TRANSFORMING IDENTITY AND SPACE THROUGH RELATIONAL LINES IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *BOOKS AND ISLANDS IN OJIBWE COUNTRY* AND LISA BIRD-WILSON'S *PROBABLY RUBY*

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the Western, colonial notion of lines as divisive boundaries and instead, cultivates a reading practice that reveals the transformative potential of the line. In my analysis of two texts written by Indigenous authors, I reflect on the connection between space and stories by considering how each protagonist depicts their surroundings and its consequent effects on their identities through the framework of the relational line. In her memoir *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003), Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe) travels through the land of her ancestors and in her descriptions of rock paintings, she remarks how the line "is a sign of power and communication" as it relays ancestral knowledge (45). I confirm Erdrich's assertion in my interpretation of the representation of lines within Erdrich's memoir as agents of interaction. This paper considers the reciprocal potential of lines in Erdrich's depictions of land and the land's ties to her identity, which she illustrates as inseparable from tradition and results in her reclamation of space. Because of the framework's inherently interactive nature, I extend my analysis to a second text: Lisa Bird-Wilson's (Métis and nēhiyaw) novel *Probably Ruby* (2020). My decision to analyze these two texts in tandem relates to how they enact Daniel Heath Justice's "process of becoming" through their nuanced depictions of identity and contrasted renderings of space. I propose that Erdrich's memoir highlights the process that Ruby encounters, wherein one's connection to land and ancestral stories is unknown because of their removal and distance from their Indigenous heritage, which occurs through Ruby's adoption, and results in a more abstract network of relationships and setting. Erdrich's text prompts a compelling discussion of Ruby's story, since it responds to the difficulty of a more abstract reclamation, with Ruby unable to navigate a physical space filled with an understanding of tradition that Erdrich is granted. I argue that through their movements that extend and return, the lines in these texts illustrate the protagonists' reclamation of their spaces while also challenging the boundaries of lines.

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Transforming Identity and Space Through Relational Lines in Louise Erdrich's *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* and Lisa Bird-Wilson's *Probably Ruby*

Introduction: Transformation Through Lines

In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) explores the power of stories as they contribute to each person's "process of becoming" (33). He explains,

> The aloneness of reading isn't loneliness. With books and other stories, whether experienced in solitude or lived community, we abide in human presence beyond the flesh and blood of personal experience. It's a remarkable alchemy, this storied transformation of self to other, and back again. When we're in the presence of stories, we're never truly alone. (35-6)

The transformation achieved by the movement from self to other and back again, effected by words on the page, is an alluring notion that illustrates the way the boundaries of the self (and the physical book) are transcended through reading. The process occurs between the reader and the words on the page—momentarily uniting the two before extending back to the self. In his remarks, Justice refers specifically to Louise Erdrich's (Ojibwe) *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country: Traveling Through the Land of My Ancestors* (2003) and her memoir's transformative abilities. The lines of Erdrich's story represent a constructed version of the author, now a figure of sorts with whom the reader interacts. In this memoir, Erdrich visits the (is)lands of her ancestors, connecting the space to Ojibwe traditions through her observations of the landscape while outlining the inescapable presence and force of books within her life.

Inspired by the ties Erdrich makes between books and space, as well as Justice's assertion about the relationship between stories and identity, this paper cultivates a reading practice that reflects the connections between becoming and place. To do so, I apply a framework that I will call the relational line, based on one of Erdrich's descriptions of rock paintings in *Books and Islands* of a rock painting of the Horned Man. Erdrich observes that rock paintings depict "major forms of communication with the spirit world," in which the form of the line is especially compelling:

> The line is a sign of power and communication. It is sound, speech, song. The lines drawn between things in Ojibwe pictographs are extremely important, for they express

> relationships, usually between a human and a supernatural being. Wavy lines are most impressive, for they signify direct visionary information, talk from spirit to spirit. (45)

I confirm Erdrich's assertion that lines hold "power and communication" (45) in my interpretation of the representation of lines within Erdrich's memoir as agents of interaction. The physical and more abstract lines, such as routes of travel and relationships, transform the space because their movement results in a challenge to settler-implemented boundaries. I will consider the reciprocal potential of lines in Erdrich's depictions of land and the land's ties to her identity, which she illustrates as inseparable from tradition in her depiction of books, moccasins, and waves, as well as in the form and structure of the memoir itself. As a settler scholar, I aim not only to challenge Western boundaries, but I also seek to prioritize and centre Indigenous voices by exploring the relationality across Indigenous texts. By positioning lines as fluid, extending and returning, I argue for their ability to transform what exists on either side—and end—of the line. Erdrich rejects and complicates the Western, colonial notion of lines as boundaries, instead centering lines around relationships or a form of grounded continuance.

Many scholars have reflected on Erdrich's entanglement of stories and land, each concluding that she contributes to a reclamation of various spaces. Christian Knoeller's analysis of language, for instance, considers Erdrich's use of the Ojibwe language, Ojibwemowin, as it connects Erdrich to her heritage and helps situate herself in the present (645-46). Marija Krivokapić examines *Books and Islands*'s effects on and position within the genre of travel writing, whereas Deena Rymhs identifies Erdrich's "challenge to settler mappings" (118). These analyses are all rooted in positionality, pointing to Erdrich's assertion of her claims to language, literature, and mapping. My paper similarly contemplates Erdrich's position, but its focus is on her depiction of setting. I expand on these scholars' arguments not only by demonstrating how Erdrich reclaims the land, but also by extending notion of relational lines to the analysis of a second literary work.

In the interest of integrating Daniel Justice's understanding of reading as an interrelational project, I introduce Lisa Bird-Wilson's (Métis and nēhiyaw) *Probably Ruby* (2020), which, I argue, can similarly be read through Erdrich's theory of the relational line. My decision to analyze these two texts in tandem relates to how they enact Justice's "process of becoming" through their nuanced depictions of identity and contrasted renderings of space. Becoming is particularly relevant to Erdrich and Bird-Wilson's narratives, with both texts

consisting of a protagonist exploring their identity: Erdrich reveals her ties to books, places, and people in a confident manner, expressing her understanding of what constitutes her home, her land, and her family. *Probably Ruby*, in contrast, follows protagonist Ruby and her attempts to understand her obscured Indigenous heritage after being adopted by a white family. In an interview with CBC Radio, Bird-Wilson explains Ruby's quest for connection through kinship as "her driving motivation." Ruby struggles with her sense of belonging, never quite finding a relationship where she feels accepted. Ruby's response to adversity certainly relates to the transformative power of stories, with the form of the novel entangling narratives that contributes to Ruby's becoming. Bird-Wilson constructs Ruby's narrative in a fragmented, non-chronological structure with the story being told from a third-person narrator but following a different character in each chapter, most of which interact directly with Ruby, yet there is never a chapter devoted explicitly to her. *Probably Ruby* expands on Justice's interrelational reading process by depicting a less confident account of self-discovery that must navigate an outside force, Ruby's adoption, and how it instills Ruby with a sense of unfamiliarity within herself. Through their movements that extend and return, the lines in these texts illustrate the protagonists' reclamation of their spaces. This paper brings various people or concepts together in a transformative way, in that it encourages interaction across texts rather than a division and reveals the connection between stories and the land, therefore challenging the boundaries of lines.

