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“PERHAPS THE BEAR HEARD FLEUR CALLING, AND ANSWERED”: THE  
SIGNIFICANCE OF MAGICAL REALISM IN LOUISE ERDRICH’S *TRACKS* AS A  
POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

by

EMILY MYRICK

Under the Direction of Audrey Goodman

ABSTRACT

In her novel *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich tells the story of a band of Anishinaabe early in the twentieth century. Through the two narrators, one a tribal elder and the other a mixedblood who eventually abandons the traditions of the tribe, the novel offers two divergent perspectives of the events that take place as the government divests the tribe of its land. The conflicting perceptions of these occurrences, which are magical realist in nature, underscore the conflict within the tribe to maintain tradition in the face of the ever-increasing influence of European settlers. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the perceptions at odds with one another in order to shed new light on the significance of Erdrich’s use of magical realism in the text. Highlighting Erdrich’s engagement

with magical realism, a largely postcolonial literary device, will hopefully expand notions of identity and authenticity within the Native American literary tradition.

INDEX WORDS: Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*, Native American literature, Native American studies, Postcolonialism, Magical realism, Postmodernism, Identity narrative

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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## 1 Introduction

In her novel *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich tells the story of what remains of a tribe of Anishinaabe in North Dakota in the first half of the twentieth century. The novel focuses on the conflict between the tribe and the United States government as various treaties and policies slowly and methodically divest the tribe of their land. The responsibility of narration is divided between two members of the tribe: Nanapush, a tribal elder, and Pauline, a mixedblood who becomes more and more assimilated into white culture as the novel progresses. Each character narrates an alternating chapter; however, on many occasions they tell the same stories from different perspectives. In Nanapush's chapters, he speaks directly to his adopted granddaughter Lulu in an attempt to instill in her a respect for the history and traditions of her tribe and to continue the tribe's legacy. His chapters exhibit the oral storytelling traditions of Native Americans, as well as the trickster qualities he possesses which are present in much Native American literature. Pauline's chapters, in contrast, address no one in particular. Throughout them, she exhibits increasingly erratic and unstable behavior as her connection to the tribe weakens. The contrast of the two narrators establishes the other conflict throughout the novel, not between the tribe and the government for control of land, but within the members of the tribe. Belief systems, traditions, histories, and memories that were once concrete and defined for the members of the tribe are now fluid. These changes caused by assimilation through government schools and Catholic churches have shifted the identities of the tribesmen. This conflict comes to a climax as the two narrators recount the story of Fleur, one of the last full-blooded Anishinaabe remaining in the area with strong, spiritual ties to the land.

*Tracks* takes place between the winter of 1912 and the summer of 1924. Throughout the four hundred years previous to this time frame, Native Americans suffered massive losses in

numbers due to European invasion. Years of war, disease and removal from land left Native American tribes without the means to provide for or to protect themselves. Throughout the novel, Nanapush refers to the “spotted sickness” that nearly killed the entirety of his tribe: “we thought disaster must surely have spent its force, that disease must have claimed all of the Anishinaabe that the earth could hold and bury” (1). This reference corresponds to outbreaks of smallpox throughout the country during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Cheyfitz viii). The spread of disease occurred alongside continued warfare over Native American land in which:

[I]nvolving European settlers, with the implicit and explicit—that is, *legal*—support of the federal government, stole the land itself from hundreds of Indian communities (tribes or nations) . . . The invasion and theft of land, and the genocide that accompanied it . . . extended into the trans-Mississippi West after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848—the result of the U.S. imperial war with Mexico—and intensified after the Civil War. (vii)

Due to disease and war, among other causes, the Native population in the United States which was “between four and five million at the time of the Columbian invasion” decreased to “250,000 to 300,000 Indians by the end of the nineteenth century” (Cheyfitz viii). This is the backdrop for Erdrich’s novel, and the backdrop which we are made aware of in the opening chapter. Nanapush tells Lulu, and us:

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long fight west to Nadouessioux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible.

(1)

However, this is not the story Nanapush chooses to tell Lulu, or us. Instead, he chooses to tell the story of the results of this disease, famine and virtual genocide. Here, Nanapush makes us privy to the events which occurred after the fighting was over, what happened in the final years of the systematic removal of Native Americans from their land.

Much of the scholarship surrounding *Tracks* revolves around the alternative telling of history and postmodern issues of understanding the past and memory. Nancy J. Peterson dissected Erdrich's use of alternative history in both her article "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" and her book-length work *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crisis of Historical Memory*. Other scholarship has also focused on *Tracks* as an identity narrative, including Nicholas Sloboda's "Beyond the Iconic Subject: Re-Visioning Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" and E. Shelley Reid's "The Stories We Tell: Louise Erdrich's Identity Narratives," which challenge the idea that Erdrich fell into prescribed roles of the Native American when constructing her characters—a charge first made by Leslie Marmon Silko shortly after the publication of *Tracks*. Other scholarship on Erdrich's body of work also focuses on her use of Native American tropes such as the trickster character and oral traditions, or on the novel's narrative techniques involving multiple voices and perspectives. Few scholars, however, have chosen to analyze *Tracks* as a postcolonial novel, and those that have accuse Erdrich of perpetuating the same negative representations that appeared in the poetry, fiction and visual art of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, this criticism has failed to explore Erdrich's use of magical realism and its importance to the postcolonial elements of Erdrich's work—issues on which I hope to shed light throughout this thesis.

Critics have attempted to pinpoint exactly what makes a text a work of magical realism since its inception as a major literary device of Latin American fiction in the first half of the

twentieth century, arguably best represented in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Critics give credit to Franz Roh for coining the term *Magischer Realismus* (Magic Realism) to describe the artistic movement that marked a turn toward realism and away from Expressionism during the 1920s. What Roh noticed in this movement was the artist's intoxicating focus on the object itself, so that even the most mundane subject possessed its own mysticism. Irene Guenther discusses the intention of the movement in more detail:

The goal of this post-World War I art was a new definition of the object, clinically dissected, coldly accentuated, microscopically delineated. Over-exposed, isolated, rendered from an uncustomary angle, the familiar became unusual, endowed with an *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness) which elicited fear and wonder. The juxtaposition of "magic" and "realism" reflected far more the monstrous and marvelous *Unheimlichkeit* within human beings and inherent in their modern technological surroundings. (36)

While Roh's term "Magic Realism" was soon eclipsed by Gustav Hartlaub's term "Neue Sachlichkeit" (New Objectivity) in the realm of visual art, authors and critics eventually adopted the term. I believe discussing Roh's initial theories of what he called "Magic Realism" is significant here because, although the literary magical realism does not abide by the same principles as Roh originally devised, it does shed some light on the nature of magical realism as a literary device in the literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Guenther notes that the intention of the Post-Expressionist or *Magischer Realismus* movement was to "expose" the subject of the work so that the audience would view the subject in a new light, the realness of the object making it seem strange and unusual. Similarly, magical realism, as literary device, attempts to renegotiate the idea of realism altogether. Luis Parkinson

