

“A PIECE OF THE ENDLESS BODY OF THE WORLD”:
GENDER, IDENTITY, AND THE COEXISTENCE OF BINARY FORCES IN LOUISE
ERDRICH’S *THE LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES AT LITTLE NO HORSE*,
TRACKS, AND *LOVE MEDICINE*

by

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for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Louise Erdrich's North Dakota series explores the historical and contemporary hardships faced by aboriginals. Her novels center on the families that live on the fictional reservation of Little No Horse and the communal and personal fragmentation that occurs as a result of colonization. Focusing on three of the novels in Erdrich's North Dakota works, I identify the different ways in which Erdrich's characters respond to the imposition of Western values. To frame my thesis, I focus on Dee Horne's examination of subversive and colonial mimics. By examining the various responses to the colonization of the reservation, Erdrich's novels reveal the possibilities of reconstructing Native communities. I identify the ways in which Erdrich exposes the similarities that exist between traditional Native spirituality and Catholicism which in turn suggests the ways in which a harmonious balance can be achieved between these two cultures.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1—INTRODUCTION: LOUISE ERDRICH’S NORTH DAKOTA SERIES

Louise Erdrich is a contemporary Native American author who has achieved critical success for her series of novels that examine reservation life. These novels focus on the generations of families who reside on a reservation in North Dakota, “documenting familial, political, and social histories over a century of tumultuous change” (Sawhney 1). Erdrich weaves together the stories “of the Anishinaabeg and Anglos [...] into a saga that recounts the triumphs, failures, and interconnectedness of their lives” (Jacobs 51). The North Dakota series examines colonization and the effects of Westernization on the families “over the last century” (52). By chronicling the lives of several generations, Erdrich’s exploration of “the evolving life of her people” (52) allows her to “inscribe[] a living history of her people to serve as a record of their lives in the twentieth century” (53). My thesis focuses on three novels from Erdrich’s North Dakota series, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), *Tracks* (1988), and *Love Medicine* (1984). I have chosen to focus specifically on these three novels because of their progression over time, diegetically beginning in the 1900s in *The Last Report* and *Tracks*, and reaching the 1980s in *Love Medicine*. The three novels also present a variety of perspectives on similar events, such as the Dawes Allotment Act,¹ government schools, the continued loss of traditions in the wake of Westernization, and the personal and communal fragmentation that develops as a result. The span of history that is outlined in

¹ The Dawes Allotment Act was a government policy that made “it relatively easy to divide up land formerly held communally on reservations and to allot it to individual Indians” (Peterson 181). The Allotment Act inevitably helped to “accelerate land loss” (Banner 257), the effects of which are explored throughout Erdrich’s novels.

these novels presents multiple narratives that chronicle the genealogies of specific families and the interconnectivity of their stories.

By exploring the effects of colonization on the reservation from the early 1900s to the 1980s, Erdrich's novels examine the effects of colonial influence and the simultaneous process of decolonization. My thesis examines the issues of identity that arise from the pressures and influences of the colonial center. I employ postcolonial theory to explore the ways in which the characters contend with the emergence of Catholicism, residential schools, and other colonial forces that seek to limit and devalue Native culture. For example, the disruptive force of land rights and shifting property ownership creates instability, something that Erdrich emphasizes in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, as the reservation is described as "a place still fluid of definition, appearing solid only on a map" (*The Last Report* 75). The fluidity of the landscape parallels the unstable identities of many of Erdrich's characters, as the absence of definition affects both the community and the individual. The loss of traditions that results from colonial intervention highlights a liminal space where past methods of understanding are broken and reassembled into new systems. The constant change and absence of stable definitions are evident in the characters of Little No Horse, as various binaries, such as those tied to gender identities and religious affiliations, are collapsed: specifically, I will explore in detail Erdrich's constant use of dualities, and how she is able to create a synthesis between seemingly antagonistic opposites, such as colonial authority and native spirituality as well as masculine and feminine identities. I argue that Erdrich brings disparate entities into a dynamic and positive whole, and portrays the Native community as being better able than the Euro-American community to accept these opposing forces as necessary elements of personal and social existence.

I focus on *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, *Tracks*, and *Love Medicine* because all three novels explicitly explore issues of colonization and gender, religion, and race. In the following three chapters, I highlight the ways in which Erdrich reveals, and challenges, the cultural binaries that inform identity in all of these discourses. In order to explore the issues of gender and ethnic identity that pervade Erdrich's novels, I employ Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry. Bhabha explains how the "demand for identity [and] stasis" (Bhabha 122) in marginalized communities results in the emulation and internalization of colonial ideologies. Erdrich explores the ways in which aboriginal individuals and communities respond to colonial presence through mimicry. She reveals issues of influence and affiliation as certain characters imitate white colonial behaviour to a damaging extreme. Pauline Puyat, the only character who appears in all three novels, is emblematic of the internalization of Western concepts. Rejecting her ties to Native culture, Pauline embraces Catholicism because of her belief that colonization is essential for progress and civilization. Other characters are often revealed to engage in mimicry, but some adopt white behaviour for drastically different reasons. In order to differentiate among the kinds of mimicry that emerge in Erdrich's portrayal of the reservation, I rely on Dee Horne's distinction between the colonial and the subversive mimic. She explains that Bhabha's theory focuses on colonial mimics, marginalized people who "are more concerned with repeating than with re-presenting colonizers" (*Contemporary* 3).² In contrast, subversive mimics "engage[] in partial repetitions of colonial discourse [in order] to contest its authority" (13). When discussing the difference between the two

² At this instance, I am exploring Bhabha's theory as it is reworked by Dee Horne. Although Bhabha's theory is more complex than my reading of Horne suggests, I have decided to focus on specific aspects of Bhabha's theory, as read by Horne, to engage with specific elements of Erdrich's novels.

types of mimicry, Horne examines contemporary Aboriginal literature. In her essay on Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Horne reveals the ways in which Pauline Puyat and Agnes DeWitt use mimicry for dramatically different purposes. Pauline's mimicry is ultimately problematic because her emulation of the colonizers stems from her desire to eradicate her ties to her heritage. Despite her convincing emulation, because Pauline is a colonial mimic, she "replicate[s] the colonizer but is disavowed" ("I Meant" 278). Pauline is always defined by her ethnicity, and as a result she is "*a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 122). Agnes, a transgendered woman living as a Catholic priest, is a "self-aware" (Horne, "I Meant" 278) mimic who actively and critically challenges the systems that she emulates. The subversive mimic "claims agency by interrogating their own cultural appropriation" (278). Agnes engages in this process of interrogation by questioning the power she adopts as a figure of colonial authority. In order to dismantle the damaging hierarchies that exist in a colonized community, Agnes challenges the prevailing systems of power, and in so doing attempts to create a harmonious interweaving of two opposing cultures.