The Space and Place of Becoming

While Erdrich relates stories to land, Bird-Wilson addresses what happens when this relationship is not as clear, presenting a tangled and abstract narrative reflective of Ruby's dislocation. An analysis of these two texts is particularly effective, then, as it demonstrates how the process of becoming is inextricably linked to space. Daniel Coleman's extensive thinking on space contributes to my approach, such as in his essay on "Holy Land" where he questions what makes a place sacred to its inhabitants and describes that by becoming aware of the "layers of story and soil," one can further their relationship with their surroundings (17). While Erdrich seems to successfully understand these layers, Ruby grapples with what is left unknown to her. My goal is to uncover these layers within each narrative, but to accomplish this goal, a distinction between the two texts must be made. In "Indigenous Place and Diaspora Space: Literalism and

Abstraction," Coleman notably explores authors' consideration of setting by distinguishing between literal and metaphorical relationships with land. He markedly connects the Indigenous relationship to *place* with literalism, in comparison to the diasporic *space* that is often rooted in abstraction, and he contemplates the resulting complications and potential interactions of these relationships. Coleman's argument relates especially to the treatment of place and tradition in Erdrich and Bird-Wilson's texts because of their contrasting depictions of setting. My approach to these two texts relies on close reading their literal or abstract interpretations of lines in space and imagery. The objects within Erdrich's memoir are tangible: one can physically hold and construct the lines of moccasins and dental pictograms on birchbark, and specific places are introduced by a map that Erdrich later moves through, refusing to be held within one settler-enforced boundary that is guarded by the border between the United States and Canada. This mobility, however, is never abstract but a detailed movement that is informed by Erdrich's understanding of and connection to the setting. These physical lines convey Erdrich's grounded connection to tradition, as the imagery she describes revolves around concrete objects and literal land.

In contrast, *Probably Ruby* opens with an abstract version of a map: a web. This imagery relates to her relationships and the temporal orientation of the novel, that is, an entanglement of lines. Alison Calder recognizes this complexity in her exploration of the themes of dislocation and identity in Bird-Wilson's works. In particular, she contemplates the struggles that Bird-Wilson's Métis characters experience, in asking, "what home is and what is to be Métis" when "you don't have land to return to?" (3). *Probably Ruby* aligns with Coleman's thinking on diasporic abstraction because of the diaspora and Métis people's similar experience of removal from their homeland. While the idea and the memory of the homeland may remain, a return to the same physical space is often not a reality, producing instead an abstract space for these two groups, which, I argue, applies to Ruby's navigation of space and identity. I propose that the framework of the relational line demonstrates Ruby's process of reclamation, where she takes her stunted lineage and ambiguous setting, and constructs it into a new narrative until she is able to return to a feeling of home, represented by biological family. I will consider her relationship web and the intersecting lines within it as these relationships often go un-reciprocated. My examination of the form of the novel in its more abstract orientation will reveal Ruby's pattern of running away and the theme of familial detachment that Ruby confronts through her successful

return to family. It is my goal to demonstrate how the lines within and between each text cultivate a productive analysis of reclamation through stories and space, expressing a relationality across the borders of their pages.

My relational comparison is rooted in Chadwick Allen's thoughtfully prescribed comparative methodology that he outlines in *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*. Allen questions how to approach comparative analyses in Indigenous texts, when the juxtaposition of Indigenous literatures requires "plac[ing] diverse texts close together across genre and media" (xvii). He asks, "Which specific formats for purposeful Indigenous juxtapositions are productive within scholarship in the field of literary studies? How might the potential of specific juxtapositions to provoke readings across various categories enable interpretations of a broad range of texts and practices?" (xvii-xviii). I suggest that the juxtaposition of literal and figurative lines in Erdrich's and Bird-Wilson's texts provides one such productive format, where it allows the researcher to engage in "different kinds of conversations, and to acknowledge the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and texts" (xiv). As I will demonstrate through close readings, the lines between and within texts are not lines of division but of interaction, prompting such dialogue and mobility because of the resulting movement, where it goes out and comes back in a manner that fosters connection. Rather than what Allen calls the restricting "work of orthodox literary studies" that "limit[s] the possibilities for reading and interpretation to a single track," my analysis presents, instead, "the many parallel, perpendicular, and intersecting tracks of movement and engagement possible among written literatures and other representational arts" (xix), which are reflective of the movements of relational lines. Because of the non-restrictive quality of the line, where the approach is broad enough to allow specific complexities of individual Indigenous nations to emerge, I remain aware of the texts' diversities. One notable difference between the two texts is that Erdrich's text is a work of non-fiction as a memoir, whereas Bird-Wilson presents a fictional narrative. A comparative analysis across these two genres enables a reclamation of physical and abstract spaces as Indigenous voices exist simultaneously in both. This comparison further recognizes the limitation that exists for those who may not have a concrete connection to place and may instead rely on accounts that are similar to Ruby's in their obscurity, and their connection removes a hierarchy that could otherwise exist: both equally deserve reclamation. As a settler scholar, I seek to follow the

advice of Allen with the goal of avoiding homogenization and erasure, and to approach my analysis by respecting the power of stories that Justice outlines. This process of becoming, then, contributes to unsettlement by challenging Western notions of boundaries and reclaiming more than physical space in detailing how relationality exists within and across texts.

Erdrich's Trailing Land-Based Tradition

Before considering the relationality across texts, I will analyze the lines in Erdrich's *Books and Islands* to reveal the transformative powers of the relational line and its ability to reclaim. Erdrich's memoir sees her travel in her traditional homelands around Lake of the Woods on both sides of the US-Canada border. The book is a series of meditations where Erdrich reflects on her connection to her ancestors and the Ojibwe culture while she travels with her youngest daughter. In addition to detailing the islands' rock paintings, Erdrich relates her knowledge of—and her difficulty in learning—the Ojibwe language. When listing the various meanings of *Ojibwe*, Erdrich demonstrates the more fundamental power of the line, that is, the force that occurs through writing and the resulting product of the interactive book. Erdrich explains how "the meaning [she likes] best of course is Ojibwe from the verb *Ozhibii'ige*, which is 'to write.' Ojibwe people were great writers from way back and synthesized the oral and written tradition by keeping mnemonic scrolls of inscribed birchbark. The first paper, the first books" (8). The lines made on the birchbark act in a similar way to the lines within any physical book, entangling past and present as well as self and other for whichever new reader interacts with the narrative. Indeed, one of the purposes Erdrich assigns to books when repeated her guiding questions, "Books. Why?," is communication beyond boundaries. She explains that books allow the reader and author to "talk… even though [one is] dead. Here we are, the writer and I, regarding each other" (43). The physical lines within the book cross temporal and physical boundaries as they relate a story and unite people through one object.

