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Establishing Native American and Magical Realist Literary Traditions

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Abstract

A saga of early twentieth century Anishinabes is told in Louise Erdrich's novel Tracks. In the novel, the two narrators offer diverse perspectives on what happens when the tribe loses its land to the government: the elder who is a tribal member, and the mixed blood who ultimately leaves the tribe. These occurrences are interpreted magically realistically as representing the struggle within the tribe to maintain tradition despite the increasing influence of European settlers. To shed light on the significance of Erdrich's use of magical realism, this paper examines the perspectives at odds in her text. The discourse of authenticity and identity within Native American literature can be analyzed by exploring Erdrich's use of magical realism, which was shaped to a great extent by postcolonial literary devices.

Keywords: magic, realism, supernatural, colonialism, Native American, oral tradition.

Introduction:

The act of preserving one's identity is central theme in *Tracks*, as it is much contemporary to Native American fiction. After the American Revolution, as Joy Porter notes, American Indians were systematically destroyed, if not physically, then culturally and spiritually, when "Americans created a national mythology that consigned Indians to a "savage" past" (50). For the new America to succeed, "Indian absence, through death or the cultural death of complete assimilation, was deemed necessary". This "Indian absence" was carried out in multiple ways, either by the removal of land, conversion to Christianity or a western education. Targeting the Indian children became key to fully assimilating a tribe: "It was part of a pattern of erosion of Indian family life, augmented by child placement and adoption within non-Indian families that was not formally or comprehensively halted until the passage in 1978 of the Child Welfare Act" (Porter 52). In the 1920s, the period in which Lulu begins to attend a government school, a generation of children "were encouraged to think that the wholesale abandonment of Indian ways would guarantee Indians' full incorporation into the mainstream of American society and the fulfillment of America's "final promise" of compensation for the loss of Indian land (Porter 53). Yet this promise was never kept, like thousands of others in the writ of government land acts. As a result, American Indians are once again at the margins. As a result of this systematic disenfranchisement of Native Americans, Native American literature is preoccupied with the question of identity. As Louis Owens notes in *Other Destinies*, often the mixedblood characters in Indian fiction "truly find themselves between realities and wondering which world and which life might be theirs". He also recognizes, however, that again and again "in Indian fiction, though, we are shown the possibility of recovering a centered sense of personal identity and significance". The novel addresses these issues of identity through several

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characters, notably Pauline, but it also poses a unique set of questions about the future of Anishinaabe identity woven throughout. The paper traces the tradition of Native American literature present in the novel. To Nanapush, this represents an attempt to maintain a sense of cohesiveness within the tribe. To situate the novel in this tradition, Erdrich also embodies other Native American literary conventions. Nancy J. Peterson highlights the history that runs parallel to the stories that Erdrich produces in *Tracks*. In her essay "History, Postmodernism and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" she discusses the treaties, epidemics and other government documents that corroborate the events which occur throughout the novel. Specifically, she notes that Nanapush's narrative "is revisionist because it de-familiarizes the popular narrative of American history as progress by showing the costs of that "progress" to native peoples". Peterson claims that it is important for Erdrich, or more precisely, for Nanapush to rename events, documents and other historical accounts, giving this history a new identity—one that specifically belongs to his tribe. Nanapush understands the significance of naming and renaming to ownership and identity inherently as the narrator and creator of an alternative history that he passes down to his granddaughter Lulu. He tells her, "Nanapush is a name that loses power every time that it is written and stored in a government file". According to Nanapush, the more the government documents the land and its inhabitants, the smaller the inhabitants' claim to that land becomes. In her essay, Peterson also discusses the importance of the form the novel takes in terms of oral history and storytelling as well as the manner in which the novel "establishes two competing and contradictory frames of reference: one associated with orality, a seasonal or cyclic approach to history, a precontact culture; the other linked with textuality, a linear or progressive approach to history, a post contact culture" (986). Peterson's distinction in this passage is especially useful for me, because Erdrich in this novel does not favor oral, cyclic, precontact representation over linear, progressive, textual representation, even though the novel begins with Nanapush's narrative. This is, in fact, because the novel is not necessarily linear, progressive, or precontact at all. Instead, the novel drifts between the two, or "moves between these frames," just as the character's drift between assimilation and preservation of the tribe's traditions. There can be no distinction between them, just as Erdrich cannot choose between different interpretations of history. As a result, they are both neither. Critics like Silko have been troubled by this ambiguity, which presents itself in various ways throughout the novel. The mixed blood character that appears so often in contemporary Native American fiction, primarily exists to highlight the "protagonist lost between cultures and identities" (Owens 26).

