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Writing Back to the Canon:

The Birchbark House as Counter-Narrative to *Little House on the Prairie*

MARISA DA SILVA MARTINS

University of Aveiro

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on two children's novels: *Little House on the Prairie* (1932) by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and *The Birchbark House* (1999) by Louise Erdrich. Both works are set in the nineteenth century, specifically during the westward expansion, and during the forced displacement of Indigenous communities. This article aims to read the two novels as opposing narratives, particularly regarding the ways in which settler-colonialism and Native Americans are represented. Through a postcolonial lens, this article aims to show Louise Erdrich's novel as a counter-narrative, in which the culture and way of life of the Ojibwe community is put in the foreground, as well as its resistance toward white settlers.

KEYWORDS: Louise Erdrich, Laura Ingalls Wilder, counter-narrative, postcolonialism, Native Americans.

RESUMO: Este artigo centra-se em dois romances infantis: *Little House on the Prairie* (1932), de Laura Ingalls Wilder, e *The Birchbark House* (1999), de Louise Erdrich. Ambas as narrativas decorrem no século XIX, especificamente durante a expansão para o oeste e durante o deslocamento forçado das comunidades indígenas. Este artigo visa analisar os dois romances como narrativas opostas, particularmente no que diz respeito às formas como os colonos e os nativos americanos são representados. Através de uma leitura pós-colonial, este artigo pretende apresentar o romance de Louise Erdrich como uma contranarrativa, na qual a cultura e o modo de vida da comunidade Ojibwe são colocados em primeiro plano, assim como a sua resistência aos colonos brancos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Louise Erdrich, Laura Ingalls Wilder, contranarrativa, pós-colonialismo, nativos americanos.

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INTRODUCTION

Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean marked the beginning of European exploration of the Americas, reshaping the geopolitical power of the globe (Townsend 2019, 30). The first European expeditions aimed at establishing colonies in the New World, seeking valuable resources, e.g. land and labor, and quickly initiating contact with Indigenous populations. Following Columbus's arrival in the so-called New World, the establishment of various trade routes caused the dissemination of diseases, namely smallpox, measles, influenza and tuberculosis (Teuton 2018, 14). Since the Indigenous people had no immunity to these illnesses, their demographics decreased considerably. Similarly, the Columbian Exchange also introduced new diseases to Europe, as is the case with syphilis (Townsend 2019, 33).

The colonization of American territories from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century was characterized by a systematic process of expansion and dispossession, marked by treaties and land dispossession, legitimized by narratives, such as the Doctrine of Discovery, the *Virgin Land* or the *Right of Conquest* (Teuton 2018, 15-16). The Indigenous populations resisted in numerous ways, which often led to warlike conflicts. Others contended that acculturation represented the best strategy to ensure their survival (Townsend 2019, 30). The nineteenth century introduced a new way of colonizing the American territory, pressuring Native Americans to adopt the European way of life, through agricultural practices and permanent settlement promoted by Thomas Jefferson. The works of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Louise Erdrich are set in the nineteenth century, when the U.S. federal government displaced Native Americans from their lands. The gradual removal began in the Southern lands, where the Cherokee and the Seminole tribes resided. The Cherokee occupied large territories that were then claimed by white settlers for mining purposes, whereas the Seminole resided in fertile lands for agricultural purposes, as well as for the cotton trade business (Townsend 2019, 202). Although the Nonintercourse Act of 1790, signed by George Washington, aimed at prohibiting the purchase of native land without federal consent (Cozzens 2016, 13), it became difficult to halt settlers' illegal acquisition of Native Americans' lands. Ultimately, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson's policy aligned with the civilization program, heavily embedded in the myth of Manifest Destiny. Within this ideology, the Euro-American way of life would have influenced Native Americans to assimilate and integrate into the white society, as

agreed with the Civilization Fund Act (1819), signed by James Monroe. This was also known as the Indian Civilization Act, whose main intent was to provide funding for missionary groups to establish schools for Native American children. However, in these schools, Indigenous children were forced to learn English and to convert to Christian values, leaving their culture and traditions behind. However, the acculturation efforts were superseded by removal policies upon the emergence of the Jacksonian Democrats (Townsend 2019, 202). According to them, Indigenous people would never integrate into the American way of life. The shift of federal policy from acculturation efforts to removal was undoubtedly motivated by the discovery of gold near Georgia around 1820. Firstly, the state of Georgia began to challenge the Cherokees, refusing to recognize their nation (*idem,* 212). Secondly, with the declaration of the Indian Removal Act (1830), signed by Andrew Jackson, the political administration sided with settler colonialism. This Act legally authorized Jackson to negotiate with Native communities, prompting them to exchange their ancestral lands in the South for new lands west of the Mississippi River. The forced displacement led to various tragedies, namely the Trail of Tears, where the "Five Civilized Tribes", Choctaws, Chickasaws, Cherokee, Creeks, and Seminoles, were resettled. This is one of the many examples of the Native Americans' genocide.