1.2— CHAPTER 2: TWO SPIRITS AND GENDER IDENTITY IN *THE LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES AT LITTLE NO HORSE*

Agnes' position "as a negotiator between the terms of contact between the dominant and marginal cultures" (Sawhney 3) allows her to reveal the similarities between Native spirituality and Catholicism, systems of belief often considered as

diametrically opposite.³ The desire to bring together two cultures stems from Agnes' position as a transgendered character. Throughout *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Agnes strives to reconcile the parts of her identity that have been culturally deemed as masculine and those that are seen to be feminine. Erdrich's novels often attack conventional interpretations of gender, since in each of the three novels characters recognize themselves as embodying both masculine and feminine elements. The reservation presents a space drastically different from Western communities, since many of the people of Little No Horse recognize and accept sexualities that transgress conventional Western expectations. Historically, many Native tribes have recognized the Two Spirit, a person who inhabits "more than two gender categories" (Sue-Ellen Jacobs 2). Erdrich's novels explore the existence of transgendered characters as respected members of the reservation. The community is revealed as essential to the freedom of the Two Spirit, since communal acceptance allows people with what would be, in the Euro-American tradition, transgressive sexual identities to live as equal members of society.⁴

At various points throughout Erdrich's novels, characters struggle with their gender identities. In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Agnes finds a sense of freedom in the reservation by being accepted as a Two Spirit. However, her attempt at living convincingly as a man reveals the performative nature of gender. In my first chapter, I examine the ways in which Erdrich's sexually transgressive characters highlight the problems of socially normalized gender roles. I utilize Judith Butler's

³ Annette Van Dyke's essay "A Hope for Miracles: Shifting Perspectives in Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*" explores the ways in which Agnes' unique position in the community allows her to engage and understand the community differently than her Catholic predecessors. As a result of her own marginal position, she is able to more successfully harmonize the two cultures.

⁴ See Jason Cromwell's essay, "Traditions of Gender Diversity and Sexualities: A Female-to-Male Transgendered Perspective," for a further discussion of Two Spirits and the importance of community acceptance.

Gender Trouble and her theory that gender is an act governed by “rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms” (Butler 370). The development of gender identity is created through “a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects” (369). Since understandings of gender and gender behaviour develop through a process of repetition, Butler suggests that gender is not determined by nature. Behaviour is not informed by biology but is instead informed by a series of social rules “that govern intelligible identity” (369). Some of Erdrich’s characters, especially Agnes DeWitt in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and Fleur Pillager in *Tracks*, address the notion that Western conceptions of normative gender identity are socially constructed. On the reservation, characters are forced to reconcile the colonial privileging of gender categories with a culture that has traditionally accepted binaries as a coexisting force.

1.3—CHAPTER 3: THE RELEVANCE OF CONFLICTING BELIEFS AND POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS IN *TRACKS*

In my second chapter I focus on *Tracks*. Considered one of Erdrich’s “most overtly political novel[s]” (Stookey 70), *Tracks* reveals “images of cultural catastrophe” (Stookey 70). Told from the perspective of two narrators who present “sharply contrasting political positions” (71), the novel highlights the turmoil that developed within Native communities as people responded to colonial interference in often opposing and irreconcilable ways. Erdrich’s novel begins during the time of the Dawes Allotment Act, when the members of Little No Horse are forced to contend with the difficulties of maintaining their land. The hardships faced by various members of the reservation

highlight an exploration of the different ways land was lost or sold out of aboriginal hands. Issues of gender and ethnicity are further emphasised in the presentation of two main female characters, Fleur Pillager and Pauline Puyat. Struggling with gender stereotypes, the two characters recognize the apparent powerlessness attributed to them because of their marginal position as impoverished aboriginal women. Fleur and Pauline challenge the ways in which they have been essentialized by dominant culture, as well as within their own community, by refusing to adhere to racist and sexist expectations of normative behaviour. For example, Fleur's spirituality is integral to her destruction of limiting stereotypes, since she uses traditional Native shamanic powers to counter her marginality.

1.4—CHAPTER 4: THE INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL STRUGGLE FOR THE SURVIVAL OF ABORIGINAL CULTURE IN *LOVE MEDICINE*

My third chapter explores the ways in which the internalization of Western values results in the dissolution of Native traditions and simultaneously contributes to the destruction of the community. Because the people of the reservation are increasingly marginalized, the fragmentation that pervades Erdrich's novel is revealed to be both a communal and individual problem. However, highlighting this growing alienation of the characters from their culture, Erdrich presents a sense of community that links the people on the reservation through interconnected genealogies and histories. Countering Butler's notion of identity performance in this case, Erdrich suggests that there is a transcendental essence that becomes a uniting force, collapsing "the boundary between [...] the individual and the collective" (Ferrari 147). This connectedness, which results from the

interweaving of families and histories, aids in the rejection of Western understandings of normative identity categories. Although cultural and personal differences persist in the reservation, there remains a link to Native traditions, highlighting how characters struggle to reach a dynamic combination of both systems.

My thesis as a whole thus focuses on the ways in which Erdrich uses her novels to “investigate[] the possibility of syncretism” (Chapman 150). By revealing generations of familial and communal life on the same reservation, Erdrich exposes the damage done to the aboriginal community through colonial interference. The fragmentation and dissolution of traditional Native ways of life haunt the reservation since racist and sexist colonial stereotypes replace traditional belief systems. What challenges the damaging relationship between colonization and the marginalized community is “a complex web of borrowings, reappropriations, and transformations” (Chapman 151). The subversive potential of mimicry arises from the recognition that appropriating colonial behaviour allows for the possibility of challenging and undermining unjust power dynamics. Through the subversive mimics in her novels, Erdrich stresses the “importance to the Ojibwe of adapting Catholic customs and beliefs to new ends” (163). The process of adapting rigid colonial hierarchies is not limited only to religion, as Erdrich’s characters also challenge the privileging of rigid gender categories. Forced to reconcile traditional lifestyles and belief systems with Westernization, many of the characters in *Little No Horse* strive to combine opposing forces in order to achieve a positive alternative to restrictive understandings of identity. By recognizing the compatibility that exists in seeming oppositional cultures, the people of the reservation begin to reject limiting categories in favour of the coexistence of binary forces in order to help create a

community where cultural and personal differences are respected, and can perhaps one day exist in a state of harmony.

CHAPTER 2

“A MAN ACTING WOMAN”: GENDER TRANSFORMATIONS, MIMICRY, AND THE DESIRE FOR BALANCE IN LOUISE ERDRICH’S *THE LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES AT LITTLE NO HORSE*

Louise Erdrich’s portrayal in her first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), of the Ojibwe families that live on a North Dakota reservation received wide recognition. Erdrich explores her culture by representing the lives of the Anishinaabeg who populate the fictional reservation of Little No Horse.⁵ Erdrich’s series of novels about the fictional reservation of Little No Horse explores interconnected genealogies and the “tangled [and] complicated” (Connie Jacobs 59) issues of identity that arise. *The Last Report on the Miracles of Little No Horse* presents the diegetically earliest portrayal of the people residing on the reservation. Published in 2001, the novel is the latest in Erdrich’s series, and extends the furthest back in time, to the early 1900s, and chronicles the entrance of Father Damien, a missionary priest, into the parish at Little No Horse. The novel begins in 1996, with a very old Father Damien writing a letter to the Pope. Since his beginnings in Little No Horse, Damien has written letters detailing “the series of unusual events” (Erdrich 3) that have unfolded on the reservation. Many of these events focus on Sister Leopolda, a nun who has been nominated for sainthood. During this time in the story, Damien meets Father Jude, a priest sent to investigate the supposed blessedness of the nun. Damien recounts his troubling knowledge of the potential saint, and the supposed miracles said to have resulted from her zealous intensity. Forced to recall his past, Damien also remembers the events that led him to become a priest in such a remote and

⁵ There are several English spellings of the term Anishinaabeg. I follow Erdrich's usage, but some critics use other variants.

harsh landscape. Instigated by his dialogue with the other priest, Damien's narrative is a cathartic process that allows him to confront the opposing forces of his inner psyche. What is revealed is Father Damien's origins as Agnes, a young girl who becomes a nun and who then eventually becomes the common-law wife of a German farmer. Subject to forces beyond her control, Agnes' life is destroyed and she is left widowed. The progression of Agnes' identity culminates in her adoption of the identity of a drowned priest. By performing the role of Father Damien, Agnes' position of masculine authority allows her to create a synthesis between traditional Native spirituality and Catholicism. Her eventual integration into the Ojibwe community allows Agnes to recognize the damage done to the people of Little No Horse by previous missionaries and other colonial forces. In an attempt towards healing the damage, Agnes strives to relate to the people of Little No Horse in order to interweave two often antagonistic belief systems. Through the rejection of Western understandings of race and gender, Agnes helps create a community where cultural and personal differences exist in a state of harmony.