The inscribed birchbark complicates the notion of the book as an object, though, with Erdrich demonstrating the way the "oral and written [Ojibwe] tradition" has been "synthesized" through these "first books." By remembering that line "is sound, speech, [and] song" (45), Erdrich links orality and writing in a relational manner, where books are not limited to mere marks on a page. Erdrich also confronts the Western narrative that claims, traditionally, Indigenous peoples hold no physical records. By returning to Ojibwe culture and imparting this

culturally specific knowledge to readers, Erdrich extends lines of the physical book, thus reaching a more complex understanding of what qualifies as a physical book worthy of consideration. As a result, these lines hold more power than simply transforming words and objects into stories because they simultaneously move away from potentially harmful claims by returning to and extending Ojibwe knowledge and practices. This definition of *Ojibwe* is also rooted in the land, with books, constructed by birchbark, clearly emanating from trees. These books are evocative of the pictograms on the islands themselves, another Ojibwe conception of stories or books. The land not only supplies materials for book-making but is also physically integrated into Ojibwe traditions, here, through writing and storytelling. Erdrich begins to reclaim space in her interaction with the land that is based on relationality and literally grounded in her own traditions, as opposed to treating the land in an extractive or divisive manner.

The communicative birchbark lines align especially with an argument made by Louise's sister, Heid Erdrich, in "Name': Literary Ancestry as Presence," where Heid recognizes a similar potential to be "connected across time" through found marks and landmarks, where land and language are entwined (14). From her Anishnaabe perspective, Heid Erdrich reflects on the power of marks in "landmark literary works and the pictographic marks/signs/presence"—like the rock paintings and birchbark books—in that they produce a continual relationship between present readers and past ancestral authors, but she also expresses that these marks prompt an "understanding of [a] shared place," where marks formed on land are not made with an "intent to claim territory" (13-14). Instead, the marks function in a way that bring "comfort in their signs of presence" for those who are aware of them (13-14). As such, (Louise) Erdrich's reclamation of the land is not one that produces a hierarchy where she holds dominion over the land but constitutes a reclamation that is aware of Ojibwe ancestral presence. In Louise Erdrich's descriptions of the lands and telling of the stories within, she relates this presence to the reader to re-establish "Anishnaabe presence" (H. Erdrich 15) from *her* point of view in its emphasis on community, and not a settler one that prioritizes ownership of the land.

To return again to *Books and Islands* and our primary author, Louise Erdrich explains that another definition of Ojibwe is the physical line in the thread of the moccasin that binds fabric and tradition as it crosses the boundaries of time. Erdrich[1] describes the way she has "heard that Ojibwe refers to the puckering of the seams of traditional moccasins, or *makazinan*"

[1] The rest of the paper refers to only Louise Erdrich, not Heid Erdrich.

(7). While not perhaps obvious at first glance, a line is apparent in the seam and the thread that is used to sew the moccasin together. Erdrich's description of the traditional moccasin creates a relationship in the act of sewing, bringing the sewer closer to Ojibwe culture with what is created when guiding the thread through these lines of stitches. The line here, though, is not straight, as is evident in the image of the puckering seam. The thread goes through one piece of fabric to the next, returning in either a wave or spiral pattern to achieve such an effect— in each stitch, the thread extends outwards and returns closer to the sewer. The stitch connects and continues, rather than separating as a boundary, therefore expressing the relationship between past and present by returning to tradition in the present— or going there and coming back.

Erdrich's engagement with time can be understood in terms of the theory of time articulated in Mark Rifkin's *Beyond Settler Time*, where he advocates for a new temporal and Indigenous orientation based on people's "potentially divergent processes of becoming" (2). Rifkin recognizes that the process of becoming differs from one person to the next, which at first glance may appear obvious. What Rifkin asserts, though, is that people's conception of time not only contributes to their process of becoming but it also relates to their past experience, and consequently, time differs:

> Being temporally oriented suggests that one's experiences, sensations, and possibilities for action are shaped by the existing inclinations, itineraries, and networks in which one is immersed, turning toward some things and away from others. More than a question of relations in space, orientation involves reiterated and nonconscious tendencies, suggesting ways of inhabiting time that shape how the past moves toward the present and future. (2)

Rifkin's thinking of Indigenous orientations of time aligns with the concept of relational lines, in which both seemingly collapse chronological understandings of time. Time, according to Rifkin, affects people differently based on their own processes and this unique temporal orientation is seen in the relational line, in its extension to the past and return to the present. After returning home, time, according to Erdrich, "seems foreshortened, furiously spent, a blur. If, as *Austerlitz* says, time is by far the most artificial of all our inventions, then what am I living in, what is this force that holds me captive in its ineluctable continuance?" (Erdrich 110-11). Time itself can be transformative, leading the self to past "others" and transforming the present self, whether the

past refers to a return to tradition as in Erdrich's case, evident in the seams of the moccasins, or a return to land without borders.

As the subtitle indicates, Erdrich's memoir certainly travels through the land of her ancestors; to overcome the current settler limitations of borders, Erdrich prefaces her text with the image of a map that she uses to confront division lines as boundaries through the map's presentation.[2] While the theoretical landscape that considers the overlap between settler colonialism and mapping is abundant, in her work which attempts to move "Across Borders," Deena Rymhs specifically considers Erdrich's prefatory image. Rymhs recognizes in the map Erdrich's depiction of "borderland spaces that further work to challenge settler mappings," astutely noting how Erdrich emphasizes the bolded "Ojibwe Country" label over the smaller size (and, therefore, significance) of colonial territorial markers such as the names of Canada, the U.S., and the border itself (121-22).

The border between the U.S. and Canada, however, certainly exists, despite the lesser significance Erdrich grants it in her map, and it is one that she must navigate throughout her travels. In Erdrich's recollection of one of these crossings, despite her attempts "not to be nervous," she finds that she "can't help it" (83). Her account of crossing the border is not pleasant, with Erdrich expressing the "hate" she feels regarding "the question, the scrutiny, [and] the suspicious nature of the border guards" despite the Jay Treaty, "which guarantees Native People the right to cross the Canadian-U.S. border without hassle" (84). Erdrich infuses this recollection with horror, questioning by the end of this section, "What have they done to me?" (84). The border line here is certainly a dividing one and is crossed, physically and metaphorically, as the guards go so far as to question Erdrich about whether her child is actually her own. In her analysis of Erdrich's memoir, Rymhs recognizes Erdrich's need to negotiate the border between nation-states, but ultimately asserts that Erdrich "honors instead an alternative geography formed by millennia of Indigenous occupancy and migration across borders" (118). In other words, Erdrich's treatment of and movement across the land confronts the dividing line of the border. The Western conception of the line continues to exist but to extend past it, Erdrich returns to her Ojibwe ways of living by going "back onto a lake" (84).

