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Sous le signe de l'ours. Mythes et temporalité chez les Ojibwa septentrionaux. By Emmanuel Désveaux

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presentation of the ethnographic present, for it shows the ways in which Caddo tradition and religion continue to inform contemporary life and shape the future in a complex interweave of old and new.

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**Sous le signe de l'ours. Mythes et temporalité chez les Ojibwa septentrionaux.** By Emmanuel Désveaux. Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme', 1988. 318 pages, color illus., index. No price available.

The bear, from the depths of his hibernating cave to the heights of his constellation in the skies, is one of the animals that has special mythic significance for the Ojibway of Big Trout Lake in Canada's subarctic. Vaguely anthropomorphic in form, cyclical in lifestyle, the bear symbolizes in his bumbling way the supernatural and temporal forces that mold the lives of these people, and their not always effective attempts at coping with them. In attempting to rationalize this multi-faceted struggle in the terms of their own lives, these Ojibway have created a structure which anthropologist Désveaux sees as "an angle-stone of the great system of American myths" (page 15).

The architecture of that mythic system is both sophisticated and complex, and nowhere is this more evident than at Big Trout Lake. Isolation and a simple technology have not entailed simple myths; quite the contrary, one of the things the myths reflects is the web of highly developed techniques and skills that have made it possible for that technology to support organized social life in a demanding environment. As Désveaux sees it, the local tales of Big Trout Lake, in dealing with these factors in their variety of aspects, both contribute to, and reinforce, the essential unity of all Amerindian myths in the Americas. It is an interweaving of the part with the whole that is mutually enriching. Désveaux frankly acknowledges that this is pure Lévi-Strauss; fortunately, he does not allow his admiration for the master to stifle his own interpretations.

Désveaux sets about the task of describing and analyzing the Big Trout Lake stories by postulating that the mythological and ethnographical approaches to the lifestyle of the region yield parallel views of the same reality—theirs and ours. But apparent simplicity quickly turns out to mask still another underlying complexity, and ethnographic descriptions vary, sometimes widely, between ethnographer and ethnographer. Myths are no more obliging—although being recounted today by a people who have radios, telephones, and even television, thanks to satellites, they are still peopled by heros whose equipment and weaponry are straight out of the Stone Age. The fur trade, which historians see as having had such a profound effect upon Amerindian society, does not appear at all. Neither does the fact that the tellers of these tales are not only christianized, their forbears have been also for several generations. To the mythic world at least, the arrival of European was (and is) not pertinent.

The purpose of myth, according to Lévi-Strauss in his *Structural Anthropology*, is “to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction” (1963, page 229). The contradictions that concerned Amerindians reflect their binary mode of thought: life and death, nature and culture, seasonality and aseasonality, version and inversion, earth and sky, to give only a few examples. There were also contradictions in behavior, such as that of the moon, which belongs to the night, but which sometimes disregards the alternating rythmn of night and day to appear during the day. To the Ojibway of Big Trout Lake, the moon is thus the logical abode for Jakabish, the prankster hero who gave the world its conformity and equilibrium, but who then risked everything with his disrespectful behavior and unquenchable penchant for adventure.

Out of such contradictions was humanity symbolically born—Jakabish, swallowed by a jackfish (by his own fault, as he had been warned to stay out of the waters where the monster lurked), is rescued by his sister, who cut him out of the fish’s stomach, cleaned and bathed him. The metaphor of the fish as the vehicle for this event operates on different levels; for one, the internal fluid of the mother’s womb and the external waters inhabited by the fish. The jackfish incarnates aseasonality, as he can be hooked all year round; his rows of sharp teeth and powerful jaws indicate a carnivorous (not to say cannibal) temperament, made even more

effective by his capacity to extend himself to swallow large prey. But where Jakabish transgressed boundaries imposed by nature, the jackfish is simply not bound by them. For these reasons, besides his role in myth, the jackfish is important in shamanic ritual.

If Jakabish was responsible for humanity's biological origins, Wisakejack, the fox, the puckish champion of inversion, instituted the code of good conduct which made possible the perpetuation of social order: for one thing, avoid eating each other. The antithesis of Wisakejack is Witigo, the cannibal monster, the rejected other.

These abridged and simplified summaries do not do justice to the complexities of the original myths which have been compiled and analyzed in careful detail by Désveaux. As with totemic thinkers generally, Amerindians accord an important place to animals in the natural ordering of the world. In fact, they play out their roles on a par with mankind, roles which are defined by the Amerindians' acute and minute observations of their behavior and its relationship to the natural world. The associations which Amerindians make, and the themes which they develop, can be both strange and elusive to western modes of thinking. They see the universe as a balancing act, in which finely tuned and complicated interplays keep cosmic forces in equilibrium. Although integrated, this universe is decentralized, and man is not set apart. What is of overriding importance is the working order of the cosmos, and the measures and behavior that are necessary to keep it functioning as smoothly as possible.

In other words, the Ojibway of Big Trout Lake, in common with other Arctic and subarctic peoples, and indeed with Amerindians throughout the Americas, seek in their myths to mediate nature and culture, revealing their close connections without exalting one over the other. The Ojibway illustrate this with the story of discord between wolves, whom they associate closely with humans, and otters, whom they see as older brothers of mink but also related to wolves. Wolves are equated with humans because they occupy the same ecological niche, and they use similar hunting techniques; otters, on the other hand, symbolize the human capacity to transcend nature through the creative use of language (to the Ojibway, the otters' vocalizations are ironic laughter; to the neighboring Cree, they sound like Ojibway). In mythic thought, both animals are metaphors, the wolf for the natural condition (even though his behavior recalls the

human in certain aspects), and the otter for intellectual genius. When the two confront each other, neither emerges victorious; indeed, that could not happen, as they also symbolize complementarity, the hunter and the hunted. In Ojibway mythic terms, the discord is explained by the fact that Nigigwinini, Otter Man (who is only allowed to take one otter a day for his needs), is married to a wolf, whom he mistreats, thus inciting her relatives to her defense. Even in conflict, nature and culture are linked so closely, and with such complexity, that they cannot be separated.

Désveaux has acquitted himself well in his explorations and explications of this intricate structure. He has convincingly demonstrated that there is an underlying logic to the bewildering array of Amerindian myths, here exemplified by the Ojibway of Big Trout Lake, which to western minds have for so long seemed haphazard and even pointless. Although Lévi-Strauss has provided a key to this totemic, binary way of thought, he has by no means provided all the answers, as Désveaux is well aware. In the meantime, rich new fields have been opened up for investigation.

This well-organized and thorough work makes an important contribution to a difficult area. Its presentation is to be commended, with its use of illustration (colored as well as black and white), tables, diagrams, and a glossary, all of which help in finding one's way through the maze of binary mythic thought.

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**Living The Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology.** Compiled by Gay American Indians. Will Roscoe, Coordinating Editor. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1988. 235 pages. \$16.95 Cloth.

*Living The Spirit* is a compendium of embattled, passionate, tough and bleeding testaments to the twin isolations and alienations of being an American Indian and homosexual in a Dominant Culture which has held (and continues to hold) both identities in derision and contempt and which ignores, condones and commits acts of violence against their members, individually and collectively, in spite of (perhaps because of) the recent liberation movements which have arisen in both camps. Although the anthology's