2.1—"THE TRANSFIGURATION OF AGNES": THE DISSOLUTION OF GENDER CATEGORIES

The intermingling of binary oppositions begins with Agnes' gender transformation, a lifelong exploration of the ways in which gender identity is constructed through performance. J. James Iovannone discusses how Erdrich "[synthesizes] traditional notions of 'men' and 'women' into new understandings of gender that transcend binary categorization" (Iovannone). Father Damien's identity highlights a harmonic blending of masculine and feminine qualities that have culturally been

considered as oppositional and gender specific. Damien “elude[s] and subvert[s] binary models” (Iovannone) by rejecting rigid categories.

In order to analyze the subversive potential of Damien’s androgyny, I will employ Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a “politically enforced performativity” (Butler 371). Butler explains that gender is an act governed by “rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms” (370). The development of gender identity is created through “a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects” (369). Since understandings of gender and gender behaviour develop through a process of repetition, Butler suggests that gender is not determined by nature. Behaviour is not informed by biology but is instead informed by a series of social rules “that govern intelligible identity” (369). In Erdrich’s novel, Agnes emphasizes the performance of gender roles through her construction of Father Damien. Agnes positions herself as an actor attempting to successfully play the role of a masculine figure of colonial authority. She “[transforms] herself each morning” (Erdrich 76) into the figure of the priest and states her resolve “to make of Father Damien her creation” (77). In the act of developing a role to perform, Damien becomes “her masterwork,” a figure who mirrors herself as she makes him her “twin [...] her brother” (77). The importance of creating an identity that is almost identical to Agnes’ own connects to Butler’s discussion of repetition. Butler explains that gender “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 33). In this regard, it is through the repetition of specific gestures and appearances that the notion of an original, definite gender identity is created. However, there is ultimately no original, just a copy of a copy. Agnes’ desire to make Father Damien her twin emphasizes how she constructs a

character who mirrors her previous identity. As her twin, Damien's identity is developed out of repeated actions. However, in order to make Damien's behaviour convincing, Agnes emulates cultural notions of masculinity by repeating specific actions associated with men.

Butler discusses how the act of performing "is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggerations, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (Butler 371). These "exaggerations" of "the natural" become evident in Agnes' portrayal of the priest. In order to make her performance believable, Agnes creates a list of behaviours that suggest masculinity. Her "Rules to Assist in My Transformation" list such imperatives as "[m]ake requests in the form of orders," "[a]sk questions in the form of statements," and "[a]dmire women's handiwork with copious amazement" (Erdrich 74). These rules, which derive from observations of masculine behaviour, not only help in her transition but also act as critiques of normative gender behaviour. Father Damien becomes an amalgamation of seemingly oppositional behaviours that show the falsity of binary understandings of gender identity. The development of new understandings of gender, Iovannone explains, creates "sites of resistance to dominant, oppressive, and regulatory ideologies" (Iovannone). Agnes challenges "dominant ideologies" by rejecting normative behaviour. The creation of Father Damien gives her the freedom to express herself in ways that were previously impossible because of her gender.

Throughout her life, Agnes recalls various stages of performance and identity transformation. As Sister Cecilia, Agnes assumes the position of both a religious servant as well as a dedicated musician. Her connection to music is evident in her belief that her "being" comprises "half music, half divine light, only flesh to the degree she could not

admit otherwise” (Erdrich14). Cecilia’s profound connection to music manifests itself in both a sexual and transcendental experience. For example, Cecilia escapes the limitations of her body when playing the piano, since it is music that allows her to “[exist] in her essence” (14). Playing the piano becomes a means for Agnes to connect with her inner nature, which she “believes is of sound and music,” highlighting her “unique spiritualized self-perception” (Rader 223). Agnes’ deep spiritual connection to music highlights her transcendental self that exists separately from her physical body. Pamela J. Rader explains that for Agnes there is a “distinction between public and private selves” (222). In this regard, Agnes is able to alter herself spiritually and physically. Her transformational possibilities connect her to “Ojibwe trickster-like attributes” since she can exist in a state that is both “spirit and human” (222). The separation between her spiritual self and her human, physical self, manifests in various ways throughout the novel. As Cecilia, Agnes recognizes that her passionate dedication to music does not correspond with her identity as a nun. She comes to the awareness that “the nun cannot simultaneously be her music [...] and still be the bride of Christ” (224) and so Agnes chooses to leave the convent in order to maintain her connection to her musical essence.

There are various moments in the novel when a division develops between Agnes’ spiritual self and physical, public self. Throughout her life Agnes attempts to alter the shape of her physical being to make it correspond with her spirituality. When performing the identity of Sister Cecilia and Father Damien, Agnes distorts her figure by tightly wrapping cloth around her chest in order to flatten her breasts. Agnes’ transition from Cecilia to Miss DeWitt, Berndt Vogel’s common-law wife, is marked when she “[stops] binding her breasts” (Erdrich 18). When enacting the identity of Father Damien, the wrapping and unwrapping of her breasts becomes an integral part of her performance. For

example, Agnes “must recede at daybreak as she routinely reconstructs herself as a priest, and then the ritual reverses itself in the evening when the breasts of Agnes are unbound” (Rader 225). Even the cassock that Agnes wears over the many years she lives in Little No Horse becomes an attempt at masking her feminine figure. The robe becomes like “a shield—concealing and protecting identity” (230). By hiding her body, Agnes is able to move beyond the restrictions imposed on her because of her gender. The freedom Agnes gains allows her “to move among her people as a spirited body” (230). By altering her physical shape Agnes is able to fully express her spirituality and maintain her self-appointed vocation without being condemned because of her sex.

The various ways that Agnes “outwardly changes her appearance” (224) suggest her attempt to remove herself from the stigmas attached to her because of her gender. As Monique Wittig explains, women have been “ideologically built into a ‘natural group’” (Wittig 2014) and as a result have systematically “been compelled in [their] bodies and in [their] minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established” (2015; emphasis in original). This idea of nature is rejected by Agnes, who recognizes the falsity of cultural notions of gender identity. Agnes attempts to avoid the oppression imposed on women because of their biology, but she is ultimately unable to escape her body. When still a music teacher in the convent, the nuns are surrounded by bricks on which are inscribed the word “Fleisch” for “Fleisch Company Brickworks” (Erdrich 13). German for “flesh,” the word that surrounds Cecilia suggests how she is trapped within a body that dictates her function in society. Cecilia acknowledges that she “[lives] within the secret repetition of that one word” (Erdrich 13) and thus recognizes that she is unable to avoid the stigmas and stereotypes that are culturally imposed onto women as a result of their anatomy.