Celebrated as one of the most famous works of American children's literature, *Little House on the Prairie*, comprising nine books, was published between 1932 and 1971, and it is based on Laura Ingalls Wilder's childhood and adulthood in the Mideast of the United States. During that period, Wilder's family had moved from Wisconsin to the Kansas prairie, as other families had chosen to do, during the westward expansion. Therefore, the narrative is significantly influenced by the historical and social context of the time. Praised at the time of its publication, Wilder's book series is now more contested, since it is not exempt from the ideology of the epoch. As Sharon Smulders explains, the books are based on the "un-American Indian" myth, which reinforces the western expansion, formulates a dichotomous view of settlers and natives, foregrounding frontier culture as the quintessence of the American identity (2002, 192). Although some authors have warned about the complexity of the racial issue in the work (Heldrich; Miller), *Little House on the Prairie* mostly complies with the colonial project.[1]

In opposition to Wilder's work, Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* follows the story of the eight-year-old Omakayas, an Indigenous girl living in the 1840s. Louise Erdrich

has expressed discomfort with the ideological underpinnings of *Little House on the Prairie*, particularly in how it omits Indigenous perspectives and perpetuates racial stereotypes. As noted by Stewart, Erdrich was critical of the *Prairie* books for their lack of awareness regarding the displacement of Native peoples and for their reinforcement of settler-colonial narratives (2013, 216). This critical engagement played a formative role in shaping *The Birchbark House*, which seeks to offer a more accurate and culturally grounded portrayal of Ojibwe life during the same historical period. Therefore, the author intended to portray Native Americans more accurately, deconstructing stereotypes and offering new perspectives on Ojibwe culture.[2] The first book in Erdrich's *Birchbark* series focuses on the context of the decline of the fur trade among northern tribes. As Carolyn Podruchny and Stacy Nation-Knapper state: "By the latter half of the 19th century, North American fur sources had been depleted by overhunting and the settler nations of Canada and the United States had constructed and were enforcing political boundaries that interfered with Indigenous mobility and trade routes" (2016, 5). Highlighting the Indigenous people's resilience, *The Birchbark House* can be considered as a counter-narrative, broadening the young reader's perspective about the westward expansion era. This shift in approaching Native American children's novels in contemporary times needs a theoretical framework that takes into account concepts, such as cultural resilience and counter-narrative as forms of resistance. Thus, the present study will rely on postcolonial theory to recontextualize the presence of settler colonialism in historical children's fiction. After providing the main theoretical concepts on postcolonialism, mostly regarding symbolic and cultural resistance, the article will be divided into three parts. The first two parts will compare the representation of space/land in *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Birchbark House*, as well as the portrayal of Native Americans. Lastly, this article also aims to examine how Erdrich approaches and subverts the frontier culture, more accurately rewriting the history of Indigenous people.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to understand how *The Birchbark House* functions as a literary response to settler-colonial narratives, it is of paramount importance to engage with postcolonial theory,

particularly the foundational work of Edward Said. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said demonstrated how the Orient is not merely an idea stemming from a European construction, but also a mode of discourse (1979, 2). In other words, the colonial discourse operates as a framework through which the West exerts control over the East by shaping knowledge, representations, and systems of authority in ways that reinforce domination and cultural hierarchy (*idem*, 3), and consequently, it constitutes a binary discourse. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said further develops the idea that culture and literature are particular means in the establishment of an imperial ideology. Through the analysis of Victorian novels, Said concludes that literature is imbued with imperial themes, such as white supremacy, legitimized by social Darwinism and scientific racism, and, in this way, fostering the perpetuation of power relations.

The *Location of Culture* (1994) by Homi K. Bhabha expanded on these conclusions, while emphasizing tensions and contradictions within the colonial discourse. Bhabha has significantly contributed to postcolonial theory, working on concepts such as ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and Third Space, and deconstructing the binary conception of the world (West-Orient, colonizer-colonized, oppressor-oppressed). This stems from the mutual interaction between cultures, and because the colonizer has given the necessary tools for the colonized to subvert the colonial discourse (e.g. mockery and power negotiations within a Third Space). Notwithstanding Said's emphasis on the domination of the Orient, Bhabha conveys that cultural resistance emerges from colonial encounters.

Richard Terdiman also delved into cultural resistance, adopting the term 'symbolic resistance'. Validating both Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci's perspectives on discourse as a system of language and knowledge through which power hierarchies emerge, Terdiman proposes the analysis of counter-discourses as "a certain mode of cultural resistance" (1985, 52). According to the author, "discourses are what give differential substance to membership in a social group or class or formation, which mediate an internal sense of belonging, an outward sense of otherness" (*idem*, 54). Although Terdiman examines the discourse and political struggles of nineteenth-century France, his insights on counter-discourse are valuable to study symbolic resistance. In fact, the concept of counter-discourse as a form of resistance can be applied to other contexts, namely children's literature. This is most distinct in the work of Clare Bradford, which focuses on

examining colonialism, as well as the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in contemporary children's books (2011, 4).

