river became the obstacle, so, too, did disrespect and disregard for the First Nations people and their history become

obvious. The Canadian Pacific Railway built its own connection to the north side of the river, and the construction on the High Level Bridge began in 1910; however, its site is "linked with Aboriginal oral history, which knows the river ford directly west of today's High Level Bridge as a junction with the 'Old North Trail,' the prehistoric migratory pathway that ran along the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountain range" (ibid., 115). The bridge was completed in 1912, erasing a site of Aboriginal sacred history. And four workers lost their lives while working on it, a bitter reminder of what it took for the river to be crossed.

NWMP Inspector Arthur Henry Griesbach and his family arrived to take up residence in the Fort Saskatchewan police post in 1883 (Kostash, 142). The family remained at Fort Saskatchewan throughout the events of 1885, which were caused, as Griebach recalls in *I Remember*, "by the 'curious' disappearance of the buffalo on which the Indians had so completely relied for food, clothing, and shelter" (ibid.). The first sign of trouble started in 1885 when runners, or "agitators," as Griesbach called them, "arrived from the Prince Albert region and circulated among the Indians and Métis, hoping for support for the insurgency organized under the leadership of their spokesman, Louis Riel, at Batoche" (ibid., 143). Kostash quotes Griesbach's son, William:

> At the very moment of the outbreak of the Rebellion the Mounted Police were changing over from the short Snider carbine to the .45–75 Winchester rifle, which was a nine cartridge magazine repeater and considered to be the very latest thing in a repeating rifle. (ibid., 143)

With industrialism and insurgency coming to the fore, this contact zone witnessed, in addition to transculturation, the appearance of multiculturalism, or, rather, "cultural diversity" (Ashcroft et al., 109). As the Métis and First Nations resistance to the colonization of the Northwest collapsed, the way was opened for the federal government to sponsor "mass immigration of farmers to homestead the newly-surveyed territory," for example, Ukrainian-speaking settlers from the Galician provinces of Austria-Hungary (Kostash, 144). It is no coincidence that Harry Piniuta published *Land of Pain, Land of Promise: First Person Accounts by Ukrainian Pioneers 1831–1914* (1978) "during the heyday of official multiculturalism in Canada" (ibid., 145).

In the fall of 1864, the Hudson's Bay Company's post at Fort Victoria was established in order to take commercial advantage of "the Woods and Plains Cree hunters and free traders [...] to trade mainly in buffalo robes, buffalo tongues, and dried meat" (Kostash, 151). Thus the contact zone became the exploitation zone. In 1876, representatives of the Crown and of the Plains and Woods Cree negotiated and Treaty 6 was signed at Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt (ibid., 224). First Nations Peoples were promised land

settlements and material and medical assistance in exchange for giving up claims to 310,000 square kilometers of land, and they withdrew to designated reserves (ibid., 224). This setting up of boundaries is a familiar practice of "designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs'" (Said 1979, 54). Despite the fact that this was called a "treaty," it was clear that this was a negative instance of life in the contact zone, in which Pratt saw "asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 8). By signing Treaty 6 in 1876, the chiefs and their people had agreed to settle on reserves and become farmers in return for "relief, medical care, and protection when needed, schools and farm implements and seeds" (Kostash, 151). The underlying goal of the treaties was to find the means by which the transfer of the land of the Indigenous Peoples "to the Crown could be effected peacefully and consensually," without them rebelling (ibid., 197). First Nations people mostly accepted the treaties out of fear, as can be seen in a petition by Cree and mixed-bloods at Victoria Settlement, reproduced by Historic Sites writer Peter Melnycky, where fear was omnipresent – specifically, the fear "that when the white man comes our hunting grounds will be destroyed and our lands taken for nothing, and we and our children left to perish […] The buffalo tracks are growing over with grass" (ibid., 151). Some did try to resist. Of the chiefs, Mistawasis (Big Child) "didn't sign the treaty until 1879; Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) refused to sign until 1882 when the buffalo hunt failed and his people were starving" (ibid., 197). In the end, fear and starvation led them to accept the inevitable life under the imperialist rule of the Europeans. Pitikwanahanapiwiyin (Poundmaker) signed but was aware of what was imminent: "From what I can see and hear now, I cannot understand that I will be able to clothe my children as long as the sun shines and water runs" (ibid., 197). Peter Erasmus, the celebrated buffalo hunter, witnessed the disappearance of the buffalo herds by the 1870s, the herds on which the First Nations had depended in this very region:

> In July [1870] I joined a small party of six carts and was successful in finding a small herd of buffalo northeast of where the town of Vegreville was later built. […] each year I noted the buffalo were getting harder to find. […] Only eleven years had gone by and there was now less than one animal for the hundreds that could once be found within a few days' ride on the North Saskatchewan River. (qtd. in ibid., 182)

J. G. MacGregor also wrote about a sense of loss, about the erasure of the earlier First Nations people's language under the infiltration of white people's terms which annihilated the connection of the First Nations people with nature and their surroundings in general: "Hills were all named, there being Buffalo Hills, Thickwood Hills, Moose Hills, etc., and the ubiquitous Birch Hills and Snake Hills are on either side of the Saskatchewan River" (qtd. in ibid., 142). As the Europeans established a firmer

grasp on the ways the land was distributed and ruled, the North Saskatchewan River witnessed the disappearance of the First Nations people, the disappearance of their names, and their stories, and thus, the erasure of their cultural identity, as can be seen in the following letter sent by Cree chiefs at Fort Edmonton in 1883 to the Minister of the Interior in Ottawa: "We were once a proud and independent people and now we can get neither food nor clothing, nor the means necessary to make a living for ourselves… the treaty is a farce enacted to kill us quietly" (qtd. in ibid., 206).

Nevertheless, they did not give up without fighting. Métis settlers disapproved of the land rights to their lots along the rivers, as they did not have a say in that decision (Kostash, 206). First Nations people, meanwhile, who were "confined to the reserves and ordered to farm with little instruction and few resources, began to starve, while the CPR and Hudson's Bay Company scooped up enormous parcels of fertile land to sell to homesteaders" (ibid.). Tired of such treatment, in March 1885 armed Métis and their First Nations allies "skirmished with the North-West Mounted Police in the Metis town of Duck Lake and won" (ibid.). After the battle, around "five hundred white residents of Battleford barricaded themselves in the fort" out of fear of attack by the First Nations and the Métis (ibid.). This was followed by the news of the killing of nine white people at the village of Frog Lake at the hands of the war chief Kapapamahchakwew (Wandering Spirit), and of the survivors "spirited away to the camp of Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) as war hostages" (ibid., 207). The hostages, however, either escaped or were released, Big Bear surrendered to the authorities in July 1885, and at Fort Battleford in November "eight Indians, tried without counsel, were convicted of the Frog Lake murders and executed in a mass hanging" (ibid.). This was the largest mass hanging in Canadian history.

4. Modern times

The river continues to be exploited and changes on it made. The steamer Northcote, which was launched in 1874 from Grand Rapids at the mouth of the Saskatchewan on Lake Winnipeg, was the first of half a dozen steamers "to ply the river between Fort Garry and Fort Edmonton" (Kostash, 273). What was then known as the Squaw Rapids Dam was constructed 80 kilometers upstream in 1962, which had a detrimental effect on the wildlife surrounding the river as the lower water levels in the delta adversely affected plant and animal life; the marshlands became stagnant, and the fur-bearing animal population was severely depleted (ibid., 275). In modern times, "the Saskatchewan River serves a new purpose: a hydroelectric generating plant at its mouth began producing power for the provincial power grid in 1965" (ibid., 313).

As the changes on the river started taking place, so did the literature of the Saskatchewan River develop – "from reportorial and narrative voices to the language of feeling and sensibility" (Kostash, 128). Ian MacLaren, an essayist who sees "cultural memory" as essential to a shared sense of space, "urges us to abandon the fast lane of our modern lives and to slip into the river's slow lane on a passage of meditative recall" (ibid.). As MacLaren recalls,

> Many students I teach at the University of Alberta know nothing more about the river than the name – the North Saskatchewan – flowing just outside the building where we convene; not where it rises, where it debouches on salt water, which are its tributaries, and what other settlements lie on it banks… (qtd. in ibid., 128)