The character of Pauline is deeply entangled in the struggle between understanding and accepting her tribe's identity and fully assimilating into white culture. The novel ends with Leopolda's transformation into a Catholic nun, demonstrating Erdrich's identification struggle as Pauline disengages from the tribe. While Pauline has undergone a transformation, she still suffers delusions and punishes herself physically due to her transformation. In *Other Destinies*, Owens argues that Erdrich "goes beyond the long-established pattern of making cultural conflict and mixed blood angst the thematic center. Instead, she writes of the more universal trials of characters who just happen to be Indian or Indian-and-white" (29). While Owens is correct in his statement that Pauline's identity confusion is not the heart of this novel, I would like to argue that the confusion she experiences in her narrative is a large part in her perception as well as how she describes the magical realist elements in her novel, and to what extent her narrative works in opposition to Nanapush's narrative. In the context of Pauline's narrating position, her identity becomes vital to the way she narrates the story to the reader and the degree of trust he or she can place in her narration.

The internal conflict Pauline experiences as a result of her whole change into Leopolda, as well as her rejection of her tribal identity, raises concerns about Erdrich's objectives with her character. An problem I'll go into in further depth during a discussion of her narration, when I'll emphasize the amount of confidence Nanapush wants the readers to invest in Pauline. In contrast to the mixed blood Pauline's

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narration, Erdrich provides Nanapush, who many have thought plays the trickster figure.Murray notes that the "shape-shifting trickster who can change identities has been quite widely adopted and circulated as corresponding to postmodern ideas of constantly reinvented identity, and a lack of fixed valuesor identity". Thus, we have juxtaposed to the narration of a character in a significant battlewith the search for identity, the trickster Nanapush, who signifies the fluid identity of the tribe. While the trickster is a popular trope in Native American literature, critics of the use of the character argue that it panders to non-Indian audiences while not accurately depicting the realities oftriballife. As a result, the juxtaposition of these two narrators has the potential to produce erroneous impressions of the novel's magical realist components. I emphasize both the good and bad aspects of the mixed blood and trickster tropes in this section so that I may study the viewpoints that both of these characters present on the events in the novel and see the possible flaws in both characters' narrations. Their reactions to the novel's events as people and traditional Native American figures will be critical to the novel's study.

Erdrich not only uses traditional Native American characters in Tracks, but she also uses traditional ways of storytelling.Before written English became a standard practice in the Americas, "American Indian texts were oral and communal," and this transition into the written word also introduced the "concept of a single author for any given text, or of an individual who might conceive of herself or himself as the creative center and originating source of a story" (Owens 9). To commemorate this oral storytelling heritage, many authors seek to incorporate form norms into their fiction. Erdrich accomplishes this in Tracks through the use of many narrators as well as Nanapush's first turn away from the individualistic storyteller and toward the voice of the community. In the first chapter of the novel, we find that Nanapush is participating in an oral transmission of numerous stories to Fleur's daughter Lulu, and he shifts from individual storyteller to tribal identity. Here, his repeated assertions of "I saw," "I guided," "I spoke" reinforce individual identity; however, throughout the novel, the individualistic nature of Nanapush's character diminishes as his voice begins to become that of the tribe. He tells Lulu, "the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once. Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared when, along with the first bitter punishments of early winter, a new sickness swept down" (1). Here, he starts talking about the tribe as a whole, as if Lulu were the tribe's grandchild. As a tribal elder, Nanapush makes it clear that he intends to keep the tribe's traditions alive, particularly through this storytelling method, but we are also made aware that his narrative has another purpose other than keeping the custom alive. Nanapush is working to document the tribe's history in order to pass it on to future generations. Deep into the narrative, we learn that Nanapush is actively striving to oppose the goals of the government school Lulu attends. He thinks that by telling her the history of her people, he can implant in her the memory, history, and culture of that tribe.