Over recent years, there has been a greater production of children's literature by Indigenous authors who address the legacy of colonialism in their communities (*idem*, 47). Nevertheless, a significant number of texts still perpetuate fallacious portrayals of Native Americans, reinforcing stereotypes (Sabis-Burns 2011, 134). Thus, such stereotypical representations contribute to historical and cultural distortions and, ultimately, highlight the dominant discourse which, in turn, continuously erases Indigenous cultural values. Assessing Indigenous children's literature as counter-narratives of canonical (white) children's books is therefore crucial to eschew the paradigm. One of the leading critics who addresses this imperative need is Debbie Reese, providing a reevaluation of indigeneity in children's narratives, promoting not only inclusion and diversity but also reaffirming Native American identity. In this sense, Reese's advocacy for Native American accurate representations in children and young adult fiction furtherly challenges the dominant discourse. Similarly, this resonates with symbolic/cultural resistance through postcolonial storytelling. One of the hallmarks of postcolonial narratives is the phenomenon of 'writing back' to canonical literature, resisting its ideology.[3]

Children's literature represents a powerful site for ideological formation because it plays a central role in shaping young readers' understanding of history, identity, and cultural norms. Thus, children's literature has served as a vehicle for national, moral, and cultural education. In settler-colonial contexts, it has also been a tool for transmitting ideologies of land entitlement, cultural superiority, and racial hierarchies. As Perry Nodelman and Peter Hunt have long argued, children's books are rarely neutral; they often carry implicit messages about power, morality, and belonging. This makes the genre especially significant in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where the stories children encounter help to reinforce, or resist, dominant narratives about race, land, and national identity. Within this framework, children's literature becomes a space where ideology can be both absorbed and subverted. As P. Jane Hafen notes, "Indigenous authors have taken English and made it their own language and used it for their own unique expression of tribal nationalism" (2009, 26). Embracing change and using literature as a form of resilience (Porter 2005, 40), Indigenous authors of children's fiction, like Louise Erdrich, are continuously indigenizing this genre of literature to reassert cultural identity, challenge settler myths,

and cultivate awareness of difference and survivance (Bradford 2011, 332). Works like *The Birchbark House* destabilize white settlers' narratives by offering a view from within Indigenous epistemologies. In this sense, children's literature becomes a contested terrain for cultural memory and postcolonial resistance.

Crucial to the act of indigenizing children's literature is the literary reimagining of land/space. More than a mere physical setting, the representation of land plays a fundamental role in characterizing Native American culture, identity, and spirituality. The following section explores how both narratives construct the image of the natural world that surrounds them, as well as how this portrayal is influenced by settler colonialism, in the case of *Little House on the Prairie*, and communion with nature, in *The Birchbark House*.

CONTESTED LANDSCAPES: LAND/SPACE REPRESENTATION

According to Jane Suzanne Carroll, landscapes encompass natural, geographical, and historical aspects. Landscapes are not merely physical terrains, but they also embody human culture. Therefore, the author concludes that landscapes should be understood as a construct, since they are shaped by both natural/physical and cultural inferences (2011, 2). Land, space or landscape is a central feature of settler colonialism. In fact, the doctrine of *terra nullius* can be seen as an essential part of the westward expansion. The concept derives from Latin, signifying land which belongs to nobody. In this regard, *terra nullius* is used to describe a terrain where there is neither sovereign nor tenure, and it was used within colonial contexts, in order to legitimize the dispossession of hunter-gatherers and nomadic societies. Similarly to this doctrine, the idea of the frontier/boundary is also integral to colonization. Within the framework of Manifest Destiny, the frontier functions as both a conceptual and physical space where interactions between American white settlers and Indigenous peoples unfolded—often violently. This notion was famously theorized by Frederick Jackson Turner in his 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", in which he argued that the frontier was central to the development of American democracy, character, and exceptionalism. Turner's thesis helped solidify the frontier as a mythic space of progress and civilization, while simultaneously erasing

Indigenous presence and legitimizing settler expansion. The frontier culture, long associated with adventure, conquest, and self-reliance, became central to the myth of American exceptionalism — what Turner famously framed as the crucible in which American democracy, individualism, and national identity were forged. This "frontier thesis" contributed to the romanticization of westward expansion while simultaneously masking the violence and dispossession experienced by Indigenous peoples. Within this ideological framework, the frontier marked a symbolic boundary between so-called civilization and wilderness; between the white settler and the Indigenous 'other'. As Ashcroft *et al.* observe, "the distinction of one place from the other implies a civilization where rules of law and social graces wither as man reverts to a state of nature; the frontier then becomes a place of savagery" (2013, 123). On the one hand, the frontier was imagined as a space of opportunity and progress; on the other, it justified the erasure of Indigenous peoples and the appropriation of their ancestral lands. U.S. foreign policy reinforced this vision through treaties that were systematically designed to displace Native nations and legitimize settler occupation. In fact, there was a clear distinction between theoretical conquest (occupancy) and actual conquest (dominion), as Patrick Wolfe explains: "The right of occupancy entitled natives to pragmatic use of a territory that Europeans had discovered, even though ultimate title, on dominion, vested in the European sovereign" (2016, 131). The physical boundary of the frontier not only distances lands/spaces but also separates white settlers from native people (Smulders 2002, 192).