Zamora and Wendy Faris note in the introduction to a collection of essays regarding magical realism that what is up for debate in most magical realist literature is the reality that is perceived by the characters and the audience:

An essential difference, then, between realism and magical realism involves the intentionality implicit in the conventions of the two modes . . . realism intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective (hence universal) representation of natural and social realities—in short, that realism functions ideologically and hegemonically. Magical realism also functions ideologically but . . . less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity. In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation. (3)

What Zamora and Faris are arguing here is that in using this literary convention, authors ask us to renegotiate our understanding of reality based on western ideological notions. I want to argue that Erdrich does exactly that, and that critics who argue that Erdrich's work is not political enough (i.e. that her work does not specifically name those responsible for the injustices committed against Native Americans or that her work is not "protest literature") have neglected the subtlety of this convention and its relationship to postcolonial literature.

A general consensus among critics finds that, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, many postcolonial novelists used magical realism as a tool to give a voice to alternative realities that lay outside the bounds of western, normative experience. As Faris, a seminal critic on the subject of magical realism, states in the introduction to her work *Ordinary Enchantments*:

*Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, “within [magical realism’s] texts, marginal voices, submerged traditions, and emergent literatures have developed and created masterpieces” (1). These voices and traditions, displaced by colonization, emerge to shake the foundations of western realism, specifically nineteenth-century realism. Faris, in *Ordinary Enchantments*, further defines the literary device:

Magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them. Furthermore, that combination of realistic and fantastical narrative, together with the inclusion of different cultural traditions, means that magical realism reflects, in both its narrative mode and its cultural environment, the hybrid nature of much postcolonial society. (1)

While many scholars find the term “postcolonial” inaccurate or otherwise controversial when applied to Native American literature, the magical realism present in the novel makes *Tracks* undoubtedly postcolonial. What I hope to highlight throughout this thesis is the fluidity, or liminality, present in her characters’ identity conflicts, the ability of the characters as well as Erdrich’s readers to know and understand the truth, and, perhaps most importantly, how this novel helps to define Native American literary identity. This liminality also exists in the categories Erdrich’s writing falls under.

To further complicate the issues of dual narration, multiple perspectives and multiple identities within *Tracks*, I feel I must address the relationship between Native American and postcolonial studies. The inclusion of Native American literature under the title of postcolonial literature has been, and remains today, a source of much debate within Native American scholarship and international postcolonial scholarship. Eric Cheyfitz, director of the American

Indian Program at Cornell, outlines the dilemma regarding the categorizing of works by Native American authors under the umbrella of postcolonial literature. He argues that “postcolonial studies have virtually ignored American Indian communities in ... the United States, even though various U.S. Native writers have articulated the indigenous predicament in precisely (post)colonial terms, though without, necessarily, postcolonial studies’ commitment to postmodernist/poststructuralist theory”(4). This statement highlights the reluctance from both sides to approach these works from a postcolonial perspective. While, Cheyfitz acknowledges that much Native American literature, by definition, is postcolonial in its approach, he also hints at the issue that arises due to postcolonial studies’ interest in postmodernist and poststructuralist theory as well as “global cosmopolitanism” (4). Craig Womack also refers to the reluctance of the Native American scholar to engage in a postmodernist deconstructing of history:

It is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven’t yet constructed it. We need, for example, to recover the nineteenth century, especially in terms of understanding what Native writers were up to during that time and how their struggles have evolved toward what Indian authors can say in print today, as well as the foundational principles they provide for an indigenous criticism. (3)

Peterson also takes on this concept of the need to create a history before Native American authors and critics can begin to deconstruct it, and argues that Erdrich tries to do precisely that in *Tracks*. However, the perceived division of Native American studies as wholly separate from other postcolonial movements also stems from the inherent need within Native American studies to exhibit “indigenous intellectual sovereignty” (Cheyfitz 4) and “Native nationalism” (Womack 11). However, the naming of the Native American experience as “postcolonial” is also

problematic among many scholars who argue that although “Indians became citizens of the United States by an act of Congress in 1924, tribally enrolled Indians simultaneously remained citizens of colonized tribes. This dual status is the status quo today” (Cheyfitz ix). Thus, the Native Americans have yet to reach the “post” in “postcolonial”. Often the term “postcontact” is used to better describe the Native American experience due to the colonizer’s extreme physical presence within that experience. Cheyfitz has used the term “(post)colonial” in order to make that subtle distinction while still maintaining the relationship between Native American and postcolonial studies. He notes that he “place[s] the “post” in parentheses to register the particularity of the ongoing colonial regime in Indian country, where Native citizens of the United States are simultaneously colonized citizens of the Indian nations” (3). For the intents and purposes of this essay, I want to place Native American literature within the framework of postcolonial studies, specifically Erdrich’s work. Although noting the differences between other forms of postcolonial literature and Native American literature is important to Native American studies as a whole, Erdrich’s use of magical realism in *Tracks* bears so many similarities to Latin American, African and Asian postcolonial literature, I find placing these works in the same category not only relevant to my analysis, but vital to it.

The acclaimed works among the tradition of magical realism are generally Latin American and Asian novels, most notably those works by Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Alejo Carpentier, and Isabel Allende, to name but a few, with Americans Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston and Portuguese author Jose Saramago as notable exceptions. Faris places Erdrich’s *Tracks* in this list as well, but only on the periphery, stating “the irreducible elements in Erdrich’s *Tracks* are few and questionable, so that [she] would situate the novel on the fringes of magical realism” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 208). However, I would argue that *Tracks* utilizes



magical realism in a specific and inventive manner that works to highlight the division, the fissure, between the narrative presented by Pauline and Nanapush's narrative influenced by the oral traditions of his tribe. Furthermore, each narrator's explanations for the magical realism surrounding Fleur's actions works to further elucidate that division. Secondly, I hope to demonstrate that Erdrich's novel utilizes magical realism in the same way as other postcolonial novels, which means that Erdrich attempts to reassert the belief systems, customs and traditions, and, in short, the reality of the Anishinaabe just as it seems to be disappearing at the hands of the U.S. government, but this reassertion is only partially successful.