In order to combat the sexist limitations that pervade Western culture, Cecilia finds escape through playing piano. Cecilia's passion for music highlights her inability to effectively function in the role of a dutiful and subservient bride of Christ. Her playing becomes both a spiritual and erotic experience that allows her to achieve sexual climax.⁶ As a result, Cecilia's music triggers her first transformation of identity, as the emotional intensity of her playing causes her to move beyond the restrictions of her surroundings into the sexual experience of being a woman: "[In] the depth of her playing the virgin had become the woman, so the woman in the habit became a woman to the bone" (Erdrich 16). In this instance, Cecilia's performance moves into the realm of the performative, something which Butler explains as "a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (Butler 139). Gender becomes performative when it "[constitutes] the identity it is purported to be" (25), a process that is evident in Cecilia, who progresses from playing the role of a woman, to becoming "a woman to the bone" (16). When Cecilia is described as a "woman in the habit" (Erdrich 16), the word "habit" in this instance takes on a double meaning. Before her sexual experience with Chopin's music, Cecilia is only a woman by habit. It is the transformational experience of her musical performance that causes Cecilia to move out of performing a habit, to becoming a woman to her core.

The transformation that occurs from her erotic connection to music leads Cecilia to quit her life as a nun. Before leaving the convent, Cecilia carefully removes her religious garments, shedding the clothes that represent her past identity before entering into a new life and social role. In this instance, Sister Cecilia becomes Agnes DeWitt,

⁶ For further information on the relevance of Cecilia's musically triggered sexual climax see Alison A. Chapman's essay "Rewriting the Saint's Lives: Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*." Chapman explains how this profound experience is integral to Cecilia/Agnes/Damien's break from "canonical tradition" since Agnes does not renounce sexuality, but instead celebrates "the sanctity of human physical love" (Chapman 158).

who meets and eventually enters into a deeply sexual relationship with Berndt Vogel. Now Miss DeWitt, Agnes stops binding her breasts, and instead “[wears] a normal woman’s underclothing” (18), highlighting her entrance into a different performance of that reflects normative gender behaviour. However, just as Cecilia could not adhere to the strict life of a nun, Agnes’ relationship with Berndt is never legalized through marriage. It is Agnes’ refusal to marry Berndt which signals her deviation from social norms. However, in every other aspect of their relationship, Agnes and Berndt appear as a heteronormative couple. Agnes enters into an act of becoming which is evident in the ways in which she and Berndt “[construct] a good life” (22) and a very passionate one, sexually. Performance is emphasized during this relationship when Agnes encounters the notorious bank robber, Arnold ‘The Actor’ Anderson. Playing the role of a priest, an act that Agnes immediately recognizes as false, the Actor takes Agnes hostage, which leads to the death of Berndt and the destruction of Agnes’ life as a farmer’s wife. The lack of authenticity and believability of the bank robber’s act become integral to Agnes’ performance: “Now and then Agnes recalled a tiny portion of her encounter with the Actor, and she came to understand it as a pure prefigurement and sign of what was to come. The Actor had influenced the quality of Father Damien’s disguise” (76). After encountering the Actor and recognizing the flaws in his performance, Agnes enters into a similar adoption of a false role, which is evident when she assumes the identity of Father Damien Modeste.

2.2—COLONIAL AND SUBVERSIVE MIMICRIES

Agnes' third transformation of identity is described as a "transfiguration," a deeply religious process that irrevocably alters her life. It is also the transformation that depends the most heavily on performance, since Agnes is not only playing the role of a man, but is also adopting a role of religious authority. In order to convincingly portray herself in this position of masculine and colonial power, Agnes appears to undergo a process similar to the one Homi Bhabha describes in his theory of mimicry.⁷ The "demand for identity [and] stasis" (*Location* 122) can result in an emulation and internalization of colonial ideologies by marginalized people. Although Agnes is not othered to the same and drastic degree as the Native community, her existence outside of gendered norms situates her in a position of marginality. Agnes' imitation is evident in her reflection of Bhabha's definition of the effect of mimicry, borrowing from Jacques Lacan, because she uses the costume of the priest to essentially "camouflage" (Lacan qtd. in *Location* 121) her gender. Agnes constructs an identity that allows her to function in a position of power and subsequently undergoes "a process of reform" (*Location* 124) in order to resemble a priest. Agnes uses mimicry as a "mask" (126) in order to integrate into the system. She initially reflects an appearance that allows her to be accepted in the reservation, but her inability to fully assume the role causes her to be recognized as a false imitator. In this regard, Agnes' mimesis highlights her position "*as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (122). Because mimicry does not allow for a representation to appear authentic or accurate, Agnes is ultimately still marked and

⁷ For further discussion of Homi Bhabha's theory applied in the works of Louise Erdrich's North Dakota series, see Carlton Smith's "Disruptive Genealogies: Louise Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace* and Native American Identities" 102-23.

defined by her gender.⁸ For example, when her sex is revealed to a fellow priest, she is suddenly treated “as somehow less” (Erdrich 303). The authority of her position vanishes because she is treated with condescension. Agnes’ true identity is also recognized by members of the Native community. The elder, Nanapush, with a “simple recognition” (Erdrich 231), asks ““What are you? [...] [a] man priest or a woman priest?”” (230). The acknowledgment of the falsity of Agnes’ performance does not alter the way Father Damien is treated within the community. The question does, however, reveal to Agnes her inability to convincingly emulate a position of colonial authority.

The failure to successfully mimic a position of masculine power coincides with Butler’s examination of the ways in which gender identity ultimately lacks authenticity. Butler states that gender does not have “a stable existence” (Butler 367) and that it is performance and repetition of specific acts that create the image of a stable identity. Agnes’ ability to assume and portray masculine actions is more than just a clever disguise, since she studiously learns and emulates behavior in a performance of masculinity. Agnes also recognizes that being Father Damien is not the only moment of performance in her life since Sister Cecilia and Agnes DeWitt were also social roles that she acted out: “Between these two, where was the real self? It came to her that both Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien. And within this, what sifting of identity was she? What mote? What nothing?” (Erdrich 76). By attempting to mimic behaviour socially constructed as inherently masculine, Agnes highlights the function of mimicry as both “resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 123). The menace that derives from her attempt at mimicry is the revelation of

⁸ The fact that mimicry does not allow for the appearance of an accurate representation coincides with Judith Butler’s argument that an authentic representation is impossible. In this regard, no self-representation is authentic, since all self-representation is a performance.

the falsity of gender categories. The hierarchy of binarisms discussed by Butler as a symptom of the inequality between sexes is challenged by Agnes' portrayal of the performativity of gender. In this regard, Agnes partially fulfills Bhabha's process of mimicry because her attempt at mimicking masculine colonial authority reveals social conceptions of normative gender behaviour as false, limiting, and ultimately detrimental.⁹

The manner in which Agnes is able to mimic masculine colonial authority while simultaneously confronting and revealing the problems inherent in colonial authority situates her as a subversive mimic. Agnes' desire to dismantle systems of colonial injustice through the guise of a priest "raises the question of whether absorption and transformation of a dominant culture are not as subversive in their own way as explicit rejection and resistance" (Chapman 165). The subversive potential of emulating certain appearances and behaviours of the dominant culture is described by Dee Horne as a process that results from a mimic who "engages in partial repetitions of colonial discourse [in order] to contest its authority" (*Contemporary* 13). Horne develops Bhabha's ideas of the mimic's desire for subterfuge and anti-colonial sabotage in further detail by exploring the "self-aware" (Horne, "I Meant" 278) mimics who actively and critically challenge the systems they are supposedly emulating. In contrast to Bhabha, Horne suggests that there are two types of mimics: the colonial mimic and the subversive mimic. The contrast between both types of mimicry is the attempt of the colonial mimic "to replicate the colonizer but is disavowed" (278) while the subversive mimic "actively claims agency by interrogating their own cultural appropriation" ("I Meant" 278). Both the colonial and subversive mimic exist in *Little No Horse*, which is evident in the contrast between

⁹ Although Bhabha's theory is focused on race and not gender, the ways in which he describes mimicry as a menace to prevalent colonial understandings can also be related, I would argue, to both race and gender.