The myth of the frontier is central to *Little House on the Prairie*. The opening chapter of the book, entitled "Going West", provides an account of the Ingalls family's departure from the Big Woods of Wisconsin as they embark on a journey to establish a new home on the western frontier. Charles Ingalls, referred to as Pa, made the decision to relocate to the Indian Territory, since the increasing population density in Wisconsin rendered hunting less fruitful and plentiful. The journey to the West was long and challenging. Although the novel's narrator is a young child, the perspective corresponds to the ideological framework of the Westward Expansion. Firstly, the landscapes encountered by the Ingalls family are depicted as vast, empty, and devoid of civilization, as if expecting transformation by the white settlers: "Kansas was an endless flat land covered with tall grass blowing in the wind. Day after day they travelled in Kansas and saw nothing but the rippling grass and the enormous sky" (Wilder 9). Here, the prairie is depicted as a boundless

territory, reinforcing the myth of *terra nullius*. This conception is further developed in the novel, when the narrator observes: "That prairie looked as if no human eye had ever seen it before. Only the tall wild grass covered the endless empty land and a great empty sly arched over it" (*idem,* 20), as well as "There was only the enormous, empty prairie... and on the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there" (*idem,* 31). In these examples, the narrator underscores the perception of the prairie as both untamed and untouched by humans. Thus, these passages highlight a romanticized perception of the prairie, and ultimately of the frontier: a place to be tamed, dominated, and settled by the colonizers.

The land encountered by the Ingalls family, which they afterwards select for their new residence, is continuously depicted as vast, uninhabited, and with no trace of civilization. Consequently, this portrayal reinforces the myth of Indigenous lands as vacant, devoid of sovereignty and, as such, available for the white settlers to claim. This aligns with imperial discourse, which, as argued by Ashcroft *et al.* actively constructed territories through both cartography and textual representation:

> Colonial frontiers were created as imperial discourse sought to define and invent the entities it shaped from its conquests. The numerous ruler-straight frontiers of imperial maps indicate how colonial cartography existed as much to invent as to record actual features and distinctions between various places and peoples. The frontier or boundary that limited the space so defined was a crucial feature in imagining the imperial self, and in creating and defining (othering) those others by which that 'self' could achieve definition and value (2013, 123).

By imagining the frontier as *terra nullius* (an uninhabited wilderness), settler narratives like *Little House on the Prairie* reinforce a discourse that erases Indigenous presence, whether intentionally or not. While Wilder may not have consciously aimed to promote dispossession, the narrative participates in a tradition that normalizes settler entitlement and marginalizes Native claims to land. The connection between the doctrine of *terra nullius* and colonial cartography played a pivotal role in legitimizing imperial conquest. By imagining Indigenous lands as vacant or uninhabited, settler narratives such as *Little House on the Prairie* aligned with a broader imperial discourse that used maps and textual representations to erase Indigenous presence and assert colonial authority. As Ashcroft *et al.* note, colonial frontiers were not merely recorded—they were invented

through discourse and mapping practices that constructed clear spatial and cultural boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized (2013, 123). These visual and narrative tools helped define both territory and identity, positioning Indigenous peoples as outsiders to the emerging American nation. Similar to several other families of that time, the Ingalls began encroaching on Osage lands after the Civil War (1861-1865). The Osage Nation occupied extensive territories, like present-day Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri. The outcome of the Civil War resulted in escalating tensions, as white settlers sought land control. The federal government significantly supported the westward expansion, and white settlers deemed Indigenous lands as auspicious for occupation. Both federal policies and the railroad development brought an influx of white settlers, exploiting the fertile and prosperous Osage lands. Ultimately, the Osage's experience of displacement reveals a pattern in American colonization of Indigenous people and their lands. Throughout the novel, Laura Ingalls is caught in the paradox of her family's decision to settle in Indian Territory, despite their evident disdain for Indigenous people. This contradiction reflects a broader pattern in American settler-colonial narratives, where settlers simultaneously deny Indigenous legitimacy while occupying their lands. According to John E. Miller, one of the central themes of *Little House on the Prairie* is this tension between the settlers and the federal government over who has the right to claim land (310). For example, when Pa says, "Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement" (Wilder 36), the narrative presents settler appropriation as both uncertain and inevitable. In this way, the novel reflects and normalizes the historical process of encroachment on Indigenous lands—particularly in the case of the Osage territory—while sidestepping the legal and moral implications of that occupation.