Essentially, the argument I intend to make here is that, often, the structure, form and literary devices Erdrich uses in *Tracks* reflect the conflict present in the novel—the conflict against the government accumulation of Indian land, the conflict against assimilation, and the various identity conflicts. Erdrich incorporates the dual narration to highlight this set of conflicts, as other scholars have previously noted.<sup>1</sup> However, the perspective that each of these narrations provides regarding the magical realist elements of the novel exhibit a failed use of magical realism as a device in that it creates doubt in the reader as to whether these events occurred because of Fleur's spiritual connection to nature and the mysticism surrounding the tribe, or if these occurrences have scientific (or western) explanations. It represents the fissure, the conflict, the struggle of the future of the tribe. At times, the interpretation of “magical” events that interrupt the realism of the novel by either narrator reinforces the belief system of the tribe, and at other moments in the text, those interpretations reflect the tribe's steady assimilation. At times, the reader, or listener (Lulu), might be convinced that these events have happened and have no other explanation than that they were “magical”. At other times, Pauline's explanation

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<sup>1</sup> See Sergi, Jennifer (1992); Reid, E. Shelley (2000); Rainwater, Catherine (1990); Hassell Hughes, Shelia (2000) for a more comprehensive discussion of the dual narration in *Tracks*.

casts doubt within the reader, leading us to feel confused about whether the tornado was the physical manifestation of Fleur's anger or if the tornado was simply a dangerous weather pattern. This doubt symbolizes the uncertainty the tribe feels regarding its future. Erdrich's use of magical realism may be a mixed bag of belief and disbelief, but its appearance in the novel is full of meaning, nonetheless. As Nanapush grasps at the remaining fragments of what was once a flourishing tribe, his stories involving his tribe's belief system are called into question by Pauline's narration. I want to explore these disparate explanations in further detail to elucidate the difficulty the reader has in accepting these events as magical realism, an action that makes material the complexity Erdrich is exploring in the novel.

Fully illuminating the contemporary issues surrounding the novel's publication is necessary in order to flesh out the fracture on which the novel focuses. The reception of Erdrich's work has been mixed, and among her critics are many prominent, contemporary Native American novelists and scholars. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, for one, in her essay "The American Indian Fiction Writers: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and First Nation Sovereignty" finds Erdrich's position as representative for the Native American experience problematic. What Cook-Lynn finds especially difficult is that Erdrich and novelists like her have "moved away from the expected nationalistic affiliations toward an acquired 'cosmopolitanism,'" and, as a result, they "have contributed to the confusion about cultural authority in the Third World literary voice" (78). Although Erdrich is not the lone victim of this accusation, Cook-Lynn singles her out as perhaps the most popular of the bunch, which also includes James Welch, N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko is also an outspoken critic of Erdrich's who also questions her presentations of the Native American experience. Her at times scathing review of Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* highlights some of the prominent issues facing the contemporary

Native American author. In her essay “Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy,” Susan Perez Castillo addresses Silko’s concerns while attempting to put Erdrich’s position into perspective. Peterson also addresses these issues in the essay mentioned earlier, ultimately defending Erdrich’s perspective and her representation of the Native American experience through her acknowledgement that a postmodern view of history further complicates the writing of alternative histories. I want to address the each critic’s perspective here in order to determine where *Tracks* falls regarding Native American literary discourse.

The goal of this thesis is to enter into the discussion surrounding *Tracks* by looking at the novel in terms of its contribution to the canon of Native American literature and its postcolonial aspects, specifically, Erdrich’s use of magical realism. My intention here is to highlight the particular set of issues around which *Tracks* revolves: the loss of the tribe’s land, the increasing “non-native” influences on the tribe, and the future of the tribe’s traditions, belief structures and spirituality. The first chapter will analyze *Tracks* as a work that reflects the conventions of contemporary Native American literature and upholds the traditions of the tribe. It will also delineate the ways in which Erdrich’s brand of magical realism meets the generally agreed upon and recognized definitions of magical realism as a literary device. In chapter two, I will discuss at some length how the novel strays from the conventions of contemporary Native American literature, but more importantly, this chapter will address how the magical realism in the novel highlights the division between those who wish to uphold the traditions of the tribe and those who are beginning to assimilate into “western” culture. In doing so, I hope that this analysis will shed light on the manner in which Erdrich addresses contemporary issues facing Native

Americans within the novel as well as Native American scholars, specifically issues of authenticity, insider/outsider status, reclaiming history and the preservation of tradition.

## 2 *Establishing Native American and Magical Realist Literary Traditions*

*Tracks*, like much contemporary Native American fiction, is a novel primarily concerned with not only the search for, but also the maintenance of, identity. 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” (50). 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). However, this promise, like countless others made in government land acts and treaties, failed to deliver, leaving American Indians again on the margins of American society. This methodical undertaking to effectively drain a nation of people of their land, culture, language and spiritual practices provides the basis for the preoccupation of the bulk of Native American literature on 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” (19). 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” (19). *Tracks* undoubtedly engages in these questions of identity through several characters, especially Pauline, but the novel also raises a unique and important set of questions about the future of Anishinaabe identity throughout this novel. As I will discuss in further detail throughout this chapter, Erdrich practices other Native American literary conventions in order to situate the novel within the traditions of Native American literature which reflects Nanapush’s attempt to maintain some sort of cohesive identity in the tribe.

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 defamiliarizes the popular narrative of American history as progress by showing the costs of that “progress” to native peoples” (985). 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. As the narrator and creator of an alternative history that he passes down to his granddaughter Lulu, Nanapush seems to inherently understand the importance of naming and renaming to ownership and identity. He tells her, “Nanapush is a name that loses power every time that it is written and stored in a government file” (32). With this statement Nanapush suggests that the more the government documents the land and its inhabitants, the inhabitants claim to that land decreases. 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 postcontact culture” (986). The distinction that Peterson makes here which I find especially useful is that Erdrich does not favor one over the other in this novel, and in fact, that the novel does not begin, necessarily, with the oral, cyclic, precontact representation of events and end with the linear, progressive, textual representation—although the novel does begin with Nanapush’s narrative. Instead, the novel drifts between the two, or “moves between these frames,” just as the characters drift between assimilation and preservation of the tribe’s traditions. They do not, and cannot, choose one over the other, just as Erdrich cannot choose one telling of history over the other. As a result, they are decidedly both and neither at the same time. This ambiguity, which takes on various forms throughout the novel, has made critics like Silko uneasy—an issue I want to discuss in depth in Chapter Two.