We are made aware of the importance of audience early in the storey because of Lulu's position. I propose that we extend the emphasis we have on Lulu as an audience to the text's readers. For, as Owens notes, in the oral tradition, "speaker and listener are coparticipants in the telling of a story" (Owens 6). Readers of this work, like Lulu, have responsibility for the information they receive and must interpret events based on the many renderings. However, because Pauline talks to no one in particular, we must presume that Lulu is just getting the information included in Nanapush's story. Our situation is exacerbated further since we also have access to Pauline's interpretation of events, which differs greatly from Nanapush's in certain circumstances. We also know that Nanapush's tale serves an important purpose: he aspires to spread his knowledge of the tribe to the tribe's future. Pauline, on the other hand, has no set agenda and frequently gives half-truths, is unable to recall some events correctly, and is labelled a liar by Nanapush in multiple instances. As a result, she and Nanapush are at odds with one another, representing opposing experiences, opinions, and philosophies. However, we might explore the idea that Lulu is

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having the same trouble understanding the history that has been communicated to her, since she gets comparable competing truths or realities as a result of attending the government school. Since a result, we share Lulu's perspective throughout the novel, as Erdrich leaves it up to us to interpret the work's magical realist components.

In *Ordinary Enchantments*, Wendy Faris devises five characteristics a work must exhibit to truly be considered a work of magical realism:Most of these characteristics are self-explanatory, but I will go into detail regarding the "irreducible element" of magic as Faris does in her work. She states that the irreducible element "is something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse. Therefore, the reader has difficulty marshaling evidence to settle questions about the status of events and characters in such fictions". Furthermore, these elements of the text "are well assimilated into the realistic textual environment, rarely causing any comment by narrators or characters, who model such an acceptance for their readers". I will address all of the above-mentioned elements when discussing the significance of magical realism to Erdrich's novel; however, I want to pay special attention to the "irreducible element" Faris discusses. This aspect works in *Tracks* to reaffirm the tribe's belief systems, traditions, history, and memories while also highlighting the battle within the tribe to preserve these traditions while treaties, religion, and government schooling aim to destroy them.

The novel's opening chapter is narrated by Nanapush. In it, he tells Lulu about saving her mother from the plague that penetrated the tribe and murdered the rest of Fleur's family. The novel's first instance of magical realism occurs here, in the opening few chapters. Nanapush and Edgar Pukwan, a tribal police officer, walk a few miles to the Pillager residence to quarantine the area and burn the house down with the dead inside; however, the house does not burn.Pukwan "threw kerosene repeatedly against the logs and even started a blaze with birchbark and chips of wood, the flames narrowed and shrank,went out in puffs of smoke. Pukwan cursed and looked desperate, caught between his official duties and his fear of Pillagers". This passage is significant for several reasons. First of all, it introduces us to the spiritual power, or magic, belonging to the Pillagers who "knew the secret ways to cure and kill, until their art deserted them". It also exhibits the inability of Pukwan to destroy the Pillagers' home or their bodies, and his understanding that something more powerful—the Pillager's power—was at work than his repeated efforts to make and maintain a fire. Most importantly, it illustrates the first hint of the ideological conflict ongoing within the tribe. Pukwan is torn between his "official duties" and what he knows about the Pillagers. His tribal history, memories and belief system encourage his fear, but his necessity to fulfill tribal law, laws created under the influence of assimilation, makes him a victim of warringidentities.