As previously observed, colonial frontiers, or the geography of adventure and conquest, function as a cultural space "in which identities and geographies are constructed, and its spatiality is reflected in those constructions" (Phillips 1997, 14). These spaces embody an exercise of power, asserting imperial authority. Despite this, geography can also be used as both a literal and a metaphorical site of resistance. Instead of perpetuating the myth of Indigenous lands as vacant, Louise Erdrich counter-narrates this by providing a map to the readers, thereby placing her characters in a defined and inhabited space. Thus, the map at the beginning of *The Birchbark House* plays a crucial role in reasserting

Indigenous presence. By marking specific geographic and cultural features, such as the location of docks, homes, and trade routes, it situates the narrative within a clearly defined and inhabited Indigenous space. This contrasts sharply with the portrayal of land in Wilder's novel, which presents the prairie as empty and untouched. Erdrich appropriates a convention often used in imperial literature, cartographic framing, but subverts it by emphasizing cultural continuity and Indigenous knowledge of the land. In doing so, the map contributes to a reconfiguration of spatial imagination, challenging the settler-colonial view of Indigenous lands as vacant and available for conquest. According to Richard Phillips, "the geography of adventure has been used as a site of resistance by a range of post-colonial critics, who unmap (literally) the geographies of empire, and (metaphorically) the identities, particularly the imperial masculinities, constructed in that geography" (1997, 20). Thus, the map situates the narrative in a specific geographical and cultural context, highlighting the relevance of Indigenous perspectives. Not only that, but Erdrich also appropriates and subverts this element closely associated with imperial literature. Furthermore, Erdrich's map contrasts and reconfigures the portrayal of land in Wilder's novel which, in turn, frames Indigenous lands as *tabula rasa*, ready for conquest and cultivation.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, Indigenous lands are consistently described as prosperous and fertile, and the narrator compares the new lands and their fauna, composed of rabbits and prairie chickens, with the reality she experienced in Wisconsin. Apart from describing these livestock animals, highlighting the fertility of the Kansas prairie, the novel also narrates the encounter between the Ingalls family and wild animals, such as wolves: "She had never seen such big wolves (...). Everything about him was big – his pointed ears, and his pointed mouth with the tongue hanging out (...). His coat was shaggy grey and his eyes were glittering green" (Wilder 74-75). The wolves, in contrast to rabbits and chickens, reinforce the idea of the frontier as a place of savagery. Correspondingly, the narrator's lively depictions of the howling wind and the wolves' cries at night also emphasize Laura's sense of discomfort and unease on the prairie. As observed by Mowder:

> Indians and wolves represent the undomesticated, uncivilized native inhabitants of the landscape; while they dwell within the frontier's space, the family cannot remain. Indians and wolves, recognized by their howls and cries, are speaking to each other in a language which cannot be understood by their civilized settlers of the frontier (2009, 18).

In opposition to these descriptions of Indigenous lands, nature and animals, *The Birchbark House* portrays the natural world not as savage, but as vital to the Ojibwe lifestyle. In the opening chapter of Erdrich's novel, the narrator depicts nature as a realm of peace and serenity. The Great Lakes are both silent and solitary. Nonetheless, the vastness and openness of this territory do not mean that it is empty; on the contrary, the village of LaPointe, Lake Superior, is inherently beautiful and serene. The land is also closely connected to the nomadic traditions of the Ojibwe people, since both their residences and hunting patterns are dependent on seasonal migration (Sparks 2022, 416). This seasonal rhythm is also reflected in the novel's structure, each chapter corresponding to a season.

The Ojibwe people's relationship with nature is characterized by a deep dependence on its resources, and this is exemplified by Omakayas's family's use of birchbark in order to construct their winter homes. Nokomis (the protagonist's grandmother) addresses the birchbark tree with both tenderness and respect, referring to it as 'Old Sister'. Even though the family needs the tree's skin for shelter, Nokomis leaves a tobacco offering at the base of the tree (Erdrich 7-8). This episode shows the respect that the Ojibwe people have towards the natural world, emphasizing how humans and nature can coexist in a relationship of reciprocity. On the other hand, it also recognizes "the stark contrast between Indigenous and settler approaches to land use in the early nineteenth century" (Sparks 2022, 409). In opposition to the previous description of the wolves in *Little House on the Prairie*, Omakayas's encounters with animals are respectful and even spiritual. When the girl meets two bear cubs and their mother, she offers them berries and refers to the latter as "grandmother" (Erdrich 26-32). This episode not only demonstrates how Omakayas is selfless by sharing the cherished fruit with the bears, but also shows how the girl had no intention of hurting the animals. The encounter left Omakayas deeply changed:

> The longer she thought about her encounter with the mother bear, the more Omakayas was convinced that something she did not understand had passed between the two of them. Not words. Perhaps they had communicated in smells. Or maybe in a language of feelings (...). Nokomis had told her that the bear must be addressed with greatest respect, as a treasured relative, that the bear had human qualities, and nobody quite understood the bear (...). Nobody on the island ever tossed the bones of a bear aside. Every bear bone was gathered respectfully and buried, all together. At a

> bear feast, the bear's skull was ribboned and set out on a good red cloth, spoken to, honored (*idem,* 34-35).

