



Essay

Dwelling through the Land *Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea,* by Diane Glancy

Interpretation by Tara Smith and Rosie McNamee

At the time of European contact, it has been estimated that up to sixty million buffalo roamed the Great Plains. The contact, however, resulted in near extinction by the end of the nineteenth century with less than one thousand buffalo remaining. The decimation of buffalo marks a dual reality for the Europeans and Native Americans. Euro-Americans viewed the hunt for buffalo as a sport, while the Plains Indians utterly depended on the buffalo for survival. Diane Glancy's *Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea* depicts the tension between the white explorers, Lewis and Clark, and a Shoshoni woman known as Sacajawea. The buffalo for Lewis and Clark was merely a form of physical sustenance on their journey West. While this form of sustenance played a role for Sacajawea, "Plains Indians developed their cultures, communities and way of life around the buffalo" (Fixico). Sacajawea's journey, as depicted in Glancy's novel, illustrates the buffalo as the Plains Indians' ever-present connection to home.

Sacajawea's reverence for the buffalo did not falter during her time of captivity. Her ties to her people and the land remained strong through her connection with the buffalo. Early in her journey she expresses, "Sometimes they are buffalo calves who have lost their mothers. They will not live long. You feel like one of them" (Glancy 35). Like the lost buffalo, Sacajawea's bond with her tribe has been unwillingly broken by the white man's expedition. She fears this new, unknown world and doubts her ability to endure the journey. Without her immediate connection to home, she turns to the buffalo as a source of strength and remembrance. Throughout her life, buffalo have provided her with not only food, clothing and medicine, but also maintained a spiritual connection to the land. Through that connection, she now hears the voices of her memories. They are her private connection to home: "You hide your memories. They are the herds of buffalo" (65). The memories gently remind Sacajawea of happier times when she was surrounded by her family and friends. Their voices speak words of encouragement that sustain her spirit throughout the journey. Sacajawea does not speak of her recollections for fear that they, like everything else, will be taken away.



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“Yet the sky puts its teepee hide over you” (14). Like a mother sheltering her child from danger, the teepee offers security for its inhabitants as if it, too, is a good mother. Sacajawea identifies with the nurturing space of the teepee. As a mother, she values the role of the teepee in the Plains culture as a mobile, yet concrete home. Throughout her journey, Sacajawea sees the teepees’ presence: “At night you see the teepees lit with the fire inside them” (74).

While she is isolated on the journey, the sight offers her a comforting reminder of home. The fire stirs within her memories of Shoshoni village and ignites a sense of connection with the unfamiliar territory. For Sacajawea, the teepees’ location has no significance. Rather, the teepee portrays the most fundamental aspect of home. The shelter rises as an extension of the land made from buffalo hides. In essence, the buffalo, also like a mother, protects the plains and her children. The buffalo and Plains Indians are connected with each playing an integral role in the others’ survival.

The buffalo robe may have been Sacajawea’s strongest link to the idea of home. As she fearfully anticipates leaving the Mandan Village, Otter Woman offers her comfort: “She holds you under the buffalo robe. It is another parting from what you know. Another tearing away from yourself” (28-9). The journey marks a painful separation for Sacajawea, yet she does not part ways with the comfort of the buffalo robe. Each time she feels the warmth of the buffalo robe, it is as if Otter Woman embraces her soul. Unlike the buffalo and teepee, the presence of the robe’s physical embrace actually adds a sensory connection to home. The connection based on feelings of physical warmth and comfort – both feelings that Sacajawea has realized in her own times of sickness – animates in the way she wraps Jean Baptiste in the buffalo robe. The comforting robe blankets Sacajawea and Jean Baptiste’s ever-increasing distance from home.





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The buffalo robe also symbolizes an important connection between the Euro-Americans and the Plains Indians. Sacajawea offers the explorers robes as a symbol of peace and hospitality: “You know you are nothing they want. Yet you take them four buffalo robes” (15). While Sacajawea recognizes Lewis and Clark will “look past” (14) her, she does not refrain from sharing with them the comforts of her home. In this way, unlike the differing viewpoints on the use and necessity of the buffalo and the teepee, the buffalo robe transcends both cultures. Each individual understands the need for warmth and protection, which is indiscriminately acquired through the buffalo robe.

Even after the expedition reaches its destination – the place “where the water goes on and on” (101) – Sacajawea’s memories of the buffalo connect her with her home thousands of miles away: “You remember the mounds of lodges look like buffalo humps” (103). The persistence of the images of buffalo in her mind transforms the Mandan earth lodges into buffalo-like forms. For Sacajawea, both the earth lodge and teepee dwellings are tangible structures that, through the presence of the buffalo are made into homes. The buffalo through its varied forms, including the teepee and robes, offers comfort and nurturing care to Sacajawea throughout her journey. These qualities connect her to a sense of home. The mutually protective alliance between the buffalo and the Plains Indians represents a common oneness with the land. Sacajawea’s reverence for the buffalo is a result of her spiritual connection with the Great Plains – the land that each respectively calls home. While the Plains Indians live spiritually through the land, the Anglo-American expedition claimed the land for commerce. A force unwilling to listen to the voices of the land severed the buffalo connections, through the destruction of both the land and her people. Diane Glancy’s *Stone Heart* encourages readers of a new generation to awaken to the sounds of home that for so long have been repressed.



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