Pauline Puyat and Agnes. For example, Pauline fully rejects her culture in favour of Catholicism whereas Agnes uses her position of colonial authority to challenge unjust power relations. There is a sense of irony that develops from the fact that Pauline, a “mixed-breed” from the reservation, is the mimic who desires the power of the colonizer to aid in the subjugation of her people, and Agnes, the white colonial figure, strives to use her power subversively. Agnes’ position as a colonial figure who challenges colonial authority suggests “the inherent dilemma for the colonizer who, in participating in the ‘civilizing mission’, comes to question the merits of that mission” (“I Meant” 277). In this regard, Agnes questions her own damaging power in hopes of dismantling colonial injustice whereas Pauline’s mimicry highlights the ways in which aboriginals internalize Western values and side with the notion that colonization is “progress”.¹⁰

The ways in which she questions her role as a priest distance Agnes from fully becoming a colonial mimic. Agnes reveals a strong trepidation about conversion, a practice she considers a “loving form of destruction” (Erdrich 55). In the second section of the novel, titled “The Deadly Conversions,” Agnes understands the harmful nature of forcefully imposing Catholic practices on the community by questioning the relevancy of conversion. Agnes avoids imposing destructive Catholic conventions on the Kashpaw family because she recognizes that enforcing strict Western values will destroy their family and their traditional way of life. As an old priest, Agnes recalls with certainty the damage that inevitably resulted from colonial intervention in the community. Agnes

¹⁰ The devout and potentially evil Pauline, who later becomes Sister Leopolda, “exemplifies the colonial mimic” (Horne, “I Meant” 277) not just in *The Last Report in the Miracles at Little No Horse*, but also in *Tracks*. In my second chapter I will examine in further detail Pauline’s role in *Little No Horse* and how her position as a colonial mimic irrevocably positions her as a problematic figure responsible for the perpetuation of colonial hierarchies.

asserts that the belief among missionaries that “conversion would bring about redemption” was “wrong” and instead resulted in “a void left in the passing of sacred traditional knowledge” (239). Agnes also acknowledges her own implication in the destruction of the community: “I was so knit into the fabric of the damage that to pull myself out would have left a great rift [...] So I was forced by the end to clean up after the effects of what I had helped to destroy” (239). Agnes’ realization of her involvement in the destruction of the community results in her dogged attempt to avoid inflicting further harm. By questioning her position of power and what is expected of her as a priest, Agnes is conscious of the implications of her authority. In her essay on *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Horne explains that the subversive mimic has a “critical awareness,” something which is evident in Agnes who is able to understand the potentially destructive consequences of her power, and as a result, prevent herself from “perpetuating [...] unequal power relations” (Horne, “I Meant” 278). By both mimicking and questioning colonial power, Agnes challenges the colonizing role of the missionary. She instead strives to create new ways of engaging with the aboriginal community.

In order to create an alternative to colonial power imbalance, Agnes immerses herself in the Ojibwe culture and begins adopting various aboriginal traditions. As a result, issues of appropriation tie into Agnes’ position as a subversive mimic. Agnes inhabits a difficult position, since her role as priest, and even her previous identity as a white woman, deeply connect her to “the very systems of stratification and dominance [she] critiques” (Hoy 18). Helen Hoy, a white academic who studies aboriginal women’s writing, confronts the issues of a white woman writing about aboriginality. Erdrich explores the problems that arise from the appropriation of voice through Agnes, since the priest represents a colonial figure who writes avidly about the people of Little No Horse.

There is a strong epistolary element to the novel, with many sections being comprised of the letters that Father Damien writes to the Pope. The subject matter of the letters ranges from the personal to the communal, but nearly always centers on Agnes' attempts to reconcile her Catholic beliefs with the spirituality of the native community. Through her writing, Agnes can be understood to be at risk of creating the same problems that Hoy describes, since the writing of the white outsider is at risk of "romanticizing, cultural ignorance, [and] colonization" (16). Mimicking a masculine colonial figure, although subversively, Agnes is distanced on many critical levels from the cultural experience of the native inhabitants of Little No Horse. In a letter, Father Damien claims his connection to the community: "*I am becoming one with them [...] And the closer I draw, the more of their pain do I feel*" (Erdrich 209). Although sympathetic to the plight of the people to whom she is devoted, because of her position as "a specific cultural outsider" (Hoy 11), Agnes is removed from the reality of the Anishinaabeg and is thus incapable of truly feeling and relating to the experience felt by those in the community. What remains positive in Agnes' letters is the manner in which she is able to create access to the plights of those on the reservation.

The most problematic instance that suggests Agnes' danger of cultural appropriation is when Father Damien refers to the people of Little No Horse as "*my people*" (Erdrich 49). Such a statement can be read as a description of the way Father Damien has been accepted into the community as an equal. However, because of Agnes' irrevocable tie to colonial power, the statement is fraught with problematic implications. By claiming that the Anishinaabeg are her people, Agnes' statement can suggest a claim of ownership over the colonized ethnic group. However, Agnes' ties to the colonizer do not make her writing ultimately negative. In her introduction to her book on native

women writers, Hoy looks at Chandra Mohanty's explanation of the importance of white people's contribution to the knowledge of ethnic minorities. What must be acknowledged, Mohanty explains, is the "co-implication" that exists between different cultures, and that there must be an "awareness of asymmetrical but mutually constitutive histories, relationships, and responsibilities" (Mohanty, qtd. in Hoy 17). Hoy follows Mohanty's statement by summarizing Uma Narayan's acknowledgement that "one can be at once insider and outsider in relation to different groups and that analogizing from one position to the other may increase one's conscientiousness" (18). There is great value "in the process of communicating and learning across difference" as long as "humility and caution" (18) are employed. As a subversive mimic, Agnes' awareness of the injustice of colonial power structures allows her to approach the aboriginal community with respect as opposed to a "superior sense of entitlement" (5). Agnes' statement that the people of Little No Horse are her people derives from her acceptance into the community of Little No Horse. Her connection to Nanapush results in her "[adoption] into [...] the Nanapush family" (Erdrich 5), a familial connection that emphasizes her deep ties to the people she serves.

Set in contrast to Pauline Puyat's rejection of her heritage in favour Catholicism, Agnes does not "[privilege] Anishnabe traditions over Catholic ones" but instead "re-examines Catholicism within the context of Anishnabe traditions" (Horne, "I Meant" 278).¹¹ By entering into a process of "reframing" (278), as opposed to privileging one form of belief over another, Agnes escapes the problem of simply "[reversing] the binary

¹¹ See Mark Shackleton's essay for further information on the blending of Catholicism and Native Spirituality in Erdrich's novels. Shackleton explains that "Erdrich's work relies on a fusion of Christian and Native symbolism, but overt Christian symbolism is often placed within a Native context that interrogates and ironizes it" (Shackleton 189).

operations and merely [perpetuating] inequality” (278). As a subversive mimic, Agnes strives towards harmoniously incorporating both cultures in a way that “creates a ‘syncretic’ collaborative vision in which both Catholic and Anishnabe traditions coexist” (278). Agnes’ clothing becomes a physical manifestation of both beliefs. After acquiring a set of vestments required for mass, Agnes has the religious garments covered with native beadwork. Stitched meticulously with both Catholic and Anishinaabeg symbols and images, “each robe weighed upon [Father Damien] like a shield, like armor” (Erdrich 224). The vestments physically highlight the ways in which Agnes incorporates both belief systems into Father Damien’s religious ceremonies, as well as her own transforming spirituality.