Thus, the natural world is central to Indigenous cultures, grounded in a deep respect for all living beings. Although hunting is part of survival, it is traditionally accompanied by acts of gratitude and spiritual acknowledgement, often involving a prayer or offering to thank the animal and ask for forgiveness for taking its life. In *The Birchbark House*, animals are not depicted merely as sources of food; they are also portrayed as companions and beings with spirit, as seen in the character of Andeg, the crow, who becomes Omakayas's pet and friend. This profound connection to the natural world emphasizes that the environment is not external to Ojibwe life, but rather integral to their daily practices, cultural identity, and spiritual wisdom.

OTHERING: THE PORTRAYAL OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The Other is distinct from oneself, but it is essential in defining the latter. Regarding discourses, including primitivism or cannibalism, the colonized is characterized as Other (Ashcroft *et al* 2013, 186). In other words, within colonial discourse, Indigenous people are framed as Other, as a means to legitimize colonial domination. Therefore, "othering" is a process which reinforces the binary savage/civilized. This binarism between civilization and savagery has its roots in Enlightenment thought, particularly in the eighteenth century, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau advanced the concept of the "noble savage", an idealized figure imagined as living in a pure, pre-social state and maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature. With the American westward expansion, the dualism savage/civilized is also used to justify power dynamics, depicting Indigenous people as inferior to white settlers. *Little House on the Prairie* operates within this ideological framework, thus considering Native Americans as the inferior "Others" to be dominated.

Although Laura frequently inquires her family about when they will encounter Indigenous people, or see a baby papoose, it is not until the eleventh chapter, entitled 'Indians in the House', that the protagonist's wish is finally fulfilled. The narrator firstly describes Indigenous people as "tall, thin and fierce-looking men" (Wilder 106), wearing leather moccasins, a leather thong and the smelly skins of skunks (*idem,* 110). The

eleventh chapter of Wilder's novel depicts Indigenous people wearing minimal clothing apart from animal skins, positioning them closer to a primitive state, and emphasizing a lack of civilization. Both Heldrich (100) and Smulders (196) point out how the animalistic portrayal of Indigenous men in this scene is not only meant to emphasize their supposed primitiveness, but also to evoke a sense of sexual threat. This is especially evident in the way their minimal clothing and physical appearance are framed by the narrator, who describes their sudden entrance into the domestic space during Pa's absence as intrusive and unsettling. The underlying fear is gendered: Indigenous men are portrayed as a danger to white women, reinforcing colonial anxieties about racial and sexual boundaries. This first encounter with Indigenous people relates to the binary savage/civilized examined above, ultimately aiming to dehumanize natives, as well as to justify Manifest Destiny. In addition to this portrayal, the narrator also describes Laura's deep fear as she observes those Indigenous men: "Her heart jumped into her throat and chocked her with its pounding. Two black eyes glittered down into her eyes. The Indian did not move, not one muscle of his face moved (...). Laura didn't move, either. She didn't even breathe" (Wilder 110-111). Laura's outright fear might be seen as a way of "othering" Native Americans, consequently reinforcing the settler colonialism. Besides this characterization, the eleventh chapter portrays Indigenous people as not only intrusive, but also exploitative: "Indians ate the cornbread that Ma had baked. They ate every morsel of it, and even picked up the crumbs from the hearth" (*ibidem*). According to Smulders, "by depicting supposedly real Indians as consistent with the stereotype, Wilder does, however, reproduce those ideas that shaped the settlers' perception of and contact with native peoples" (*idem,* 196). Furthermore, the narrative represents Native Americans as excessive consumers of white settlers' resources, underlining the stereotype of laziness and dependency. For example, they are repeatedly depicted as stealing food and supplies from the Ingalls family (e.g. taking tobacco, cornmeal, and other household items), often without direct confrontation or consequence. These moments not only construct the Native characters as burdensome intruders but also serve to justify the settlers' occupation by casting Indigenous presence as parasitic. If Wilder's book perpetuates certain stereotypical images and ideas regarding Native Americans, Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* does the opposite, acting in a deconstructionist way and attempting to provide a more just, and less simplistic, depiction of Native Americans.