Ultimately, his tribal identity wins this conflict as "[h]e finally dropped the tinders and helped [Nanapush] drag Fleur along the trail". However, minute this internal struggle seems to the reader, Pukwan's behavior in this passage is the first symptom of a much larger problem. Had there been no imposition of U.S. law on the tribe or, furthermore, no transmission of disease by European settlers, Pukwan would never have been placed in the position in which he must burn bodies instead of taking part in a proper Indian burial—an act that later literally haunts Nanapush and Fleur as they combat this foreign illness.

After Fleur returns to health, she escapes to the cabin to continue her family's customs. She is asked for the fee money on the allotments of land given to her by the government, but when the Indian agent visits Fleur to collect the money he:went out there, got lost, spent a whole night following moving lights and lamps of people who would not answer him, but talked and laughed among themselves.They only let him go at dawn because he was so stupid. Yet he asked Fleur again for money, and the next thing we heard he was living in the woods and eating roots, gambling with ghosts. Erdrich gives us a piece of a story rooted in realism: An Indian agent who comes to collect money on land allotments created by an actual treaty, the Dawes Act. However, the focus of this passage is not the realistic elements, but the magical, or what

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Faris calls "the existence of a mysterious realm of the spirit". These "ghosts" as Nanapush calls them, perhaps Fleur's ancestors, are assisting her by initially driving away the Agent. When he returns, they continue to torment him, gradually driving him mad. Here, we are reminded of the Pillagers' power, which they use to defend the future of their family, and hence the future of the tribe. This text implies, but does not expressly state, that the tribe's forefathers live in the forest. The woods, at least on Fleur's property, become a "realm of the spirit," maintaining the tribe's spiritual connection to the land and its ancestors and existing as a location where magical happenings are still possible—even likely.Creating a setting on Fleur's farm where "magical" events may still occur helps Fleur to carry on her tribe's shamanistic traditions, allowing the tribe's traditions to continue alongside the assimilation of some of its members. In this sense, Fleur represents the tribe's religious system, history, and heritage, as well as her land, the tribe's territory. As a result, the majority of the novel's magical realist components take either on Fleur's land, in her presence, or via her.

Pauline describes a critical episode in the storey, one that deepens her faith while driving her away from the tribe. This scenario also highlights Faris's fourth feature, the fusion of several realities. Fleur has caused Sophie Morrissey, fourteen, to sit rigid and immovable in front of Fleur's house after she used Pillager magic to push Fleur's husband Eli and fourteen-year-old Sophie Morrissey into a violent and extended sexual relationship.Her father and brother in their final attempt to rescue her, place a statue of the Virgin Mary in Sophie's face, and afterward, she is able to move and speak. More startling however, was that the statue "wept a hail of rain from Her wide brown eyes" (94). Later, Pauline scoops the tears, which had frozen on the ground, into her pocket. On her way home the tears melted in her pocket and the only proof left of the statue's tears was a "damp cloth that soon dried" (95). Here, the mystical components of Native American spirituality and Catholic mysticism collide to reflect Pauline's experience. She utilized Pillager magic, which caused her a lot of trouble, but she was spared by the illuminating statue's tears of pity.Faris also comments on this moment in the text, noting that in spite of Pauline's increasingly irrational state of mind, her report ofthe damp cloth and the realistic detail of how it dried argues in favor of the miracle. In this case, Pauline has not left behind or denied the "magic" occurring around her. Instead, she has just exchanged one source of mysticism for another out of a strong desire to belong to a group with a strong spiritual foundation.