Throughout her life in *Little No Horse*, Agnes’ beliefs progress, and the most drastic moment of this progression occurs when Nanapush builds Father Damien a sweat lodge. In order to enter into the spiritual place that Nanapush calls “our church” (214), Damien is asked to take off his priestly robe. Agnes willingly removes the articles of clothing that signify her position as a colonial authority, and enters with Nanapush and other members of the community into the sweat lodge. Altered by this experience, Agnes’ beliefs subsequently begin to meld both Catholic and Anishinaabeg elements:

As Father Damien, [Agnes] had blessed unions, baptized, anointed, and absolved friends in the parish. In turn, Father Damien had been converted by the good Nanapush. He now practiced a mixture of faiths, kept the pipe, translated hymns or brought in the drum [...] He was welcomed where no other white man was allowed. (276)

With the “critical awareness” (Horne, “I Meant” 281) that makes her a subversive mimic, Agnes is able to move away from cultural appropriation by creating a new spirituality that

harmonizes previously oppositional belief systems. By being aware of her power, Agnes questions colonial authority in order to create positive and dynamic alternatives.

The church that Agnes builds also becomes emblematic of her attempt to synthesize both beliefs. Because the church is built against a “flat slab of rock [that rises] abruptly at a steep angle into a craggy cliff” (Erdrich 217), the religious institution is directly incorporated into the landscape. Agnes’ new church presents a dynamic alternative to the restricting traditions of previous churches, since Agnes incorporates colonial traditions with Anishinaabeg spirituality. Because the church is built on top of the slab of rock, Agnes’ music allows her to engage in an experience that is enmeshed in Native traditional spirituality. The vibrations created by the piano in her rush of playing cause numerous snakes to enter into the church. The snakes, believed to be “a deeply intelligent secretive being,” are emblematic of “the great snake, wrapped around the center of the earth, who kept things from flying apart” (220). The symbolic importance of the snakes and their entrance into the church to hear Agnes play resonate with the community. As a result, the people of Little No Horse believe the priest has “acquired a very powerful guardian spirit” (220), causing Agnes to gain a more respected position in the community, and Agnes finds that she is “consulted more often and trusted with intimate knowledge” (220). The bringing together of ostensibly opposing traditions throughout Erdrich’s novel is signaled in the image of the snake, since the creature is an important symbol in both Native and Catholic traditions. The snake, depicted in the biblical tale of Eden, is responsible for the destruction of Adam and Eve’s world. In contrast, the great snake in Native spirituality is responsible for holding the world together. The snakes, which venture into the Catholic church where Agnes plays the piano, calls together both religious understandings. Agnes’ changing beliefs, which

incorporate Native spirituality and Catholic traditions, result in the formulation of a dynamic religion that allows for acceptance and forgiveness. In this way, Agnes' church breaks from the restrictive assimilatory agendas of previous missionaries, allowing instead for a harmonious intermingling of religions previously thought of as diametrically opposite.

2.3— AGNES' EXPLORATION OF GENDER AS A PERFORMANCE

In a manner similar to the ways in which Agnes synthesizes Catholicism and aboriginal spirituality, her performance as a male priest creates new alternatives by presenting the fluidity of gender. In her discussion of Simone De Beauvoir, Butler examines the ways in which gender is “variable and volitional” (Butler 8). The notion that gender can be chosen at will is evident in the “The Exchange,” a subsection of a chapter in part I of the novel. At this point in the text Agnes consciously decides to assume a different gender after encountering the real Father Damien, a corpse snagged on a tree beside a river. Her desire to enact the identity of the priest is made possible by impersonation, an enactment that “effectively mocks [...] the notion of a true gender identity” (137). The beginning of Agnes' imitation occurs when she exchanges her feminine clothes for the masculine robes of the priest:

It was nearly twilight before she rolled him in. Her heavy night-gown was his shroud. His clothing, his cassock, and the small bundle tangled about him, [...] Agnes put on in the exact order he had worn them. A small sharp knife in the traveler's pocket was her barber's scissors—she trimmed off her hair and then she buried it with him as though, even this pitiable, he was the keeper of her old life. (Erdrich 44)

Agnes adopts the clothes of the opposite sex while simultaneously removing the female signifiers that highlight her previous gender identity. Through the careful manner in which Agnes dresses herself to imitate the original priest, and her ability to emulate structured social cues that indicate masculine behaviour, she “reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (Butler 137). The authority and freedom associated with the role that Agnes adopts allow her to move beyond the boundaries that previously restricted her when she was a nun and wife. Distanced from the signifiers imposed on her because of her sex, Agnes feels a sense of liberation, since after her transformation there is “nothing to hold her back, now, from living the way she had dreamed of” (Erdrich 45).

Agnes’ imitation of both masculine behaviour and masculine dress allows her to be understood in terms of drag. Judith Butler explains drag as a performance that “plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (Butler 137). When discussing drag in *Gender Trouble*, Butler quotes Esther Newton’s description of drag as symbolizing the inversion between the physical appearance of the body and the supposed essence inside the body (137). Butler disputes the notion of an actual existing essence, suggesting that it is the constant repetition of specific gestures and appearances in a performance that creates the feeling of an essence.¹² For Agnes, however, there is a seeming division between her body and her inner self. For example, Father Damien’s apparent masculinity is disrupted by his anatomy: “His woman’s breasts were small, withered, modest as folded flowers” (Erdrich 8). At this moment, the appearance of Agnes’ naked body is that of a woman, but her

¹² In Judith Butler’s essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” she further discusses the ways in which gender is a performance that is constantly acted out. Although people may truly feel that there is an essence, it is only through “repeated gestures and acts” (24) that the feeling of an essence is constructed. How Erdrich counters this notion in her characters is something I will discuss in further detail in my second chapter.

identity that exists beyond her body, her essence, is masculine. The notion of an essence or spirit that exists within the human body suggests how Erdrich's metaphysical world can differ quite fundamentally from Butler's. The division between the body and spirit is more explicitly referred to when Agnes is confronted with the possibility that after death, the truth of her gender would be revealed. The potential discovery of the body "that had sheltered and harboured her spirit all this life" (343) greatly disturbs Agnes since she understands that because her gender does not correspond with her chosen identity, her life's work will be demeaned and discredited. Her body will be something to be simply "prodded, poked, and marvelled at when dead" (342; emphasis in original). The complexity of Agnes' character extends beyond the division between anatomy and essence, because her anatomy and essence contain both masculine and feminine qualities. For example, despite her efforts to appear and behave as a man, Agnes still feels "[her] womanness crouched dark within her" (209). Even her physical appearance contains both masculine and feminine characteristics, a hybridity that I argue develops out of the dynamic performance of drag.

The manner in which Agnes challenges the prevailing Western belief that gender is a rigidly defined identity category sides closely with Butler's theory in *Gender Trouble*. However, there are certain instances in Erdrich's novels that differ from Butler. For example, in her characters, Erdrich develops the notion that there is a spiritual, transcendental "humanness" that connects all people. Agnes' "essence" (Erdrich 14), which is directly referred to when she is playing piano in the convent, highlights that there is a part of her being that exists beyond her physicality. Agnes refers to her own spiritual essence when she repeatedly affirms her humanness, stating that despite her anatomy, she is a human that deserves equal treatment. Erdrich's suggestion that there is a

fundamental human nature that exists inside everyone differs drastically from Butler, who suggests that there is no fundamental essence or origin that defines identity. For Butler, the belief that an essence exists is simply a fiction, since it is through repetition that “the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 33) is created. The manner in which Agnes challenges the rigidity of categories that define identity, such as gender origins, allows Erdrich’s novel to be understood in terms of Butler’s theories. However, in specific instances, such as Erdrich’s emphasis on a transcendental humanness, Erdrich drastically differs from Butler.