The Ojibwe people demonstrate a deep understanding of seasonal cycles. This knowledge not only influences the location of their residence, but also their food and cultivation practices. If the white settlers in *Little House on the Prairie* try to convey the idea that Native Americans do not cultivate their soil, Erdrich debunks this fallacy. Not only do Ojibwe pick the fruits of the season (for example, heartberries and blueberries), they also cultivate corn and rice. Furthermore, the male hunting activities, especially of beaver and otter, were also corresponding to the Ojibwe seasonal migration, and they were a fundamental revenue for their economic well-being (Erdrich 124-126). Throughout the narrative, there are numerous references to labor-intensive practices, from skinning birchbark trees to preparing pelts and hides, which require several and methodical steps. These depictions reveal the care, skill and meticulousness inherent in Ojibwe's day-to-day life. In such manner, Erdrich subverts the colonial stereotype of Native Americans as lazy, dependent, and exploiters of white settlers' resources. Moreover, through the character of Deydey, Omakayas's father, Erdrich illustrates Ojibwe's active involvement in the fur trade, underscoring their agency, adaptability and negotiation skills in the broad American economy. In turn, this portrayal also deconstructs white settlers' narratives, since *The Birchbark House* challenges the stereotypes which depict Native Americans as isolated and passive people.

Erdrich also debunks the idea of Indigenous people as "naked wild men", showing that the characters take pride in clothing. In fact, Erdrich meticulously describes the crafting of moccasins and the use of deerskin for clothing purposes, while also mentioning that Ojibwe wear different types of clothing depending on the season. The character of Old Tallow, in particular, demonstrates these differences. At the beginning of the novel, when Omakayas goes to visit her, Old Tallow wears a blue dress "trimmed with the teeth of fox at the collar, beaded halfway around the scraggly, ripped hem" (*idem,* 22). Later in the novel, during winter months, Old Tallow wears a long and beautiful woven coat from various pelts, such as lynx, beaver, deer hide and dogs: "She had pieced together old blankets, one a faded red, one brown, discarded shreds of unidentifiable stuffs were sewed patch on patch, including some black beaded velvets and bright calicos" (*idem,* 124). Furthermore, there is also great attention to the embellishment of the clothing, as it is possible to notice from the following statement:

> Mama had made him a new suit of clothes – a calico shirt, skin leggings, a set of blue broadcloth britches trimmed with red wool. Onto the shirt, she had sewn four carefully hoarded brass buttons, gleaming, each marked with the French flower which the voyageurs called fleur de lis (*idem,* 54).

The detailed descriptions of Ojibwe's clothing deconstruct the colonial stereotypes and, in turn, emphasize not only the cultural identity of Indigenous people, but also the skill required for such traditional practices. From Wilder's novel, Erdrich crafts another side of the narrative, the westward expansion from a different side, in this way demonstrating some of the consequences of the white settlers' dominion over ancestral Indigenous lands, and, ultimately, underlining the resilience and adaptability of their people.

REIMAGINING THE FRONTIER: VERSIONS OF HISTORY

Both novels under analysis here engage with the history of westward expansion, through different lenses. Throughout Wilder's novel, there are hints of the settlers' wait for the government's legal permission for the Ingalls and other families to formally occupy the Osage lands. Although there are rumors that the federal government would be supportive of Native Americans, Pa believes that white settlers will keep the land, and the government will push the natives to the west. This moment in the narrative opens the way for further discussions on the tension between the settlers and the Indigenous people. In the chapter "Indian Jamboree", a conversation between Pa and Ma reveals that the Osage have gathered nearby – a fact that increases the family's unease and anticipates the scene of war cries that follows. Upon hearing the warfare cries, Laura describes it as a queer sound: "It was the sound of quite a lot of Indians, chopping with their voices. It was something like the sound of an axe chopping, and something like a dog barking, and it was something like a song, but not like any song that Laura had ever heard" (Wilder 207-208). Unsurprisingly, Wilder's narrative dismisses the dual practical and spiritual use of war cries. Through Laura's perspective, war cries are threatening and queer, reinforcing the stereotype of Native Americans as savage, wild and even animal-like. In the last chapters of the novel, Soldat du Chêne prevents bloodshed between Native American tribes and the white settlers. This Indigenous soldier persuaded the Osage not to participate on the killing of white people, initiating consequently a conflict between the Osage and the other

Native American tribes (*idem,* 235-236). The following chapter describes the Osage departure from their ancestral lands, due to the federal government's pressure. Therefore, settler colonialism is most evident here, since Native Americans, firstly portrayed as obstacles to settlement, were forced to go west.

