

Heid E. Erdrich, *Curator of Ephemera at the New Museum for Archaic Media*. Michigan State University Press, 2017. 100 pp. ISBN: 9781611862461.

<http://msupress.org/books/book/?id=50-1D0-3FCC-.XKqDBraZMb1>

Heid Erdrich's latest award-winning collection, *Curator of Ephemera at the New Museum for Archaic Media* (winner of the Minnesota Book Award for Poetry, 2018), dexterously shepherds readers on a breakneck labyrinthine tour of a continually growing, carefully arranged, and bottomless cabinet of curiosities. Whether floating above a burning nighttime sea of gas flares in a jet high-over North Dakota's oil fields, or freefalling through a tangled medley of magnetic cassette tape, scripted Q-code signals, and coaxial cables, Erdrich's poems diligently render an apocalyptic North American landscape that is at once hauntingly familiar and imaginatively disorienting. Her incisive critique of American "over-bloom" and cannibalistic patterns of ecological destruction is strengthened, not tempered, by the attachment and studious affection she brings to her poetic subject matter (26) Supplanted technologies and outmoded media become the waypoints for this poetic journey through a terrain of insatiable appetites, new and forsaken treasures, and lapsed reciprocal relations with the other-than-human world. However, Erdrich is not yet another dystopian prophet of the Anthropocene (for Indigenous responses to Anthropocene discourses see Davis and Todd; Whyte). Erdrich's unflinching account of the cataclysmically-destructive consequences of capitalist consumption keeps a steady eye on the disproportionate impacts of continued resource extraction on Indigenous lands and communities, and explicitly underscores the ways that colonial-capitalist violence has already inaugurated apocalyptic social and ecological crises within Indigenous worlds. In this sense, *Curator of Ephemera* is both a work of urgent critical alarm and a sustained meditation on collective action and creative resiliency.

Erdrich's book engages deeply with the work of contemporary Ojibwe artists and language speakers and their attendant political and intellectual currents. It locates hope in the many artworks, relationships, and creative collaborations that inspire and adorn its pages. And, when confronting a mounting heap of twenty-first century digital detritus, it fans sparks of humor and beauty amidst the wreckage by celebrating the minor utility and unsung aesthetic charms of forgotten or maligned technologies, like the QR code. *Curator of Ephemera* rescues the refuse of the everyday. Whether retracing the manic emotional high supplied by a perfectly-sequenced track list in the poem "Mix Tape Didactic...*Hither*," or the attuned dedication of a spouse guiding stray cups to the dishwasher in "Shepherd," the keenness, wit, and perspicuity of Erdrich's "every-blest-thing-seeing eye" envelops readers in the unheralded yet intoxicating workings of daily life (41). All the routine tasks, fragrant fuzzy details, and unresolved questions, the soft joys, humor, and heartaches—the day-to-day buzz of "how it is to be alive to be alive to be alive"—ground Erdrich's account of life in the face of continued loss and destruction, and amplify the power of the poet's call to accountability and action (41).

Erdrich's role as curator of this ephemeral museum is more than extended metaphor. The author has extensive experience working collaboratively with other Indigenous and Minnesota-based artists and has amassed a hefty resumé curating multiple exhibitions in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul area in recent years. This hand-on knowledge and visual sensibility translates into a heightened attention to spatial arrangement, flow, and juxtaposition within the poetic text. Full-page reproductions of image-cells from Andrea Carlson's colossal 2014 panorama *Ink Babel*