An instance in which Agnes’ transgressive sexuality can be understood in terms of Butler’s theories is through the notion of drag. For example, Butler describes drag as a parody of gender that emphasizes the “fluidity of identities that suggest an openness to resignification and recontextualization” (Butler 138). What is revealed through drag is the absence of a gender origin, and that the image of the origin is instead a failed copy, “an ideal that no one can embody” (139). The body is instead a “variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (139). The notion that the body is a permeable boundary that can be resignified is evident in Agnes. However, Agnes does not only resignify her body into the opposite gender, but instead recreates her body into a seeming hybridity that incorporates characteristics from both genders.

Removed from the gender restrictions of Western society, Agnes is free to resignify her body in a way that incorporates both male and female appearances. Before venturing to Little No Horse, and before her transfiguration into Father Damien, Agnes’ appearance is noted for certain masculine characteristics. For example, “[she] had a square boy’s chin” (19), and speaks “with a low, gravelly abruptness” (13). As Damien,

Agnes is able to emphasize certain aspects of her appearance and take on increasingly masculine characteristics. Over time, Agnes works on her performance to a degree that allows her to appear more convincing. Even her physical appearance transforms to emphasize the masculinity of Father Damien: “Practice had perfected her masculine ease, and age had thickened her neck and waist so that the ambiguity which had once eroticized her now was a single, purposeful power” (301). However, because she cannot effectively copy masculinity, because there is no essential, original masculine prototype, Agnes is recognized at varying times as both masculine and feminine. For example, Agnes is still noted by members of Little No Horse for her “girlish earnestness” (63) and recognized as an “unmanly priest” (85). Agnes possesses characteristics that appear masculine, while still possessing her female body. The hybridity between Agnes and Damien is suggested most evidently when father Jude, who attributes it to “a problem of perception” (146), repeatedly senses that two figures exist in the same body, that of an old man and woman.

2.4—TWO SPIRITS

The sense that there are two people that exist within the priest is acknowledged directly by Agnes who feels that “the hungry expanse of skin that covered the body [...] housed two beings” (208). The use of both masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to Agnes highlights the manner in which Damien and Agnes exist as separate people dwelling in the same body. Deirdre Keenan notes how the use of “shifting pronouns” that occur “often within a single sentence” (Keenan 5) suggests Agnes’ transgendering. The shift in pronouns does highlight how Agnes switches between female and male, but what is increasingly interesting about the use of “he” and “she” to describe Agnes is the way in which one pronoun is not replaced with the other. Agnes is described

as both a man and woman, since her process of transgenering is not replacing one gender for another, but acknowledging that both comprise her identity. The body is the physical exterior that houses the two figures, and is the site where the hybridity can physically manifest itself. The interior, or essence, is where Agnes and Damien coexist, and suggests a spiritual quality that allows Agnes to be understood in terms of the aboriginal concept of the Two Spirit. The spiritual aspect of the term, as Keenan points out, is “one of the most important elements in Two Spirit traditions” (Keenan 8). In some native communities, gender is divorced from anatomy since it is considered a “spiritual calling” (8) and it “emphasizes the spiritual aspect of one’s life” (Sue-Ellen Jacobs 3). As a deeply spiritual person, Agnes finds liberation amongst the Ojibwe, allowing her to explore her gender identity free from rigid sexual categories.

The importance of the Two Spirit term is its recognition and acceptance of “more than two gender categories” (Sue-Ellen Jacobs 2) that has historically existed in certain Native communities. The people of Little No Horse exhibit this tolerance, since Agnes is immediately recognized and thought of in terms of the Two Spirit. Kashpaw, the first member of Little No Horse to encounter Agnes, immediately associates the feminine priest with a *Wishkob*, a famous Two Spirit who was lovingly integrated into the community. Kashpaw, the reader is told,

was a shrewd man, and he sensed something unusual about the priest from the first. Something wrong. The priest was clearly not right, too womanly. Perhaps, he thought, here was a man like the famous Wishkob, the Sweet, who had seduced many other men and finally joined the family of a great war chief as wife, where he had lived until old, well loved, as one of the women (Erdrich 64).

Keenan notes that Kashpaw's immediate comparison of Father Damien to a Two Spirit "signals a ready context for Kashpaw's understanding of Damien's gender identification" (Keenan 6). A similar instance occurs later in the text when Nanapush confronts Agnes about her gender. Always having known the truth of Father Damien's anatomy, Nanapush also associates the priest with other Two Spirits that he encountered in his past: "So you're not a woman-acting man, you're a man-acting woman. We don't get so many of those lately. Between us, Margaret and me, we couldn't think of more than a couple" (Erdrich 232). The recognition and tolerance of the simultaneous distinction and unification between Agnes' biological sex and her gender "[reaffirms] Damien's accepted status within the Two Spirit tradition among the Ojibwe at Little No Horse" (Keenan 7). The acceptance of Agnes' chosen gender identity suggests another important element associated with the Two Spirit, because the Two Spirit "[crosses] gender identities rather than merely cross-dressing, since the individuals assumed the male social role with the tacit approval of the family and the larger community" (Gremaux qtd. in Cromwell 122). Gremaux explains the ways in which the community is integral to the Two Spirit, since communal acceptance allows people with transgressive sexual identities to live freely and peacefully.

Agnes' acceptance into the folds of the community is what allows her to fully express herself as a Two Spirit since the people of Little No Horse "appreciate and ascribe meaning to Damien's presence on the reservation" (Rader 232). Rader explains that the "Chippewa value Damien's spirituality on their own terms," which allows Agnes to gain "a more widespread confidence of the community" (232). The people on the reservation, including, especially, Mary Kashpaw, also "protect and remain loyal to Damien" (231). After Father Damien rescues her from the Morrisey's, Mary dedicates

herself to the priest. Because Mary is aware of Father Damien's secret, her acceptance of Agnes' Two Spirit identity is emphasized when she participates in Agnes' performance. When Agnes slips into an extended unconscious state where she travels "worlds inhabited by both Ojibwe and Catholic" (Erdrich 211), Mary participates in Agnes' performance of masculinity by creating the appearance that she shaves Father Damien's face every morning: "[Mary] heated a kettle of water, readied the mug of shaving soap, dipped in the brush, stropped the razor, and was seen, ostentatiously, to be putting these things aside just as Sister Hildegard arrived" (212). Mary's unyielding loyalty to Father Damien is evident in how Damien is referred to as "her priest" (211). Because Mary creates the appearance that she ritually shaves Damien, the other nuns who visit the priest never take note of the lack of "beard growth on his chin" (212). Mary allows Agnes to convincingly maintain the appearance of masculinity, highlighting how the approval and acceptance of the Two Spirit in the Anishinaabeg community is what allows Agnes to spend the remainder of her life living as a priest.