The mixedblood character that appears so often in contemporary Native American fiction primarily exists to highlight the “protagonist lost between cultures and identities” (Owens 26). Pauline exhibits such a character deeply enveloped in the struggle between understanding and acceptance of her tribal identity and the full assimilation into white culture. Erdrich uses Pauline’s character to exhibit this identity struggle as she becomes more and more disengaged from the tribe, eventually transforming into Catholic nun Leopolda by the novel’s end. Pauline’s transformation, however, does not leave her with her sanity intact as she suffers delusions and physically punishes herself (an issue I will also discuss in Chapter Two). In *Other Destinies*, Owens argues that Erdrich “goes beyond the long-established pattern of making cultural conflict and mixedblood 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 stating that Pauline’s identity confusion is not at the center of this novel, I would like to argue

that her confusion plays a large part in her perception and narration of the magical realist elements in the novel and the degree to which her narrative works in opposition to Nanapush's narrative. Taking Pauline's position as opposing narrator into consideration, her identity becomes vitally important to the manner in which she narrates the story and the amount of trust the reader can put in her narration. David Murray argues:

the question is how to see this [mixedblood] figure. A negative view has been to see the mixed-blood figure as representing a tragic loss of Indianness, indicative of the demoralized and directionless condition of Indians deprived of the ability to continue in traditional ways. But a more positive way of looking at these figures is to see them as representing ways of mediating and negotiating, rather than being defeated by, contradictions. (78)

The internal struggle Pauline faces in response to the total transformation into Leopolda and the denial of her tribal identity raise questions regarding Erdrich's intentions with her character. An issue I will explore in further detail during a discussion of her narration in which I will highlight the amount of trust Nanapush asks the readers to place in Pauline.

In contrast to the mixedblood Pauline's narration, Erdrich delivers Nanapush, who many have claimed takes on the role of the trickster character. 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 values or identity" (79). Thus, we have juxtaposed to the narration of a character in a significant battle with 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 of tribal



life (Murray 79). Thus, the juxtaposition of these two narrators has the potential to create problematic perceptions of the magical realist elements of the novel. I highlight both the positive and negative attributes of the mixedblood and the trickster tropes here, so that I may analyze the perspectives that both of these characters provide regarding the events in the novel and recognize the potential shortcomings of both characters' narrations. Their reactions to the novel's events as both individuals and traditional Native American figures will prove vital to the analysis of the novel.

Not only does Erdrich incorporate traditional Native American characters into *Tracks*, she also incorporates traditional modes 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 honor this oral tradition of storytelling, many authors attempt to utilize the conventions of the form in their fiction. Erdrich does so in *Tracks* by implementing multiple narrators as well as through Nanapush's initial shift away from the individualistic storyteller toward voice of the community. In the opening chapter of the novel in which we learn Nanapush is engaging in an oral communication of multiple stories to Fleur's daughter Lulu, he makes the shift away from individual storyteller into the communal identity of the tribe. He begins with an assertion of an individualistic nature:

My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years growth. I spoke aloud the words of a government treaty, and refused to

sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager. (2)

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 begins to speak about the tribe as a whole, as if Lulu is the granddaughter of the tribe itself<sup>2</sup>. As a tribal elder, Nanapush makes obvious his intentions of holding together the traditions of the tribe, especially through this storytelling process, but we are also made aware that his storytelling has another purpose aside from continuing the tradition. Nanapush is attempting to recount the tribe’s history in order to preserve it for future generations. We find out deep into the novel that Nanapush is actively attempting to counteract the agenda of the government school Lulu attends. In narrating the history of her people, he hopes to instill in her the memory, history and tradition of that tribe.

Due to Lulu’s position, we are made aware of the importance of audience early in the novel. I am suggesting here that we extend the importance placed on Lulu as audience to the readers of the text. For, as Owens notes, in the oral tradition, “speaker and listener are coparticipants in the telling of a story” (Owens 6). The readers of this novel, like Lulu, have a responsibility regarding the information they hear and must interpret these occurrences according

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<sup>2</sup> Some critics have argued that Nanapush’s narration reinforces individualism and perpetuates the stereotype of the “noble savage,” Gloria Bird (1992); however, after considering Nanapush’s commitment to the sanctity of the tribe, I argue here that, at most, this “I” represents the remnants of the tribe as a result of European influence. At least, it hints at the ambiguity of Nanapush’s position, as well as the positions of each tribal member. The complexity of Nanapush’s position as tribal elder and storyteller offers more than simply the continuation of a stereotype.

to the multiple renditions. However, we must assume that Lulu is only receiving the information included in Nanapush's narration, as Pauline speaks to no one in particular. Our position, then, is further complicated because we also are privy to Pauline's interpretation of the events, which, in some cases, is vastly different than Nanapush's. We also know that Nanapush has an admirable goal for his storytelling: he wishes to extend his knowledge of the tribe to the future of that tribe. Pauline, in contrast, has no certain agenda and repeatedly tells half-truths, cannot properly remember certain events and, in several cases, is called a liar by Nanapush. At one moment in the text, Nanapush even compares his trustworthiness to Pauline's, informing the reader exactly to whose story we should listen, insisting that Pauline:

was different once her mouth opened and she started to wag her tongue. She was worse than a Nanapush, in fact. For while I was careful with my known facts, she was given to improving the truth. Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage. (39).

Thus, she and Nanapush are at odds with one another and become representatives for different experiences, different perspectives and different ideologies. We can consider the possibility, however, that Lulu is experiencing the same difficulty in understanding the history conveyed to her, for she, by attending the government school, receives similar competing truths or realities. Thus, we share Lulu's position throughout the novel as Erdrich leaves it up to us to interpret the magical realist elements of her novel.

In *Ordinary Enchantments*, Wendy Faris devises five characteristics a work must exhibit to truly be considered a work of magical realism:

First, the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space and reality. (7)

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” (7). 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” (8). 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 element both works in *Tracks* to reinforce the belief systems, traditions, history and memories of the tribe and to highlight the conflict within the tribe to hold on to these traditions as treaties, religion, and government education seek to destroy them.

Nanapush narrates the first chapter of the novel. In it, he tells Lulu of the time he saved her mother from dying of the sickness that infiltrated much of the tribe and killed the rest of Fleur’s family. Here, in the first few pages of the novel, we experience the first instance of magical realism. Nanapush and Edgar Pukwan, a member of the tribal police, travel a few miles

to the Pillager residence to quarantine the area and burn the house to the ground with the bodies inside; however, the house will 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” (3). 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” (2). 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 warring identities. Ultimately, his tribal identity wins this conflict as “[h]e finally dropped the tinders and helped [Nanapush] drag Fleur along the trail” (3). 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. (9)

Here, 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 Faris calls “the existence of a mysterious realm of the spirit” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 69). These “ghosts” as Nanapush calls them, perhaps Fleur’s ancestors, are assisting her by initially driving away the Agent. When he returns once more, they continue to haunt him, slowly driving him insane. Here, we are again made aware of the power of the Pillagers, who protect the future of their family, and, in turn, the future of the tribe. This passage hints, without stating explicitly, that the tribe’s ancestors exist in the forest. The woods, at least on Fleur’s property, become a “realm of the spirit” which upholds the spiritual connection with the land and the tribe’s ancestors and exists as a place where magical events are still possible—even probable. Creating an environment on Fleur’s property where “magical” events can still take place allows Fleur to continue the shamanistic traditions of her tribe, in turn allowing the tribes traditions to continue alongside the assimilation of some of the tribe’s members. In this way, Fleur becomes the representative for the tribe’s belief system, history and ancestry, and her land, the land of the tribe. Thus, most of the magical realist elements of the novel occur on Fleur’s property, in her presence or through her.