interpose the book's sections. These stark high-contrast renderings of rising seashores, jutting observation decks, and Fresnel lenses (a recurring motif) push into their surroundings, mingling with and reflecting off of Erdrich's linguistic imagery. Poetic lines strut across the white space of the pages in measured amounts of pattern and unruliness, huddling together in clumps and piles, or dangling alone in the stolen breath of a small clearing. Bits of text mimic and mirror each other within these raucous and serene compositions, creating visual circuits and interpretive feedback loops. Page space also dutifully structures caesuras and line breaks in many of the poems. These spaces step in for commas and periods with such agility and panache that they beg the question of whether such run-of-the-mill punctuation marks are yet another outmoded communications technology ripe for Erdrich's New Museum. And lest we forget the handsomely-pixelated and cumbrous QR codes hung like square canvasses on the page, patient and ready to connect cellphone-clad reader to video poems or "poemeos" online. Like in the art gallery, there are multiple vantage points, and each reading of the collection rewards fresh eyes with new pairings, pathways, and points of emphasis. Furthermore, these vicarious juxtapositions playfully lure, delight, and rebuff interpretation by fostering tension between hermeneutic dichotomies of image and non-image, epiphany and apophany (a notion of "mistaken epiphany" that Erdrich wryly probes through the collection's formal, conceptual, and narrative apparatus) (51). Poems like "Mix Tape Didactic...*Break Up 2*" teasingly skirt the line of such indeterminacy. The poem offers a track list as an artifact-memorial to a terminated relationship, along with the single line: "I mean I broke up with you" (52). This separation can be read at multiple registers and scales. Is it a youthful romance gone flat? Or parting words between the Earth and its unfaithful human relations (a post-apocalyptic "it's not me, it's you...")? At each turn in the text, Erdrich's studied and judicious choices challenge and electrify.

The poetics in *Curator of Ephemera* build upon and innovate the formal and stylistic experimentation manifest in Erdrich's earlier published works. There are several poems written collaboratively with Margaret Noodin, for example, which are structured around the multi-step English-Ojibwe-English translation process that the two have been honing for many years. Likewise, fans of Erdrich's previous collections will find plenty of thematic continuities in *Curator of Ephemera*, from engagements with DNA, cannibalism, and compulsive internet sleuthing, to an encore performance by Indigenous Elvis. The poem "Charger" for example, which is one of the many ekphrastic poems in *Curator of Ephemera*, offers a sampling of the kind of formal and thematic exploration that can be found throughout the collection. "Charger" takes Andrea Carlson's mixed media painting *Aimez-vous les Femmes* (2011)—a work that counterposes the image of a video camera with a severed sculptural head—as its point of creative departure. In Erdrich's poetic treatment, the tableau transforms into an alternate telling of Salome's storied dance before Herod:

Oh Wanton Oh Salome
what was it you wanted?

How sexy
the head
you called for
you got dead head
you got it off

off that big mouth
 crying in the dessert crying
 just desserts
 on a platter a silver charger
 charged you (36)

The truncated and enjambed lines drip economically down the page. Her wordplay summons the “silver charger” charged with delivering John the Baptist’s head to Salome, just as it recalls the ubiquitous silver-pronged adaptors charged with powering our electronic devices. What must be sacrificed to make our cell phones, tablets, and LCD screens dance each day, the poem prompts us to ask, and at whose hand is such violence committed? “Charger,” like many other poems in the collection, amply demonstrates Erdrich’s deft command of language and capacious creative vision.

Erdrich’s words refract like light passing through a Fresnel lens, a device that ornaments the cover of *Curator of Ephemera*. Each of her carefully crafted images reflects multiple meanings at once. The Fresnel lens, a technology that significantly reduced the amount of material needed to powerfully transmit light, is an apt metaphor for Erdrich’s newest collection of poems. No thicker than the edge of a box of matches, and just as incendiary, Erdrich’s svelte and skillfully curated text broadcasts its author’s critical and creative voice for miles.

Ryan Rhadigan, University of California Berkeley

Works Cited

- Carlson, Andrea. “A Note on Ink Babel.” *Mikinaak*, 20 Mar. 2017, <https://www.mikinaak.com/blog/a-note-on-ink-babel>
- Davis, Heather, and Zoe Todd. “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene.” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2017, pp. 761-80.
- Whyte, Kyle P. “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopia and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, 2018, pp. 224-42.