With the revival of national consciousness among the Indigenous Peoples and the emergence of something like "two solitudes," the river as a contact zone has become largely redundant. *Reading the River: A Traveller's Companion to the North Saskatchewan River* contains excerpts from modern travel writing by two modern tourists, Joanie and Gary McGuffin (ibid., 320). The McGuffins describe the Grand Rapids riverbed: the turbulent rapids which are now reduced to a mere trickle and "the thunder of white water silenced forever" (qtd. in ibid., 322). In the early 1960s, as the McGuffins write, Manitoba Hydro harnessed Grand Rapids for hydroelectric power, and the "headpond formed behind the dam is one of the 10 largest man-made lakes in the world" (qtd. in ibid.). However, water power always comes at a cost to the natural environment; due to the construction of the Grand Rapids dam, the "flooding destroyed thousands of acres of wildlife and their habitat and the livelihood of the local native Peoples," they write (qtd. in ibid.).

In recent decades, the only thing which can be obvious on the river is the detrimental effect of human activity on it. A contact zone does not stay a zone of contact forever. In the 1993 film by Wayne Schmalz, *Saskatchewan*, he narrates that "thousands of people continue to live and work along the Saskatchewan and yet there is no central mythology associated with it that binds them together. For many, the river is simply a barrier to be crossed, a watery line to cross over and forget" (qtd. in Kostash, 330). The changes came "with the coming of the telegraph and railway," and the river was "deserted of its traffic except for a brief period of steamboats and recreational paddlewheelers. Bridges become extensions of the railway tracks, and a whole literature of the drama of the perilous river crossing disappears […]. In fact, the river all but disappears from human interest in the new age of agriculture and then urbanization" (ibid.). Yet there is another rather consistent metaphor – "river as communiqué, linking us up" – and in the digital age, it is both a metaphor and literal truth (ibid.).

The east-west waterways of "the trade" etched the outlines of a future nation: the 'distinctive economy' of the fur trade had laid down the communications grid that incorporated as a single coherent unit the east-west orientation of the British and French colonies distinct from the colonies that would become the United States. (Kostash, 333)

In the postcolonial and post-exploration era, not even the ambition of conservationists contains everything which is needed in order to preserve "the ceremonial and sacred places of the First Nations" such as their mountains and rivers, which have become destinations of eco-tourism, "protected even from the Aboriginal celebrants themselves" (Kostash, 333). In the assessment of novelist Hugh MacLennan, "Canadians lost their soul when they left the rivers" (qtd. in ibid.). Coming back to the notion of the "mediating consciousness" Myrna Kostash accorded to travel writing, *Reading the River* ends with Kostash's own words and thoughts, adding to the overall intertextuality of the book:

> We stop on its bridges and banks, staring down into the streaming current of murky water racing east, mesmerized by that quality a river has if we stand looking at it in one spot: a thing that is passing us, going somewhere else, leaving us and not coming back. Wherever it's going, we're not going with it. We may be lost in contemplation but it does not stop its run to the sea. That's what rivers do. That's what this river is for. (ibid., 334)

Conclusion

So significant in the past, the North Saskatchewan River has now been abandoned, overcome as an obstacle, put under control. From a river which meant contact, the exchange of different cultures, it became easy to overlook and not take into account when considering Canadian history. People are unaware of the history it witnessed, the history which took part on its banks and on it. Without the stories which people wrote about it, there would be no way of knowing what the river initially meant, and what place it held in the lives of the people living on its banks. This is why travel writing is important. It allows us to be "present" as historical events take place. History books help us remember what happened in the past, but travel writing is necessary to recreate the events, appreciate, and understand them. Even though the earliest travel writing bore tendencies of portraying only the European side of the story, with rare instances of a glimpse into the mind of the local populations they encountered, these histories still helped to construct the reality of the times. And in recent travel writing, the mistakes are being corrected, and the voices of both the people traveling and the people welcoming them are included. This is why Myrna

Kostash's book, with its intertextuality and a rather objective portrayal of the contact zone of the North Saskatchewan River, is an important step in the development of the modern travel writing genre. It takes us down the river, allowing us to listen to the recorded stories of both First Nations Peoples and European settlers, giving us an opportunity to judge for ourselves, and re-live the flow of history.

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