

Reaction Essay on *Blonde Indian* by Ernestine Hayes

Blonde Indian is the story of the young Ernestine Hayes in which she describes her harsh life growing up as the daughter of an Alaska Native Indian and a white man. The narrator presents her own strong sense of place multiple times throughout her memoir. She is connecting a difficult childhood, that was heavily influenced by sexual and alcohol abuse, with "Lingít Aaní" (page 52), the rich Southeast of Alaska. But she also associates the never ending love of her grandmother, her covetousness for: "the Native food of my childhood" (page 57) and her wish to return this place one day.

In one reflection, Hayes describes her dangerous and painful life roaming and loitering the streets of San Francisco. This time was a while after she and her mother had left the Southeast of Alaska. When she got to one of the food lines called "Saint Anthony's", she expresses her own feeling with a short but outstanding quote: "who call this, if not home, then at least home base" (page 119). When I read this I was initially reminded of the mixed feelings I had when I came here to Sitka. With a lot of uncertainty and the memories of my old home, I could not immediately call Sitka my new "home". However, I knew from the beginning that this will be, after all, the place where I will spend part of my life. For now I am feeling that Sitka is more my home base, but in the near future, hopefully will feel more like my home.

The narrator also spent part of her life living in the lower 48 including California. Even though she leads a typical American life with all the amenities there, she mentions several times throughout the book that her existence in this place is only temporary and that she felt like a stranger. On page 110 she says, "I never spoke about going back home, but it was in my mind every day.". Another very good quote that expresses my current feelings is: "I wandered in California like a person in a strange dark forest. I saw a woman's grief. I became a stranger" (page 26). Even though Sitka and its residents welcome me warmly, I am always well aware that I am only staying here temporarily: Until the end of June next year. Even if I would like to stay longer, I can't extend, due to the visa regulations. Even though it disappoints me, currently I am feeling more like a long term tourist and I firmly believe that I would feel more grounded and connected to Sitka if I had the chance to stay here for the rest of my life.

I was intrigued by her in-depth descriptions on how she tries to prepare native food like dry fish or seaweed. By following the advice of a friend she tries to prepare dried seaweed again. As the weather was too bad to dry it outside, she decides to use the dryer. Though when she checked her result, the seaweed was distributed all over the drum of the dryer. After her unsuccessful attempt to prepare seaweed and dry fish she comes to the totally disappointing conclusion "I can neither gather nor prepare those old Native staples." (page 58). There has been a similar moment in my life when I felt like I lost part of my identity and also part of my sense of place. When I came to Sitka I tried to prepare some typical German yeast dumplings that my own loved grandmother always used to prepare for me when I was younger. Even though I followed the recipe precisely, they were burned on the bottom and still very doughy on the inside and on the top. It was a truly embarrassing moment and an unsettling experience for me.

Several times throughout the text, Hayes expresses her biggest wish: to return to the place where she spent her childhood and where her ancestors had lived for centuries. I was totally impressed by the quote: "the determined resolve to pay any price to get back home." (page 110), as it made me think about my own appreciation for this very unique part of the world even more. I came to the conclusion that sometimes the everyday life traps me so much, that I don't appreciate this place as much as it deserves. Though whenever I am going for a short walk in Totem Park or hiking on one of the beautiful trails like Mosquito cove, I am once more charmed and also a bit dazzled by the

intact environment -especially by the huge variety of plants like the devil's club- and by the coastline.

Before I read the book *Blonde Indian*, I never really thought about my own sense of place. But after now living for a few weeks here in Sitka, I am learning more and more from the local people and also much about the natural resources that are characteristic for Sitka. I slowly regard Sitka as my new home. Currently, most of my experiences are connected to the tremendous environment like the steep mountains, the ocean, the wildlife, engaging conversations and the rich Russian-American-Tlingit history. As "sense of place" I am understanding all the particular experiences that connect someone to a particular place. These experiences are heavily influenced by own habits, the environment and my own feelings about a place. I am sure that I will connect much more feelings with Sitka in the future and that my own sense will transform over the time.