Erdrich ensures that not only land is reclaimed but so is the water, with her travels through the Ojibwe lakes asserting the power of the wavy line through actual waves. Erdrich is

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[2] See Figure 1.1: Image of "Ojibwe Country" on pg. 24.

joined on her island travels by her partner, Tobasonakwut, who is also the father of her youngest child. Throughout the memoir, Erdrich repeats a phrase from Tobasonakwut's father that establishes a connection between waves and people: "The creator is the lake and we are the waves on the lake" (27, 64). Water is indeed more than mere waves, but a space full of movement and life, and in the various forces of waves, she suggests certain types of interactions. Erdrich expands on this comparison by revealing the interactions of relationships when "Tobasonakwut shows [her] how the waves are creating underwaves and counterwaves" (64). Waves create responses under the surface, representing either the various and occasional opposing feelings within relationships, or the generational aspect of creation, such as growing a child under the initial layer of skin or adding another line to your *line*age. Erdrich furthers these interactions when she notes how "the rough swells" bounce against the "rocky shores" (64) to indicate a balance maintained between contact. Finding their equal, rough waves meet the rough lines of rocks, which Tobasonakwut recognizes and "avoids" (64). Erdrich therefore advocates for reciprocity in relationships while demonstrating the hidden layers within the space of water.

Erdrich resists a distinct division between land and water, though, as she describes the spirituality of the waves; she notes that "[t]he wooded lands and shores will absorb the force of the waves and not send them back out to create confusion" (64). The "force of the waves" that is absorbed by the shores of the islands shows a merging, "signify[ing] a spiritual interaction" similar to the way Tobasonakwut "help[s] people meet their visions…by putting them out to fast" in his sweat lodge on an island (23). Since wavy lines "are most impressive, for they signify direct visionary information, talk from spirit to spirit" (45), the waves that are absorbed onto the shores display a similarly powerful interaction that result in a direct connection where shore and waves meet, like the visions themselves. Some waves are calmly transformed because of their interaction and merging with the island's shore, similar to the purpose of Tobansonakwut's guided spiritual visions.

Erdrich's travel through the waves also contrasts with her experience at the border, where Erdrich and Tobasonakwut present an alternative method of travel that results in a distancing from intersecting and more chaotic lines. When meeting open water, they encounter waves affected by external stimuli, with winds from the past merging into the present moment, now dealing "with yesterday's wind, a strong north wind, and swells underneath the waves" (64). The resulting "confusion" (64) prompts Erdrich and Tobasonakwut to slice through them, drawing a

line that does in fact separate from the potential turmoil, indicating how they are not travelling relationally, but in a linear direction. They are going somewhere, but the return aspect of the relational line is not included. As the number of waves increase, so too does the "complexity and mutability of human nature" (64-5). Indeed, in the memoir's first chapter, Erdrich remarks, "You could think of the lakes as libraries" (3), which contain a multitude of authors and genres, yet this image of the open water expresses the way people are not as easily placed within a confined boundary of book covers or shelves but interacting with and affecting one another, as the transformational process of going from self to other suggests. Just as anyone ponders past interactions, so too do the waves. Although the water itself may not be clear because of the many waves, the open water of that day clearly depicts the various interactions between people, sometimes countering one another like differing opinions. As a result, Tobasonakwut and Erdrich avoid the wind-affected waves, placing the purpose of their destination over the journey and demonstrating a method of travel that respects these intersecting lines.

The relational lines explored to this point certainly illustrate a movement that is rooted in reciprocal interaction, with the transformative aspect perhaps necessitated by this reciprocity. As Erdrich implies in her complex descriptions of the waves, the merging of what appears on either end of the line requires a certain balance. Erdrich navigates lines ethically. This ethical negotiation is particularly evident when she passes Massacre Island, noting how

> It is not considered wise to point a finger at any island, especially this one. The Ojibwe use mouth or head to indicate direction, and are often humorously mocked for 'pointing with the lips.' But it is impolite to point a finger at people, and the islands as well. Pointing at the islands is like challenging them. And you don't want to challenge anything this powerful. (48)

The line created from the pointing of a finger does not have a balanced reciprocity and instead incites a challenge, returning something that would be better off avoided. Since a distance is implied by needing "to indicate direction," a lack of intimacy is also involved through this particular pointed line. As such, the line here still fosters a connection, but is one best avoided because of the distanced imbalance of power.

Despite Erdrich's frequently successful reclamations of space, at one point, she is made to employ this distancing and create her own space when immersed in a setting that removes her from land-based traditions. On her way home from the Ojibwe islands, Erdrich resigns herself to

spending a night at the Skylark Motel. Here, she encounters an island "of a very different sort" where she notices the "unattractive nature of the towns and buildings" that results in a "belligerent streak [of] ugliness" (77). In this secluded setting, Erdrich returns to her frequent, and in this moment, comforting, question, of

> Books. Why? For such a situation. Marooned in this uneasy night, shaken by the periodic shudder of passing semi trucks, every sentence grips me. My brain holds onto each trailing line as though grasping a black rope in a threatening fog. I finish half a page, then read it over again, then read the next half of the page and then the entire page, twice. Not many books can be read with such intimacy, nor are there many so beautifully composed that the writing alone brings comfort. I carry *Middlemarch* along with me on book tours because the elaborate twists in George Eliot's sentences provoke in me a mood of concentrated calm. (79)

The line here acts as a trail or a rope in a moment where visibility is low, giving Erdrich something to grip in order to guide her throughout a threatening fog. The book's lines are also described as twisting, intimately comforting Erdrich in a way that grants her an escape. The lines grab her attention, connected to one another without end in a similar way to the moccasin seams, moving in a spiral pattern that continues, overcoming any separation that each end of the line and the blank border of a page may otherwise mark. Erdrich goes back and forth as she has to reread or return to the beginning of a new line, emphasizing the way reading can be a process of movement instead of a distinctly linear action. She also demonstrates that starting over, a return, is not always a weakness, but a strength. The lines here are not only a distraction but a calming thread to guide her and distance her from the setting, extending past it. They act as more than a story, but an intimate relationship between reader and words, capable of removing Erdrich from the isolating motel and placing her in a comforting space.

As the work of a British author, *Middlemarch* contrasts with the earlier birchbark books rooted in Ojibwe tradition. Seemingly unable to reclaim the space of the Skylark Motel, Erdrich still embarks on a process of transformation, where she interacts with Eliot's text as a way to distance herself from a space with which she finds no ties. She consequently reclaims the *space* of books, where literature is not solely a discipline for figures of Empire, but a tradition seen in the birchbark lines. According to Daniel Heath Justice in "Indigenous Writing," "writing—however it is understood—is both access to and exercise of power and authority in contemporary

social and political relations" (295). Erdrich employs her power as author and as reader to read whichever book she wishes but also to situate these two literatures next to one another. Erdrich rejects a hierarchy across literary spaces of British or settler authors versus Indigenous writing. She apples the urgings of Justice to learn new "ways of reading and engaging with texts outside of our interpretive skill set" to demonstrate how "we might find unexpectedly beautiful ways of comprehending the wonders of the inspired imagination" (Justice 304) by detailing how her reading of *Middlemarch* affects her. Finding an escape through reading, Erdrich creates her own space where she unsettles the settler space that she is forced to encounter on her travels between her home in Minneapolis and the home of her ancestors. This interaction with *Middlemarch* continues "to signify spiritual interaction" (45) because of the distance it grants her, bringing her to a place that she chooses.