Pauline narrates a pivotal scene in the novel—one that strengthens her connection to Catholicism and drives her away from the tribe. This scene also addresses Faris’s fourth

characteristic, the merging of different realms. Pauline tells us that after she used Pillager magic to drive Fleur's husband Eli and fourteen-year-old Sophie Morrisey into a violent and prolonged sexual encounter, Fleur has compelled Sophie to sit, rigid and immovable in front of Fleur's house. 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 elements of Native American spirituality and Catholic mysticism intersect and work to represent Pauline's experience. She practiced Pillager magic, which caused great harm and was saved by the luminous statue's tears of sympathy. Faris also comments on this moment in the text, noting that in spite of Pauline's increasingly irrational state of mind, "her report of the damp cloth and the realistic detail of how it dried argues in favor of the miracle" (209). In this case, Pauline has not left behind or denied the "magic" occurring around her. Instead, due to her deep desire to belong to a community with strong spiritual grounding, she has merely traded one source of mysticism for another.

The final scene that I would like to discuss in this chapter that exhibits magical realism is the moment in which Fleur seeks retribution for the rape committed by several men in the nearby town of Argus. In this scene we come to understand, through Pauline's narration, that Fleur has used her spiritual powers to transform herself into a tornado in order to retaliate against the men who harmed 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” (26). Pauline’s observation here hints at several ideas central to understanding both Fleur and Pauline’s relationship to the text. We find again and again that Pauline is not a trustworthy narrator, and this example of her behavior as a witness to the events is no exception to the rule. Pauline, in this instance, describes her desire to block out the incident, but despite her best efforts, she cannot. Her inability to ignore what happens to Fleur is symbolic of her inability to ignore what happens to her own identity later in the novel. Thus, her behavior here is symptomatic of Pauline’s denial and, because she “couldn’t block out” everything that occurred, her inability to deal with that denial.

Pauline never overtly states whether she believes that Fleur caused the tornado in order to exact revenge on her rapists, but the juxtaposition of the two events more than hints at their correlation. This was no natural occurrence, as the townspeople notice once they assess the damage caused by the storm:

The glass candy case went fifty [feet], and landed without so much as a cracked pane. There were other surprises as well, for the back rooms where Fritzie and Pete lived were undisturbed. Fritzie said the dust still coated her china figures, and upon her kitchen table, in the ashtray, perched the last cigarette she’d put out in haste. (29)

Again, after the completion of the description of the tornado’s damage, Pauline returns to discussing power and familial relationships, specifically that of Fleur’s family, the Pillagers. Although she does not tell us that Fleur is responsible for the tornado, we can infer the connection based on the proximity of her descriptions. She states:



Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted, big, spidery and rough, with sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards. It comes through the eyes, too, belligerent, darkest brown, the eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person. (31)

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" (31). Pauline's description of the familial power, which runs through both the blood and the land, is reminiscent of another, perhaps the quintessential, magical realist text, 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" (9). These images make tangible the connection within a family, or a culture, that these texts are attempting to convey. These passages touch on, without directly stating, how Pauline's history and experience undermine her intentions. This undermining foretells not only the dilemma that will eventually destroy Pauline's identity and her psyche, but it also demonstrates the dilemma facing the tribe, a subject in which I will fully engage in chapter two.

### 3 *Exploring and Re-evaluating Concepts of Native American Identity*

In chapter one I discussed the ways in which *Tracks* exemplifies a Native American novel in that it engages with the tropes present in much contemporary Native American fiction, as well as how certain magical realist elements in the novel remain intact—that is, both narrators and the audience can believe that these events occurred. What I want to address in this chapter are the ways in which *Tracks* strays away from typical Native American tropes, as well as the way the some of the characters, specifically Pauline, begin to stray from the tribe. In doing so, I will examine the ways in which Pauline’s narration undermines Nanapush’s interpretations of the magical elements of the novel. Although the audience may have some difficulty believing these elements, this undermining does not negate them. Ultimately, this chapter will provide a character analysis of Pauline and the perspective she provides in order to highlight the ambiguity of the future of the tribe.

The underlying discordant nature of the novel reflects the contemporary arguments surrounding Native American studies and, more specifically, Erdrich’s work, so, before I begin the textual analysis of the novel, I would like to address the criticism of Erdrich’s work as it relates to the issues of postcolonialism outlined in the introduction. Critics have been vocal regarding the major issues, perceived in Erdrich’s work, ranging from her lack of an overt political message to her appropriation of Indian stereotypes; however, the three opinions I would like to focus on here are those of critics Gloria Bird, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Leslie Marmon Silko. In delineating these issues, I hope to highlight the liminality, subtlety and fluidity of

Erdrich's work. Although I am not claiming that Erdrich's work provides the ultimate example of Native American intellectual sovereignty, it does provide an example, nonetheless, by speaking volumes about the ambiguousness of Native American identity during the early part of the twentieth century.

In her essay "Searching for Evidence of Colonialism at Work: A Reading of Louise Erdrich's 'Tracks,'" Bird examines the colonizer's influence upon Erdrich's writing. She argues that *Tracks* reifies stereotypes of the Native American as "savage," and as "a manifestation of 'The Vanishing Red Man' Syndrome" (42). Also, her essay includes a list that describes the stereotype of the savage, borrowed from Robert Sayre, which I will reproduce here. According to Sayre, "savages" are solitary hunters, bound to tradition, corrupted by civilization, superstitious pagans, and are, therefore, doomed to extinction (42). Fleur, she argues, who is only mediated to us through both narrators and never speaks for herself, is supposed to exhibit the epitome of "Indianness," but, because of the reification of negative stereotypes present in even the earliest colonial writing about Native Americans in Erdrich's work, Fleur, and her cousin Moses, only represents the trope of the savage. Throughout the novel, Bird notes, we are led to believe that community and tribal identity are of utmost importance to the people of the tribe, the subtext reinforces marginality. Bird states that the novel "simultaneously provides a subtext in which Fleur and Moses' marginality . . . the aspect of the Pillager's untouchableness and the fear of the Pillagers have instilled into Nanapush and Pukwan is exemplified. The submerged text of *Tracks* consistently provides for the mixed messages of the text" (43).

