

Writing detours: Lost and found in South Dakota

BY TOM MONTGOMERY FATE

The first thing I notice humming west through South Dakota on Interstate Highway 90 is the 30-foot-high teepees made from cement pillars. I've seen them before. They mark the public bathroom stops, but also remind you that you are now in "Indian Country." A planner somewhere probably thought they would trigger nostalgic visions of Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse in tourists on their way across this barren table of grassland to visit Mount Rushmore.

But driving farther west, the strategy becomes more clear. Most of the roadside billboards — marketing such items as fast food, amusement parks and real estate — feature iconic images from Plains Indians culture: teepees, buffalo, the medicine wheel, drum circles. Presumably, these media-driven images of the Lakota Sioux people can spark a quite marketable curiosity in visitors like me — a curiosity that an anthropologist might call "imperialist nostalgia": an odd longing for the culture that my ancestors nearly destroyed.

I'm not on my way to Mount Rushmore but to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to write a story about a medicine man I know there, which is perhaps why I'm so aware of the paradox, this odd, ironic longing. I first recognized it in myself many years ago, when I was invited to attend a Sun Dance — the central religious ceremony of the Lakota. My expectations didn't align with what I experienced those few days on the Pine Ridge: Most of the dancers were recovering alcoholics, the sweat lodges were covered with carpet remnants rather than buffalo hides, the sacred cottonwood tree was retrieved in a flatbed truck rather than on horseback, the eagle feathers were purchased rather than gathered, the drummers and singers used tinny microphones and cheap amplifiers that echoed with feedback, many of the dancers slept in nylon dome tents instead of teepees, and so on. I had still imagined a "traditional" Indian — as if tradition didn't evolve.

An hour later, I pull off the interstate and into one of the cement teepee rest stops. The parking lot is bustling with people, with lots of young families. One

couple brought their lunch in a cooler and has spread sandwiches and bags of chips out on a picnic table for their kids. Most of the cars have out-of-state plates. And it's summer, so I presume they are on vacation, that they are tourists. It all makes sense, yet I feel a bit uneasy as I pull back onto the interstate and merge into traffic, because I'm not sure what I am. An outsider for sure, but am I a tourist?

I have a nice camera, a beautiful laminated map, a shiny new rental car, and that quiet, distant sense of not belonging here. So there would seem to be little question. But I was invited to the reservation. And I don't want to be a tourist. Some writers call themselves "travelers" just to set themselves apart from the tourists, from the sightseers, the site seers. "Travelers don't know where they're going. Tourists don't know where they've been," writes Paul Theroux. I like this idea: For travelers, the concern is not with arriving, with the site, but with the journey, with seeing.

Travel writers like Theroux — Pico Iyer and Bruce Chatwin come to mind — are best described not as "accidental tourists" but as intentional detourists, since their travels are defined by a series of "almost, but not quite" arrivals at some once-intended-but-now-unclear destination. Such writers take the etymological root of "travel" seriously — travail: labor, toil; trouble. For them, the travel is like the writing itself — a constant process of discovery, of confusing and wondrous detours. Yet amid these detours a conversation always stirs, between the person and the place, between the writer's culture and the one he has just stumbled into.

This all makes a bit more sense to me



Robert Neubecker/Illustration for the Tribune

when I finally reach my exit, veer off of I-90 and head south on Highway 73 into the reservation. The desolate two-lane blacktop, with its sharp dips and turns through grassy sun-lit hills and dark valleys, feels more like a wagon trail than a modern highway. In the next 70 miles there are no McDonald's or Shell stations or Red Roof Inns, or any place else to eat or rest. In that 90 minutes, I pass four cars, five antelope, two prairie dog towns, a large herd of cattle, three red-tailed hawks perched on various fence posts, and a lone person on foot. Walking along the dirt shoulder on the other side of the road, the Lakota man is tall with dark shoulder-length hair; he is making emphatic gestures with his hands and talking to himself.

Troubled about his well-being, I pull off, make a U-turn and stop to offer him a ride somewhere. But he is smiling and calm, not at all worried or distressed, and waves me off. I drive on and watch his strolling, muted soliloquy in my rearview mirror until he disappears into the vast, green hills. I can't imagine where he is headed, but the irony of my gesture, and of his calmness, is not lost on me: I'm the one who doesn't know where he's going. Yet for some reason, I can't get the idea of arriving out of my head.

Tom Montgomery Fate is a professor of English at College of DuPage, in Glen Ellyn, and the author of five books of nonfiction. The most recent is "Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father's Search for the Wild." A class he is teaching next spring — "Writing Across Cultures" — includes a weeklong field study on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and explores the issues raised in this essay.

Bibliography: Suggested reading

On the Lakota and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation

- "The Lakotas and the Black Hills" by Jeffrey Ostler (2010)
- "On the Rez" by Ian Frazier (2001)
- "The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt," edited by Raymond J. DeMallie (1984)

Related books for young adults

- "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" by Sherman Alexie (2007)
- "The Birchbark House" by Louise Erdrich (1999)

Travel books

- "What Am I Doing Here" by Bruce Chatwin (1989)
- "The Global Soul" by Pico Iyer (2000)
- "Dark Star Safari" by Paul Theroux (2003)
- "The Best American Travel Writing 2013" edited by Elizabeth Gilbert and Jason Wilson (due out Oct. 8)