Books, according to Erdrich, act as "a witness to my travels" (111), an inseparable aspect of her life, and relate to Justice's process of becoming. The significance she places on books is evident throughout the memoir, with her frequent return to books, in the question she asks ("Books. Why?") and the physical return she makes to her bookstore, which, notably, is named *Birchbark Books*: "This little bookstore is where I belong and where anyone can belong. It is a home for people who loves books and a place that cannot be duplicated by any bookstore corporation—it is just too personal. It is an island, as lovingly itself as any lake" (116). The intimacy of the bookstore, of the books themselves, refers to Justice's becoming, with Erdrich's individual process —her identity—affected and made up by the stories she includes, even one by a British author such as George Eliot. And this island, that is, the memoir itself, as Erdrich extends away from her house into the islands of Ojibwe country, eventually leads to her return home. The plot*line* therefore upholds the relationality that connects her to the land of her ancestors, as the title suggests. Erdrich explores the land of her ancestors in a way that centres Indigenous ways of living, consequently establishing another relational line that transforms the space that Erdrich so intimately knows into one of Indigenous sovereignty.

The lines within Erdrich's memoir therefore illustrate her grounded connection to tradition and the consequent effects on her identity. Her relationship with the land and the stories within convey a certain power, encouraging Erdrich's movement through Ojibwe land despite potential isolating lines (like borders and distant motels). Traditional items, such as moccasins and dental pictograms on birchbark, bring Erdrich closer to Ojibwe ways of living, and even

objects lacking a cultural association, like books from British authors, are shown to positively enhance her travels and her process of becoming. The navigation of space— of land and of literature— is based on reciprocal interaction and grants all entities a certain level of agency because of her respectful rather than divisive, treatment. The relationships she depicts in her imagery of the waves, while rooted in the Ojibwe land, also position reciprocity at the core. She details how to navigate spaces despite the chaos of travel and the opposing views of multiple people and transforms the islands into one of spiritual interaction where visions occur, and Ojibwe tradition is prioritized. Her process of becoming is shaped by this tradition, clearly rooted in her relationship with her ancestors that translates to her current position on the land, which is a tangible reality through which she confidently moves. This literal space, filled with physical books and stories, both contributes to her identity and emphasizes a stark contrast with the more abstract approach that Bird-Wilson takes in *Probably Ruby*. To think now of the relationality across texts, Erdrich's memoir reveals the very different process that Ruby encounters, where one's connection to land and ancestral stories is unknown and results in a more abstract network of relationships and setting. Erdrich's text, then, prompts a compelling discussion of Ruby's story, since it responds to the question of how Ruby can find her reclamation when she cannot navigate a physical space filled with an understanding of tradition that Erdrich is granted.

Ruby's Search for a Place in Kinship in an Unknown Space

While Erdrich explores her traditions in a more straightforward manner, focalizing *her* story through *her*self in a mostly chronological order, Bird-Wilson approaches Ruby's story with a more abstract method: Ruby is the protagonist, but the story is told from a third-person narrator and multiple focalizers—with each chapter revolving around a different character—and it unfolds over a period of many decades that never includes a chapter from Ruby herself. Where Erdrich's text emphasizes a certain freedom in her reclamation of the Ojibwe place, Bird-Wilson's fragmented narrative aligns with Lee Maracle's (Stó:lō) discussion about forced changes and the resulting "horror" that occurs "at having change foisted upon you from outside" (13). Because of her adoption into a non-Indigenous family, Ruby is dislocated from her Métis roots; she realizes that "*I'm not who I think I am*" once she learns of her Métis background (Bird-Wilson, *Probably* 149).[3] Her narrative resonates with Maracle's notion of forced transformation

[3] The remainder of Bird-Wilson's quotations are taken from *Probably Ruby*.

because of Ruby's forceful removal from her connection to kin. Notably, a phrase that Ruby later learns from her therapist, "*wounded at dawn*" sticks "with Ruby all these years" (86), pointing to her adoption as a potential root to her problems with intimacy.

Ruby's identity appears to revolve around her relationships with others, which is suggestive of her desire for kinship and reflects the novel's overall abstract approach (in its form and setting). Rather than opening with an image of a map as Erdrich's text does, *Probably Ruby* begins with what appears to be a hand-drawn illustration of "Ruby's Relationship Web," depicted as convoluted and interrupted with Ruby as a figure at its centre.[4] The Relationship Web includes various types of lines—some of which are depicted in bold, as dashes, coloured in, or even multiplied in some cases. Each relationship evidently differs from the next. What these lines have in common, though, are their extensions outward and their ability to return intersected repeatedly by Ruby. The Web reflects the novel's plot*line*: relationships are presented in a non-linear fashion and centre around Ruby's search for kinship, belonging, and reciprocity. Ruby's timeline, then, in her chapters that tangle time, convey what *probably* makes up *Ruby*, as the title indicates. The narration itself can be considered a more abstract approach since it contributes to a less concrete identity for Ruby. The intersecting stories are all told in third person, and this outside narrator divulging information about Ruby, rather than the information coming from Ruby herself, imparts a level of uncertainty to her identity. She, perhaps, cannot find belonging even within herself. Instead, the form of the novel prioritizes navigating relationships; their entanglement across time is something Ruby herself needs to make sense of.

Ruby attempts to decipher her relationship web by returning to this idea of family and roots. The narrator affirms this search for kinship in Ruby's relationship with Moe, who is Ruby's ex-husband and father to her two boys, when the narrator states,

> It was important to [Ruby] that Moe was Métis. His was essentially the only Native family she had. That was why it was so impossible for her to leave Moe even though he gave her so many reasons to want to. He was tied to all the things she missed and wished for. He was still her "big Métis hope." Moe was part of her fantasy about his family, about finding out that they were somehow connected—related, maybe, in a distant way. That really, truly, and by blood, she belonged. (146)

[4] See Figure 1.2: Image of "Ruby's Relationship Web" on pg. 25.

Unlike Erdrich's tangible ancestral knowledge, Ruby merely fantasizes about understanding her Métis heritage. Moe acts as a potential avenue, but this remains at most a hope, an abstract image. Ruby expands on this hope through her elaborate fabrication of the "mythology" she creates for her children, with her careful curation of "Native art, cheap prints from second-hand stores, portraits of children and Elders from villages she didn't know where" (76). She tries to ensure her children do not feel "the weird amnesia" that Ruby herself feels "in her blood" (77). While Moe brings an irrefutable potential for Ruby, he represents "Ruby's attempt to dream herself back together" (77).