I agree that *Tracks* is full of mixed messages, but that these mixed messages are a product of the changing views of the tribe. Let us take a look at the scene to which Bird refers. Nanapush and Pukwan travel to the Pillager's house in order to quarantine the area. In this scene, it is not

Nanapush who fears the Pillager's power, only the assimilated Pukwan who works for the tribal police:

Pukwan did not want to enter, fearing the unburied Pillager spirits might seize him by the throat and turn him windigo. So I was the one who broke the thin-scraped hide that made a window. I was the one who lowered himself into the stinking silence, onto the floor. I was also the one to find the old man and woman, your grandparents, the little brother and two sisters, stone cold and wrapped in gray horse blankets, their faces turned to the west. (3)

Nanapush is not afraid, and I would argue that he is not afraid because he does not consider the Pillagers as othered. Later in the novel he adopts both Fleur and then her child into his family. Thus I would argue that he hardly fears her. In essence, the text does not create mixed messages, but only mixed interpretations by the characters who are no longer, ideologically speaking, the same.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, another of Erdrich's critics, discusses in her essay "The American Indian Fiction Writers: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and First Nation Sovereignty" the dilemma of Third World Intellectuals who, in their fiction, have "moved away from the expected nationalistic affiliations towards an acquired 'cosmopolitanism.'" In the process of doing so, it is argued, they have contributed to the confusion about cultural authority in the Third World literary voice" (78). Cook-Lynn wishes to extend this criticism to certain Native American authors, but she spends the majority of her time in the essay on Erdrich's work. The problem begins, she argues, when scholars that do not have the specific aims of postcolonial discourse in mind "claim for these writers a deeply authoritative cultural voice" (81). Cook-Lynn argues that scholars have continuously compared Erdrich to William Faulkner while also claiming that she is an exemplary

Native American novelist. This behavior, according to Cook-Lynn, “unintentionally illustrates the confused status in critical theory and pedagogy of the nationalistic/cosmopolitan role as it applies to specific literary works” (81). Claiming an “authoritative cultural voice” undoubtedly can be problematic for writers like Erdrich, especially in pedagogical venues; however a stronger case should be made, in these same venues, that her novel makes subtle commentary about her own identity as Native American and German American and the experience not just of Native Americans, but of the multiple and competing identities of so many of her characters.

Finally, I would like to address Leslie Marmon Silko’s infamous review of Erdrich’s novel *The Beet Queen*, titled “Here’s an Odd Artifact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf,” in which she lambasts what she perceives as Erdrich’s focus on postmodern, self-referential writing instead on the political and historical injustices facing Native Americans. She claims that *The Beet Queen* is not nearly political enough, and instead the novel creates a world where “all misery, suffering, and loss are self-generated” (182). Although Silko is discussing a different novel here, I believe that her style is similar in both novels, and I can only assume Silko would have a similar response to *Tracks*.

Interestingly, Susan Perez Castillo sheds a different light on the criticism Silko and others have placed on Erdrich’s work. Her essay “Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy” attempts to put Silko’s comments in perspective, and I would like to address some of her remarks here, as I find that Perez Castillo highlights a fluidity present in Erdrich’s work that will be relevant to my discussion of identity issues in *Tracks*. Perez Castillo argues that Silko’s strong objection to Erdrich’s portrayal of Native Americans is “rooted in a restrictive view of ethnicity and an essentialist, logocentric concept of textual representation” (285). Silko finds issue with Erdrich’s loyalty to postmodern prose, which she

views as “radically different from the Native American oral tradition, which is by definition a shared, communal experience” (286). Part of the confusion, Perez Castillo argues, is that Silko’s view of ethnicity is limiting, while Erdrich approaches identity from a more fluid perspective:

It is also significant that [Silko] grew up in a tribe which is almost unique in that it has succeeded to a notable degree in maintaining its collective identity while adapting to change. Erdrich, however, is a member of the Chippewa tribe, which for historical and geographic reasons has suffered the effects of acculturation on a far greater scale . . . the cultural ambivalence reflected in *The Beet Queen* may be mimetic in character, mirroring the fragmented ontological landscape in which many Native Americans exist today, shuttling between radically diverse realities. This diversity can be seen, however, not only as potentially alienating, but also as a source of creative ferment and positive historical change. (289)

Perez Castillo makes a significant point here, although controversial among some Native American scholars. The fluidity of identity that Perez Castillo speaks of in this excerpt is an element that most accurately describes Erdrich’s work, an element that many of her critics tend to overlook because of its subtlety. Stressing the importance of viewing “ethnicity not as a static entity but rather as a dynamic, historically constructed process,” Perez Castillo nicely sums up the way in which I believe Erdrich approaches her characterization of modern Native American identity. To illustrate the manner in which Erdrich explores the dynamic nature of identity, in this chapter I would like to discuss several passages from *Tracks* in which Pauline’s struggle with identity takes the spotlight. In these passages, her identity struggle has a direct relationship to her acceptance and dismissal of the magical realist elements of the novel.

First, I would like to continue the discussion of Fleur’s tornado as witnessed by Pauline.

Throughout the novel, Pauline has a difficult time acknowledging how the men who fell victim to Fleur's tornado came to be locked in the freezer. In her initial description of the events, she claims:

It was Russell, I am sure, who first put his arms on the bar, thick iron that was made to slide along the wall and fall across the hasp and lock. He strained and shoved, too slight to move it into place, but he did not look to me for help.

Sometimes, thinking back, I see my arms lift, my hands grasp, see myself dropping the beam into the metal grip. At other times, that moment is erased. But I always see Russell's face the moment after, as he turned, as he ran for the door—a peaceful look of complicit satisfaction. (27-8)

In this chapter, the first that Pauline narrates, she has already proven herself to be an untrustworthy narrator, even before Nanapush can further slant our opinion of her in later chapters. She states that she is “sure” that it was Russell who locked the men in the freezer, but then diminishes the truth of this statement in the next sentence. On other occasions, she sees herself “dropping the beam into the metal grip,” and at other times, she does not see it happen this way; the “moment is erased” (27). If Pauline cannot be certain of her own memories, how can we, as readers, trust her narration or her perspective of the magical events that she describes? We cannot. However, the difficulty Pauline has in coming to terms with what happened or admitting to herself the possibility that she murdered those men, reflects a struggle that Pauline encounters time and again—not only with her own actions, but with her identity<sup>3</sup>. We see her

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<sup>3</sup> Pauline's struggle with the truth is also reflective of our own struggle to comprehend the truth in the novel. With this passage, Erdrich plays with the audience's ability to decipher the truth and our ability to believe the magical realist elements of the novel. Thus, our need, as western readers, to find the rational explanation for the magical events in the novel is strengthened here by Pauline's statements, furthering the conflict between western ideas of rationalism and magical realism.

interpretation of the events in Argus fluctuate between Pauline as guilty party and Pauline as innocent bystander, as later in the novel, when she admits her guilt openly, stating “There would have to come a turning, a gathering, another door. And it would be Pauline who opened it, same as she closed the Argus lockers” (139). Pauline’s narrative often stretches the limits of truth, reality and fiction, a postmodern concept to be sure, but Pauline’s narrative cannot be dismissed because of her ambiguous identity. If nothing else, her identity conflict is representative of the difficulties of finding the Native American literary voice, not a dismissal of that search.