The topics of displacement and dispossession are also used in Erdrich's novel, focusing on the Ojibwe's perspective, rather than ignoring the part of the history which relates to the Native American experience (Stewart 2013, 220). Upon Deydey's return from the fur trade business, his friends go to visit him. The reunion leads them to discuss Chimookoman (the Ojibwe's word for non-Indian or white people), and the conflicting opinions on the presence of settlers in their lands. Fishtail reports that white settlers are building "cabins, forts, barns, gardens, pastures, fences, fur-trading posts, churches, and mission schools" (Erdrich 76-77). While Fishtail advocates for the removal of white settlers from the island, Albert suggests that Ojibwe should migrate westward, since the federal government funds those relocations (*idem,* 77-78). However, Fishtail warns that western lands are populated by spirits of the dead, pointing to a possible spiritual downfall of the displaced. Before their conversation resumes, Fishtails remarks on the white settlers' pursuit of Indigenous lands, as well as their hunting grounds, fishing streams, gardens and rice beds (*idem,* 80). Ultimately, the dialogue demonstrates the tension between Native Americans' resistance and surrender to acculturation. Whereas *Little House on the Prairie* depicts the Osages' surrender to both federal government and white settlers' pressures, *The Birchbark House* shows how Ojibwe maintain their ancestral lands, despite the settlement's pressures.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine *The Birchbark House* as a counter-narrative to the canonical settler-colonial story presented in *Little House on the Prairie*. Through a comparative analysis, I explored how both novels construct representations of Native Americans, land, and settler expansion, ultimately arguing that Erdrich's work functions as a form of resistance literature. Her novel revises the myth of the American West by offering a more complex, situated, and culturally grounded portrayal of Indigenous life.

In particular, Erdrich shifts the narrative focus toward the Ojibwe community's daily life, spirituality, and ecological relationships, foregrounding cultural resilience. While *Little House on the Prairie* depicts Native Americans as marginal and vanishing, *The Birchbark House* centers them as enduring and adaptive in the face of settler encroachment. This contrast is especially significant given the historical backdrop of Ojibwe removal from the Great Lakes region, which Erdrich addresses more explicitly across the later volumes of the *Birchbark* series.

Erdrich's narrative foregrounds the daily rhythms and cultural practices of the Ojibwe community at a time when federal removal pressures were intensifying. In doing so, she resists the teleological arc of settler expansion and instead affirms Indigenous presence as active and enduring. While *Little House on the Prairie* reinforces the myth of Manifest Destiny through its depiction of the prairie as empty and available, *The Birchbark House* reclaims that same historical terrain as inhabited, storied, and sovereign. Although environmental themes are present in Erdrich's work, this article has focused primarily on the narrative, historical, and ideological dimensions of Indigenous representation in children's literature. The goal has been to highlight how *The Birchbark House* functions as both a literary and cultural intervention, reshaping how history is told to young readers and reclaiming space for marginalized voices.

Nonetheless, Erdrich's contribution extends beyond historical correction. By reclaiming Indigenous epistemologies and voicing women's and children's perspectives, her work highlights the capacity of children's literature to engage with themes of colonialism, identity, and memory. As scholars such as Clare Bradford and Debbie Reese have shown, children's books are never ideologically neutral; they are powerful sites where cultural values are negotiated and challenged. In this regard, *The Birchbark House* serves not only as a literary intervention but also as an educational tool for revisionist historiography, empowering younger generations to critically engage with the silences and omissions of dominant narratives.

Ultimately, Erdrich's work affirms the potential of children's literature to engage critically with colonial histories and to foster a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past. It invites us to reconsider not only whose stories are told, but also how they are framed—and for whom.

END NOTES

[1] It is important to note that *Little House on the Prairie* is based on Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiographical recollections of her family's life. However, scholars have pointed out that Wilder was under the age of three during her first encounters with Native Americans, meaning that the memories presented in the narrative are likely drawn from family stories rather than direct personal experience. As such, the novel occupies a complex space between memory and fiction, filtered through adult retrospection and mediated by cultural attitudes of the time. This layered autobiographical discourse, adapted for a child audience, complicates the narrative's historical accuracy and ideological implications.

[2] While this article does not delve into the concept of autoethnography, it is worth noting that *The Birchbark House* can be situated within that framework. Although fictional, the novel draws on collective Ojibwe memory, oral tradition, and cultural experience, blending historical fiction with communal autobiography. This narrative mode resonates with testimonial works such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), where personal voice represents a broader community. Unlike Wilder's autobiographical account, shaped by settler nostalgia, Erdrich's storytelling reclaims Indigenous memory through a communal and intergenerational lens.

[3] Some examples are William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1988).

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MARISA DA SILVA MARTINS

Marisa da Silva Martins is a PhD student in Literary Studies, specializing in Children's Literature at the University of Aveiro. She has completed her master's degree in modern literatures and cultures (English and North-American Studies) at NOVA/FCSH. She is a member of the Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies (APEAA). She has presented papers in international conferences, mainly on Children's Literature and Ecocriticism. Apart from this, her research interests also include Animal Studies, Postcolonialism, Food Studies, Victorian and Edwardian Eras, and the Reception of Ancient Egypt.

Ciência ID: 2819-B2B5-15F0 | ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7642-3857
Google Scholar ID: y6hvyD8AAAAJ&hl=en

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