Her relationships are often unbalanced and unrooted, leading to separation rather than the merging that according to Justice, results in an interactive transformation. The narrator affirms how Ruby has "a history of moving on" and compares her relationships to a collection of baby teeth, lacking "roots" (74). The lines that would otherwise ground the relationship, providing support and life, are missing. Ruby's "instinct to bolt from intimacy" (103) is a pattern throughout the novel and many of the chapters include variations of her running away[5] —a going away and coming back, but because there is no interaction on the other side of the line, the relationality aspect is missing and produces no transformation: Ruby returns but she remains the same as when she left.

The novel's abstracted and non-specific setting supports this noncommittal attitude toward moving on, where the characters and the narrator avoid mention of any specific location. When Bart and Ruby are both sixteen, Ruby questions Bart about his place of birth, highlighting again the significance Ruby places on feeling tied to something concrete. Bart, however, merely responds with "North" (55), thereby contributing to the setting's ambiguity. The narrator also evades disclosing the names of cities or town but does, in fact, leave potential indicators of the city of Saskatoon behind, including the sign for "Bethany Home" (110), but other places such as "United General Hospital or Sisters of Charity" (54), complicate this exact location.[6] More specific, though, is the mention of "Porcupine Lake. Probably about a two-hour drive from here"

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[5] For examples of Ruby's running away or tendency to move on, see pp. 74, 103, 198, 209, and the Chapter "Blondie" (pp. 159-170).

[6] I was unable to locate a "United General Hospital" within Saskatchewan (unless this is referring to Regina General Hospital). However, because these placenames are included when Ruby is guessing where Bart was born, she seems to know *his* birth town, and it may not be the same as hers, and could reasonably be outside of Saskatchewan. The third-person narrator does not disclose Bart's hometown in addition to Ruby's, though, which again points to a non-specificity of setting. "Sisters of Charity" refers to "any of numerous Roman Catholic congregations" ("Sisters"), so it exists in multiple places.

(60), which is suggestive of the province of Saskatchewan. Like Ruby's relationships, a web is left to map out Ruby's location, but these fleeting suggestions are reflective of Ruby's process. The space is not a home, as it is for Erdrich, but representative of Ruby's struggle to feel chosen and belong somewhere.

This desire for belonging and its inherent ties to space is particularly evident in Ruby's fenced-in childhood. The fence around her childhood yard seemingly holds true to its expected purpose: a boundary that keeps Ruby, according to her adoptive mother, Alice, "where she was allowed to be" (17). Despite this restriction, Ruby makes various attempts to complicate this threshold as more than a space to keep her limited and within her mother's reach. Ruby turns the "small space just for her [into] a hideaway, a place of her own to curl into, out of her mother's sight" (16). In her hideaway, the lines of the fence grant Ruby freedom from her mother, a slight extension away from her mother's careful watch. The small space also provides her the opportunity to explore a new sight*line* with her neighbor David: Ruby identifies how "David's eyes, locked on hers, were more reassuring than alarming. Also comforting was the way David showed up every day at the same time, like she could count on him" (18). Their gaze, met on either end and merging together, positions reciprocity and understanding at its core. In what is labelled a "naked gaze" between Ruby and David (18), Bird-Wilson seemingly confronts the separation of a fence with an intimate descriptor, highlighting how Ruby herself yearns for and finds, albeit briefly, a form of connection she has lacked until now. The naked gaze could also, however, present an undressing that critiques the lines of the fence in a manner similar to Erdrich's border crossing, which calls for Western notions of boundaries to be removed. The emphasis on the sightline over the fence reconceptualizes the space based on relationality rather than divisions.

The fence also provides Ruby with the opportunity to physically extend past and connect with something and someone new, that is, her first encounter with an Indigenous language. Her neighbour Mrs. Fisher notably *waves* Ruby over, stating "Astum. Come," with what is described as "a generous smile" (29). The wave, as in Erdrich's text, presents an interaction between people. While Erdrich's wave is one of water and Bird-Wilson's is a hand gesture, both nonetheless represent an interaction between people. Mrs. Fisher's gesture creates a line extending towards Ruby. A line is also evident in what is said, and its presentation in two languages (Cree and English) reveals a relationality in the one phrase, a movement between

languages otherwise absent from Ruby's life. This movement, alongside the motion of the wave, is similarly reflected in the line of a smile, all contributing to this moment—Ruby's first time—of climbing over the fence. Despite Ruby's adventure resulting in a horrific visit from a doctor, she remembers and vows to keep inside "most of all, the way Mrs. Fisher laid her hand on her head like a warm ray of sunshine. Ruby held on" (34). Not letting go of this memory, Ruby grasps onto it to prevent a return to the present moment by recalling Mrs. Fisher's pond, filled with orange fish and "alive with movement" (30). And although Ruby feels remorse for their repeated and trapped swirling, she projects this image of swirling lines onto the "flaking" ceiling, representative of the "same dance, [where] over and over they got the same result" (30) that Ruby later experiences in her swirling (or repeating), yet trapped relationships. Ruby's adoptive family clearly lacks the engagement that Ruby wishes for but these interactions with David and Mrs. Fisher act, like *Middlemarch* does for Erdrich, as an escape from her more isolating surroundings. These relationships facilitate a return to the present moment and give insight into Ruby's disconnection from her adoptive family.

Ruby searches for an understanding of her *line*age, a relational line that she lacks because of her adoption, leading her to construct a lineage for herself, within herself. When meeting her ex-girlfriend, Gwen, Ruby has trouble recognizing herself in a bar bathroom mirror. She says to herself, "'Fuck *lost*.' Ruby was quite drunk now. 'I didn't lose anything,' she poked her finger at herself in the mirror for emphasis. '*They* did.' Ruby pictured herself as a baby, swaddled in messy blankets, being passed from one set of hands to another. No. *Lost* was what *others* did" (89). In this moment of drunken reflection, Ruby literally turns within to find some form of answer and relief from her missing lineage. And by remembering Erdrich's caution against pointing a finger, Ruby's confrontation is particularly evocative because she approaches herself, provoking her thoughts of blame caused by her adoption. By pointing the finger, she realizes that the line to her ancestry is something she must construct on her own—inciting a challenge within. As a result, Ruby creates her own fictional family, "lin[ing] her tiny nest of mythology with each fragment she picked up, twigs and leaves and bits of string; she hoarded each scrap and built from them what she could. Scavenged a narrative. Accounted for herself. As faulty as it was, as draughty and full of holes" (107). Her invented lineage is perhaps incomplete in some regards, scavenged and full of holes, but it is an attempt at a relational line, with small portions of lines,

or string, that she has put together for her own benefit. As such, her imaginary lineage contributes to her process of becoming, or for Ruby, her process of belonging.