Nanapush also reinforces the doubt we should place in Pauline’s narration throughout the novel. In the third chapter, Nanapush, after hearing the story Pauline told regarding the incident in Argus, confronts Fleur about it, but Fleur insists that “the Puyat lies” (38). Nanapush, however, cannot let the thought of Pauline leave him, and he reflects on her character—a characterization that will define her throughout the novel. He notes:

I could not cast the Puyat from my mind. You might not remember what people I’m talking about, the skimmers, of whom Pauline was the only trace of those who died and scattered. She was different from the Puyats I remembered, who were always an uncertain people, shy, never leaders in our dances and cures. She was, to my mind, an unknown mixture of ingredients, like the pale bannock that sagged or hardened. We never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around. So we tried to ignore her, and that worked as long as she was quiet. (38-9)

Here we have our first description of Pauline from someone’s perspective other than her own, in which she is characterized as a mixedblood, an outsider and someone who improved upon the truth. This sets a precedent for the reader to question every event Pauline describes, especially if it creates a discrepancy between Nanapush and Pauline’s narration. However, this excerpt



exemplifies the struggle over identity that leads Pauline away from the tribe, toward her own brand of Catholicism and her eventual descent into madness. In this description, Pauline seems dangerous, and her otherness makes the rest of the tribe uncomfortable. From Nanapush's narrative then, Pauline's humanity is more evident than in her own narrative, and we are made aware, for the first time, the cause of Pauline's desire to become white.

Later, Pauline has a vision in which she accompanies Fleur down a road she has never seen before. The road leads her to her ancestors: "[t]hose who starved, drank, and froze, those who died of the cough, all of the people I'd blessed, washed, and wrapped, all were here" (159-60). Initially, Pauline is ignored, invisible, marginal. However, her guilt and betrayal bring her recognition. She notes:

They turned to me then, picked me out among the watchers. Their eyes followed me through dead air no matter how small I made myself. The old trick did not work this time. I was visible. They saw me, and it was clear from their eyes they knew my arms had fixed the beam in the cradle, back in Argus. I had sent them to this place. (162)

She is now recognized when previously the tribe worked to ignore her because she did not fit neatly into their concept of tribal identity. However, Pauline finds that she does not want this recognition. She has become othered in a different manner, as her behavior is considered a betrayal of the members of the tribe. Finding it impossible to be a recognized member of the tribe, she must find acceptance elsewhere.

Pauline's desire to assimilate into white culture, only perpetuated by others in the tribe dismissing or ignoring her as well as her mother's death, leads her off of the reservation. However this desire merely leaves her on the margins of both cultures as "the white girls in

Argus either ridicule or ignore her” (40). She then seeks religion as a release, in hopes that God will accept her, and in a desperate attempt to find that acceptance, she “does not adopt mainstream Catholicism, but rather invents her own version under which she assumes the role of the “crow of the reservation,” (54) inviting death to others’ houses, handling the cold skin of the deceased, and then passing death onto the living by touching them after dressing the dead” (Hessler 41). She has no place, or cannot locate herself within any already conceived set of traditions and history, so she invents her own. This invented Catholicism happens to be a destructive brand—one in which she wears her shoes on the wrong feet, wears undergarments made of burlap sacks which scratch her and smell, never bathes or relieves herself. In her essay “Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*” Michelle Hessler comments on Pauline’s struggle with identity and her creation of her own methods of worship. She notes that although Pauline no longer subscribes to Anishinaabe beliefs, “her lack of concern over the deceased persons’ souls in the afterworld indicates that she does not hold true Catholic beliefs either” (41). Thus, Pauline is in the middle, or nowhere at all, drifting in a reality she has manufactured for herself and fulfilling a doctrine of her own devising. She has given herself no one to answer to except herself, and while this gives her ultimate control, she also cannot belong to any one group. This lack of belonging leaves her feeling incomplete and dispossessed—the only difference between herself and the other assimilated members of the tribe being that Pauline wishes to belong and cannot, while the others choose assimilation over the tribe.

Thus, shedding light on Pauline’s identity allows us to understand the differences in Pauline and Nanapush’s perspectives on the magical realist elements of the novel. I want to argue here, that despite Faris’s assertions that *Tracks* “is on the fringes of magical realism” because

“[e]ach event can be given a magical or a rational interpretation,” the novel plays with notions of perspective while also exploring the idea that the perceived sources of the magical realist moments reflect the conflict within the tribe (*Ordinary Enchantments* 208). The members of the tribe are in the midst of a significant shift in their belief system, traditions, history, land ownership, and livelihood. The experience of European settlers’ encroachment on the tribe’s land has challenged notions of what a likely, or possible, occurrence is. While the needs and desires of the tribe changes, their perspectives do as well. That is to say that they may no longer subscribe to their “third world” position once they adopt the materialism and Catholicism introduced to them by the European settlers. In the introduction to *A Companion to Magical Realism*, Stephen Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang discuss the concept of perspective in terms of magical realism. Hart also stresses the importance of magic in these novels based on the interpretations of the colonizer and those of the colonized:

What for the inhabitant of the ‘First World’ is magical (a woman who ascends to heaven, ghosts who return to earth, priests who can levitate, gypsies who can morph into a puddle of tar) is real and unremarkable for the inhabitant of the ‘Third World’. To keep the symmetry, what for the inhabitant of the ‘Third World’ is magical (false teeth, magnets, films, trains, ice) is real and unremarkable for the inhabitant of the ‘First World.’ (4)

So the difficulty Pauline, and at times Nanapush, have in placing total faith in the events they describe being magical reflects the changing, confused and ambiguous point of view of each narrator. This, in turn, reflects the confusion the reader feels, typically coming from a western, or “First World” mindset, in accepting the magical realist elements of the novel, as well as the conflicts of identity the people of the tribe suffer from, especially Pauline.