The final scenario I'd want to explore in this article that exemplifies magical realism is the one in which Fleur seeks vengeance for the rape perpetrated by numerous men in the nearby town of Argus. Through Pauline's narration, we learn in this moment that Fleur utilised her spiritual talents to change herself into a tornado in order to avenge the men who had abused her.Pauline begins by describing the rape itself, and the scene ends with her attempt to block out the event altogether: "I closed my eyes and put my hands on my ears, so there is nothing more to describe but what I couldn't block out: those yells from Russell, Fleur's hoarse breath, so loud it filled me, her cry in the old language and our names repeated over and over among the words" Pauline's comment here alluded to numerous aspects crucial to understanding both Fleur and Pauline's connection to the book. We've seen time and again that Pauline is not a reliable narrator, and her behavior as a witness to the events is no exception. In this case, Pauline explains her wish to blot out the occurrence, but she is unable to do so despite her best efforts. Her inability to ignore what happens to Fleur is emblematic of her later in the novel inability to ignore what happens to her own identity. As a result, her conduct here reflects Pauline's denial and, because she "couldn't blank out" all that happened, her incapacity to deal with that denial.

The juxtaposition of the two incidents more than hints at their link, although Pauline never explicitly mentions whether she believes Fleur conjured the storm to wreak revenge on her rapists.After finishing the depiction of the tornado's destruction, Pauline returns to addressing power and familial connections, this time with Fleur's family, the Pillagers. Although she does not explicitly state that Fleur is to blame for the storm, we may deduce this based

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on the closeness of her descriptions. After this event, both Fleur and Pauline return, separately, to the tribe's land. Regarding this return, Pauline notes that the "blood draws us back, as if it runs through a vein of earth". Pauline's portrayal of familial power running through both blood and soil is evocative of another, arguably the archetypal, magical realism work, Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.In it, a "trail of blood miraculously travels across town from son to mother" that "underlines the unusually close, even incestuously involuted nature of the Buendía family, whose ties are especially strong". These photos make the link within a family or culture that these sentences are aiming to express palpable. These sections allude to, but do not outright state, how Pauline's background and experience contradict her aims.

Conclusion

Erdrich's *Tracks* delves into the intricacies of tribal identity in the first part of the twentieth century. Tracks is ultimately about negotiation and renegotiation. Pauline must negotiate her identities; the tribe must negotiate with European settlers to save its territory; and the reader must negotiate many narrators as well as belief and disbelieve in magical realism based on diverse readings. Erdrich, as author, has, nonetheless, engaged in some bargaining. Throughout the narrative, she negotiates two conflicting schools of thought that are at odds with one another: Native American studies and postmodernism.Thus, the text's negotiations reflect the conflict surrounding the text's writing, and whether or not this was Erdrich's intention, her characters succeed in demonstrating that a Native American text can have liminal identities and non-referential language and still be considered Native American literature. *Tracks* does so through both Native American literary conventions—the trickster and mixedblood characters, oral traditions, multiple narratives—and unconventional methods (in terms of Native literary traditions)—addressing the internal conflicts of the tribe as opposed to the external conflicts, as well as using magical realism to engage in the process "of effecting important comparative analyses between separate postcolonial texts" *Tracks*, via the use of magical realism, pushes the boundaries of what is possible and, in doing so, connects with the narrative of history in a novel way. Tracks is fundamentally "insider" because to the integration of myth and magic, as well as portraying internal disputes of individual tribal members, without totally disengaging from the postmodern. Finally, Erdrich tackles questions about authenticity in the Native American community and among Native American intellectuals.

In the field of Native American studies, one pernicious effect of regarding individual groups in a somewhat idealized fashion as threatened bastions of authenticity is that it often results in a reverential, sycophantic approach to Native American texts". Perez Castillo and Erdrich's work tells us that the postmodern versus Native text binary does nothing but negate the significance of texts that situate themselves somewhere between the two, arguing that many postmodernists "seem almost willfully to misunderstand Derrida's affirmation" that nothing exists beyond the text. Finding a distinct Native American literary voice should not be the primary goal of Native American studies. Celebrating the diverse literary voices within the Native American canon or, more properly, the Native American voices within the American literary canon is unquestionably a more fruitful and fulfilling enterprise.

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