The narrator gives the reader access to Ruby's actual lineage with characters unknown to Ruby and through these chapters, an eventual return home and a reclamation of space are depicted that aligns with Erdrich's *Books and Islands.* However, before this return occurs, Ruby's biological parents, Grace and Leon, show a similar pattern to Ruby where they are involved in disconnected relationships. Grace gives insight into Ruby's current history, where Grace extends past a line without an ability to return through the birth and adoption of her two children. In Grace's chapter, she endeavors to leave what Bird-Wilson terms the Asylum in order for her to keep her unborn baby but learns, like Ruby, that her running away "amounted to nothing" (125). Despite her attempts to keep her children, she cannot escape the systemic institutions that surround her, but she also cannot return to the life before her pregnancy. While Grace stays at the Asylum, others within imply that a movement will be made in their repeated phrase of "going over." Grace learns what this means during labor:

> She found going over meant, mostly, labouring alone in quiet shame. The suggestion from the nurses, from the Warden, who made a surprising visit to the ward, and from the obscure, all-powerful doctor, was that your remorse could be measured by your self-control in the agony of labour, in the rush of delivery. Now was your chance to be a good girl. Be a good girl and be quiet, why don't you? (126)

For those assisting with Grace's labor, going over, then, is suggestive of isolating improvement. A transformation is implied with the aim that Grace will progress, crossing a line away from her misguided moments that have led her to this moment, now becoming their notion of what is good. According to everyone but Grace, she will leave the Asylum alone but remorseful, as if virtuous principles will fill the absence left by her baby. Grace, however, "kn[ows] better," and she recognizes that her child cannot be completely detached from her: She "[k]new it was forever—*felt* its perpetual shadow on her insides. It was a scar, and she was marked. Her time in the Asylum now part of her permanent record" (129). Grace cannot extend past this lingering shadow caused by her experience at the Asylum when she returns to her previous life. Instead, she seemingly passes a mark of detachment onto Ruby, leaving her disconnected from her roots with both having experienced the forced transformations described by Maracle.

Like Grace, Ruby's father shows a similar inability to return caused by a moment of distraction, where his inability to see what is most significant, leads to his permanent absence from his child's life. The chapter "Leon" is one of two chapters in the novel where readers are aware of the subject's relationship to Ruby, but Ruby herself is otherwise absent from the narrative. Here, the narrator outlines Leon's death by detailing his movement away from his intended course. After learning of his current girlfriend's infidelity, Leon leaves his home in the middle of a night to drive into the city for, it appears, some sort of distraction, although Leon himself cannot seem to recall why he felt the desire to leave his home (36). On his way, Leon picks up two young hitchhikers and while attempting to drive safely, he emphatically commands himself to "Just. Keep. Your eye. On. The dotted. Line" (38). Something interrupts his narrowed sightline, however, where he "should have been driving the centre line but he'd lost his concentration" (45), resulting in the accident that causes Leon's death. He markedly drifts away from this centre line, unable to return after his crash. He therefore remains unknown to Ruby, away from the central line of her life because of what appears to be an interruption to what would otherwise have been his path. Leon knows of his daughter and his failed responsibility (or his lost centre line), Ruby only a "foggy memory" that appears of "a long-ago daughter…A baby he never met. An unfulfilled promise" (44).

Leon continues to affect Ruby, despite his absence, and enhances her abstracted position. Even after Ruby learns of Leon from Leon's mother, Rose, Ruby admits to her inability to properly grieve for her father because "[s]he knew no ceremony of letting go" (104). He offers Ruby no relief, even when she learns of his death. And while Ruby never meets her biological father, Leon is described as "[b]ound up in her creation, at the root of her web of being, he was substantial and yet fleeting" (104). He certainly contributes to Ruby's identity, rooted in her Relationship Web, but he exists as a line without clear definition, more figurative than concrete. Their relationship appears perhaps unbalanced, un-reciprocal, or unable to assist Ruby on her path to finding her family. He provides no concrete answers for her, abstracting Ruby's story.

Describing another family member, the chapter "Johnny," refers to Ruby's grandfather and is dated 1950, but it contrasts with Grace and Leon's chapters because of Johnny's successful return home, wherein he reclaims the space in a manner similar to Erdrich. In this other outlier chapter, Johnny is connected to Ruby as her grandfather but again the chapter lacks a direct interaction with Ruby. The purpose of the chapter revolves around Johnny's

understanding of what occurs between the priests and the young boys at the residential school he attends, resulting in a priest's violent death and Johnny's escape. His return home, though, is not an easy endeavor: "Kisciyiniw [Johnny] walked over a hundred miles to return to his family. He didn't die. He went back home and learned about the old ways from his grandfather. The way a boy should" (191). His return functions in a similar manner to Erdrich's border crossing, where navigating beyond the horrific boundaries positioned by settler colonialism precipitates a return to land and to an Indigenous way of living and learning. He also reclaims the space as Erdrich does, traveling through the land to return to an alternative way of knowing.

Ruby finds *her* return home in the novel's final chapter. The novel ends (only in its presentation, not its chronology) with Ruby about to embark on her travels to meet her biological family for the first time. *Probably Ruby* finishes where *Books and Islands* begins, with the protagonist leaving on a trip to explore the "land of [their] ancestors," both ending with a return to where they find a sense of home. From a phone call with Rose, Ruby finally learns about where she belongs: "Half-blood, Métis—like she always thought she was. And Cree. The trip to the wedding would be like a salmon swimming upstream. In her blood to go there. An irresistible pull. Only she didn't swim away in the first place. That's why it was so hard to know the way back. She was a little salmon scooped up in a big net" (237). This description compares Ruby's adoption to her extension outward, and her return is finally occurring, now the transformative process that she yearns for, bringing her relationality rather than mere direction. She travels "[u]priver. Back to where she came from. Where she'd soon find out how her concoctions through all those years, her family pictures, the partial stories she'd fleshed into narratives, had turned out" (250). The image of her lineage shifts from the stuck together pieces of strings to a more concrete line, bringing her connection and relations—an extension and a return.

The novel, then, follows Ruby on her journey through distanced relationships, and sees Ruby establishing her own sense of belonging until it witnesses her eventual return to her Métis roots. While Bird-Wilson presents this return in the novel's last chapter, there are, however, events that occur chronologically after it takes place. The reader is aware of Ruby's relationship with her biological grandmother before the final chapter of her first leaving to meet her. In Rose's chapter, though, the narrator reveals Ruby's lingering feelings of unbelonging even after she locates her family: "[Ruby] didn't tell Rose what it was she ran away from, or that, even though she didn't have anything to run from anymore, the instinct to bolt from intimacy

remained” (103). Although Ruby’s heritage becomes known to her, she continues to feel a certain amount of abstraction: she struggles with intimacy as if she wishes to remain detached from anyone. Rose, however, expresses her own similar experiences, and running away now brings “a moment of affinity” between the two of them (103). Ruby’s adoption, despite this outside family *choosing* Ruby, causes Ruby to feel like an outsider and contributes to Ruby’s habitual running away, and only with Rose does the feeling of being chosen “nearly [feel] true” (103). And with the final chapter, where Bird-Wilson ends with Ruby’s excitement to meet Rose and return home, as if she is a salmon swimming upstream, suggests that the potential exists for Ruby to belong.