One instance in particular, which truly highlights the doubt cast within the tribe, occurs during Nanapush's narration. Toward the end of the novel he reflects on how he and his new extended family can no longer take care of themselves. He notes that "in the end it was not Fleur's dreams, my skill, Eli's desperate searches, or Margaret's preserves that saved us. It was the government commodities sent from Hoopdance in six wagons" (171). Nanapush's faith in the ability of the tribe to fend for itself has diminished, and even he, a tribal elder, relies on the government for survival. This reliance on the government to provide for them undoubtedly changes the tribe's perspective on the white community and shrinks the gap between the "us and them" mentality presented earlier in the novel. Likewise, Pauline, at least in the beginning of the novel displays her faith in and adherence to the tribe's belief system. Pauline describes Fleur's relationship with the monster of Lake Machimanito:

Men stayed clear of Fleur Pillager after the second drowning. Even though she was good-looking, nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself. He's the devil, that one, love hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur. (11)

Here, Pauline seems to understand and identify with the beliefs of her tribe. However, as she becomes more and more assimilated into white culture, her perspective changes, which, in turn, changes her descriptions of the magical elements of the novel. Thus, we are left feeling uncertain about whether or not these events have a magical or rational explanation, as Faris notes in *Ordinary Enchantments*. Later in the novel, we see Pauline deny the myth of the monster in the lake:

It was clear that Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other

Manitous who lived in trees, the bush, or spirits of animals that were hunted so scarce they became discouraged and did not mate. There would have to come a turning, a gathering, another door. And it would be Pauline who opened it, same as she closed the Argus lockers. Not Fleur Pillager. One night I saw. (139)

Several things are significant in this excerpt. First, Pauline dismisses the lake monster's power as well as the other manitous which she previously believed protected her and the rest of her tribe, according to her spiritual ideology. After she insists that she has a vision of God telling her that she is "not whom [she] had supposed ... not one speck of Indian, but wholly white," she has fully succeeded in creating a new identity (137). Now that she has no use for attempting and failing to belong to the tribe, she feels confident that she can, and ultimately must, dismiss the belief system of the tribe. Thus, we see her refer to her tribe as "Indians" and not "we" or "my tribe" or "my family."

Pauline's changing perspective mirrors that of the majority of the tribe. Fleur may be counted as the only member of the tribe that does not stray from the tribe's spirituality, as even Nanapush, on several occasions, doubts the mystic and spiritual nature of some of the events he describes. This perspective mirrors the reader's own doubt regarding the "magical" elements of the text, as the narrators' ever-changing beliefs skew the reader's opinion. This doubt and ambiguity the reader feels reflect the ambiguous nature of the novel itself, and ultimately the future of the tribe. This ambiguity, I argue, is something that many scholars have overlooked when criticizing Erdrich's work. Often arguing that her work focuses on the inner struggles of her characters without recognizing the overt, political issues at work which affect the tribe, these scholars neglect the subtle, yet powerful nature of Erdrich's fiction. As Perez Castillo notes, "a text is linked to ideology by its silences as well as by that which it explicitly states. Erdrich's

silences are often very eloquent indeed, and are perhaps more politically effective than overt sloganeering” (288). These silences that Perez Castillo claims are so effective in Erdrich’s work are perhaps most obvious in her use of magical realism. In “Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse” Stephen Slemon argues that because “magic realism” is an oxymoron, the magic and realism do battle throughout a novel without one ever truly winning over the other so that “each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the ‘other,’ a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences” (409). This sort of magical realist novel, Slemon argues:

involves the thematic foregrounding of those gaps, absences, and silences produced by the colonial encounter and reflected in the text’s disjunctive language of narration . . . the texts tend to display a preoccupation with images of both borders and centers and to work toward destabilizing their fixity. (412)

Through the different ways of seeing the magic *and* realism present in the novel, Pauline and Nanapush illustrate this struggle, this “disjunction,” leaving gaps and open ends. Slemon’s definition is also relevant to the changing centers and borders both within and outside of the tribe, most prominently through the characterization of Pauline. While these gaps and silences may make some critics uneasy, Erdrich’s work manages to straddle Native American literary traditions, postmodern conventions and postcolonial aims, which, I argue, make a valuable addition to the Native American literary canon.

#### 4 Conclusion

In *Tracks*, Erdrich explores the complexities of tribal identity during the first half of the twentieth century. Ultimately, *Tracks* is about negotiation and renegotiation. Pauline must negotiate her identities; the tribe must negotiate with European settlers to maintain its land; the reader must negotiate between multiple narrators and between belief and disbelief of the magical realism based on multiple interpretations. However, Erdrich, as author, has also done some negotiating. Throughout this novel, she negotiates two competing schools of thought in direct conflict with each other: Native American studies and postmodernism. Thus, the negotiations within the text reflect the conflict surrounding the writing of the text, and whether or not this was Erdrich's intention, her characters succeed in illustrating that a Native American text can possess liminal identities and non-referential language and still be considered Native American literature. Scholars like Womack continue to debate what makes a work authoritatively Native American, despite postmodernists' cries that things like truth and history have become difficult, if not impossible, to determine:

In terms of a reality check . . . we might remind ourselves that authenticity and insider and outsider status are, in fact, often discussed in Native communities, especially given the historical reality that outsiders have so often been interpreting things Indian. Further, it seems foolhardy to me to abandon a search for the affirmation of a national literary identity simply to fall in line with the latest literary trend. The constructions of such an identity reaffirms the real truth about our place in history—we are not mere victims but active agents in history, innovators of new ways, of Indian ways, of thinking and being and speaking and authoring in this

world created by colonial contact. (7)

While I agree with Womack and scholars like him that Native Americans cannot begin to fathom considering the irrelevance of history when theirs has, in a sense, not been written yet—at least from a Native perspective—I disagree that Erdrich's work fails to take part in the telling of that history. *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 (i.e. protest literature), as well as using magical realism to engage in the process “of effecting important comparative analyses between separate postcolonial texts” (Slemon 409). *Tracks*, by using magical realism, expands upon the boundary of what is possible, and in doing so, engages with the telling of history in a unique way. The incorporation of myth and magic, as well as describing internal conflicts of individual members of the tribe, makes *Tracks* inherently “insider” without fully disengaging with the postmodern. Ultimately, Erdrich addresses the concerns over authenticity within the Native American community and authenticity among Native American scholars.

Perhaps Erdrich's work and the controversy surrounding it will allow for a revising of what can be considered a Native American voice. I agree with Perez Castillo's assertion that our perception of Native Americans “is a discursive construct and not an ideal mystified category. 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” (18). Arguing that many postmodernists “seem almost willfully to misunderstand Derrida's affirmation” that nothing exists beyond the text, Perez Castillo, and Erdrich's work, tells us that the postmodern versus



Native text binary does nothing but negate the significance of the texts which situate themselves somewhere between the two. Finding a singular Native American literary voice must not be the focus of Native American studies. Celebrating the multitude of literary voices within the Native American canon—or, more precisely, the Native American voices of the American literary canon—undoubtedly is a more productive and rewarding endeavor.

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