By considering the line, the theme of familial detachment within the novel becomes more vivid, with Rose, Grace, and Leon all subtly enacting this pattern that Ruby more heavily relies on. Leon moves away from the centre line he should have been on because of his lack of concentration, which points to the “unfulfilled promise” of his child as his veered away from what should have been his path. Grace also extends away from the line of family as she is forced to give away both of her children (despite her attempts not to), “*Going over*” (117) a line that she cannot return to because of, not only her child’s birth, but the inescapable systemic institutions surrounding her, forcing her to give her child away. The exception, though, is Johnny, who runs *towards* his home and family. The novel’s construction, then, seems to bring Ruby towards a more uncertain, and perhaps abstract, return. The nonlinearity leads the reader *towards* Ruby’s choice, suggesting that she does indeed overcome loss and is brought towards some resolution despite previously knowing of her lingering feelings of unease. While Ruby’s parents seem to be unable to return to the promise of their daughter—so their line extends but does not come back—Ruby more successfully enacts an interactive transformation because she is able to find and stay with her family as Johnny previously did. Ruby’s setting, however, remains more conceptual and lacks the specific mapping that Erdrich moves through. Instead, because of the diasporic nature of the Métis struggle, the home that Ruby uncovers prioritizes relationships; she searches for a place in kinship. Ruby’s process of becoming is made up by a return and reclamation by, perhaps not breaking a cycle, but perpetuating a familial tradition of forced departure and transformative return.

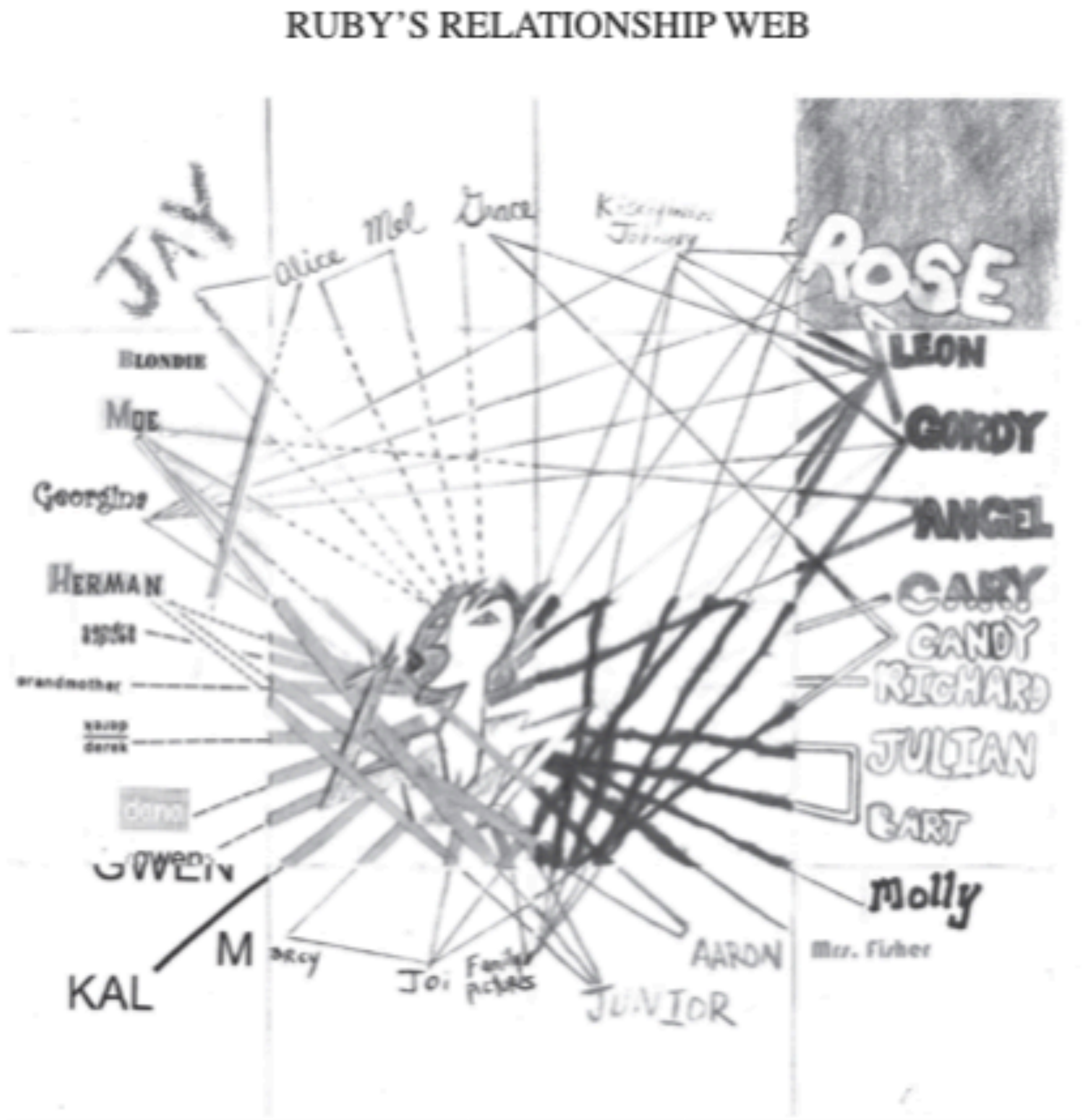
Conclusion

Both Erdrich and Bird-Wilson's narratives present divergent processes of becoming in their protagonists' individual navigations of identity and place. Through my relational analysis, I suggest that Erdrich's physically specific surroundings and imagery that she confidently navigates not only emphasize her grounded connection to tradition, but it also, through contrast, illustrates Ruby's abstraction that is reflective of her forced transformation. Both, however, lead to a reclamation of the spaces in which their stories are set. *Books and Islands* presents a reclamation of land through the line, essentially slowing down time as Erdrich explores the Ojibwe islands and the trailing and waving lines that lead her there. She, like the land, becomes entangled with books and finds comfort in the transformative process. *Probably Ruby* depicts a much more tangled orientation, where the narrator presents fragments of unrooted relationships, lines lacking in relationality, yet ones that ultimately, across the novel, lead Ruby on a transformative return to the home that she was hoping for. Since these two texts depict stories of return, which for Ruby is only revealed in the final (yet nonchronological) chapter, the different paths Erdrich and Ruby encounter before (and, for Ruby, after) their return also function to guide the reader. The lines in and between the two texts demonstrate the ability of the line no longer to divide but rather to prompt interaction and dialogue. While words themselves are simple combinations of lines, they also surpass the boundaries of their signified meaning, in this case, traversing across texts. In contrast to the Western, colonial notion of the line as a boundary, it is my hope that the framework of the relational line can challenge this divisiveness, instead promoting the process of becoming for readers and scholars where it can contribute to future analyses of Indigenous sovereignty.

Figure 1.1: “Ojibwe Country” from Louise Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*.[7]

[7] This image is pulled directly from Erdrich’s novel, preceding the narrative’s start.

Figure 1.2: “Ruby’s Relationship Web” from Lisa Bird-Wilson’s *Probably Ruby*.[8]



[8] As is the case in Erdrich’s Map, this image is pulled directly from Bird-Wilson’s novel, preceding the narrative’s start.

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