Agnes' acceptance within the community is emphasized in the moment when she is adopted into the Nanapush family. As a member of the family and larger community, the "multiple sex-gender social system" (Keenan 5) allows Agnes to find a level of freedom that would otherwise have been denied her in a Western community. The restrictions of regulated gender identity are imposed on Agnes again when she engages in a sexual relationship with Father Gregory Wekkle. By revealing her sex to a man immersed in the normative assumptions of Western society, Agnes' masculine performance is immediately threatened. Wekkle cannot separate Agnes from her sex: "You are a *woman* [...] a woman cannot be a priest" (Erdrich 206). Agnes is viewed as an abomination within the Catholic doctrine, and as a result Wekkle believes her

transgendering to be a profanation and a violation, and he expresses this by calling her a “sacrilege” (207). During their affair, Agnes is constantly aware of the ways in which her anatomy is a defining factor in their relationship. When they are together she recalls the word, *Fleisch*, etched in the bricks at the convent, knowing that although she is no longer physically surrounded by these repeated engravings, what persists in “her mind” is “only that one word” (199). Knowing that Wekkle cannot accept her Two Spirit status, Agnes contemplates the life she would be returning to if she left the reservation to marry him. The fantasy of their heteronormative relationship is immediately rejected by Agnes, who recognizes that she cannot return to Western conceptions of womanhood because her identity is irrevocably tied to the position she inhabits in Little No Horse. Although Agnes shares a sexual as well as emotional bond with Father Wekkle, there is never a full sense of equality between them. For example, their emotional connection is emphasized when Wekkle returns to Agnes when he is dying. But even in his weakened state, Wekkle treats Agnes as “somehow less” (303). Agnes attempts to understand the specifics of how Wekkle treats her as inferior, listing the various instances in which he asserts himself as superior:

It was never anything that others might note, but when they were together, he spoke first, took charge even when he felt most ill, took information from doctors regarding his disease and translated it for her into terms, simpler, he thought she would understand.

And there was another thing: that tone in his voice when they were alone. An indulgent tone, frankly anticipating some lesser capacity in her—whether intellectual, moral, or spiritual, she could not say. (303)

Wekkle's behaviours are suggested to be "learned" (303), revealing how the belittling of the opposite sex is a cultural norm. The fact that the ways in which Wekkle quietly demeans Agnes would not be noted by others highlights the extent to which these behaviours are both engrained and accepted in Western society.

Father Wekkle's adherence to Western conceptions of normative gender identity contrasts starkly with the gender expectations of the people of Little No Horse. The openness to multiple genders exists in the Ojibwe language which Agnes discovers "*is unprejudiced by gender distinctions*" (257; emphasis in original). The Anishinaabeg "refuse a gender dichotomy bound to the biological body and instead admit multiple variations freed from the body and animated by spirit" (Keenan 8) and it is this refusal that allows Agnes to fully express her gender identity free from the intolerance of Western societies.

In the parish at Little No Horse, Agnes maintains her performance until her death. Despite her persistent enactments of masculine behaviour, even in old age, the difference between her sex and her performed gender permeates her disguise, since at certain moments Father Jude sees "inhabiting the same cassock as the priest, an old woman" (Erdrich 139). By recollecting her history, and the journey that culminated in her creation of Father Damien, Agnes systematically reveals the ways in which boundaries between genders are nonexistent. What she elevates is a humanness that transcends binaries and oppositions. In this way, Erdrich can be seen as differing from Butler. Agnes highlights the existence of a transcendent human essence, something which Butler argues against. In this way, Erdrich shows the ways in which gender is constructed through performance and cultural belief, but that beneath this performance, there is a spirituality, or essence, that is tied to identity. The essence is what is essentially human in each character and it is

that which exists beyond the physicality that dictates how people are defined. When, at different instances throughout the novel, she is confronted about the truth of her anatomy, Agnes does not implore that, in essence, she is a man. She instead repeatedly asserts herself as a human, a statement that not only suggests her desire for equality, but insists on her ability to successfully embody the humanistic requirements of a priest. In a letter to the Pope, Agnes emphasises her desire to be thought of and understood as a human: “*Infallible Eminence, My hand is a human hand. My heart a human heart*” (232). A similar instance occurs when Father Gregory Wekkle vehemently strives to return Agnes to his Western conception of heteronormativity. Although exposed, Agnes refuses to return to a life of restricted sexuality, and ultimately refuses to acknowledge her gender. Agnes responds to Wekkle’s accusations of “You are a woman [...] You’re a sacrilege,” with “I am a priest [...] I am nothing but a priest” (206-207). Agnes’ emphasis on her own existence beyond gender highlights her passionate belief that “the nature of the body underneath the cassock [...] is fundamentally irrelevant to [her] identity as a priest” (Chapman 160). Agnes’ fear of being discovered after her death is prevented by Mary Kashpaw, who submerges the priest’s body into the lake. The disappearance of the body makes permanent the “shape-shifting” (Chapman 161) that Agnes undergoes throughout her life to become Father Damien. Because Agnes is never discovered after her death, she is never “restored to her ‘correct’ gendered identity” (161), and as a result, her influence in the community is made no less valuable because of her anatomy.

Agnes’ desire to make of Father Damien “her masterwork” (Erdrich 77) in a sense becomes reality. It is her construction and enactment of the priest that allows her to spend her life challenging notions of gender stability as well as to dedicate herself to the healing of a community shattered by colonial forces. Amongst the Anishinaabeg, Agnes is able to

recognize the coexistence of opposing forces that comprise her identity and the world around her. As a member of Little No Horse, and integrated into Ojibwe spirituality, Agnes explores her transgendering while also working against the damage committed to the aboriginal beliefs that allow for tolerance and acceptance. Forced to contend with hierarchies of binarisms imposed on their culture because of colonization, the people on the reservation undergo transformations of identity. Outside of gendered norms, Agnes is forced to integrate the various parts of her psyche into a dynamic whole. It is the ways in which she combines opposing forces in order to achieve a positive alternative to restrictive understandings of identity that she is seemingly able relate to the people of Little No Horse. By rejecting limiting categories in favour of the coexistence of binary forces, Agnes challenges dominant notions of gender and other forms of identity in order to help create a community where cultural and personal differences exist in a state of harmony.

CHAPTER 3

“WE WERE DIVIDED”: HISTORY, POLITICS, AND IDENTITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH’S *TRACKS*

In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Agnes DeWitt is forced to reconcile her position of colonial authority and her Catholic beliefs with the spirituality of the people of Little No Horse. Telling the story of the same community, at the same time period, ranging between 1912 and 1924, Erdrich’s 1988 novel, *Tracks*, explores the ways in which the people of Little No Horse are forced to reconcile their beliefs with the encroaching white civilization. Considered “her most overtly political novel” (Stookey 70), *Tracks* is comprised of two narratives, one from the perspective of Nanapush, the other from Pauline Puyat’s perspective; their stories reveal “images of cultural catastrophe” (Stookey 70). Throughout the novel the two narrators present “sharply contrasting political positions” (Stookey 71), highlighting the turmoil that developed within native communities as people responded to colonial interference in often opposing and irreconcilable ways. What unites Nanapush and Pauline’s narratives is the story of Fleur Pillager, one of the remaining “full-blood” aboriginals who still practices the traditions of tribal life. Her story is deeply intertwined with the people of Little No Horse, especially with Nanapush, since the two characters continue to practice the traditions of their ancestors despite the prevailing influence of colonial authority. Fleur and Nanapush embody native spirituality because of their ability to move from reality into the realm of the supernatural. Labeled as “cheap tricksters” (*Last Report* 73) by the nuns at the convent, the power conjured by both characters highlights the ways that both the real and the supernatural simultaneously exist, allowing the spiritual world to pervade the

landscape where they continue living according to traditional life. Pauline's narrative is set in stark contrast to Nanapush's. Pauline is a "mixed-blood" who rejects her heritage in favour of assimilation and sides with the notion that colonization brings progress. Pauline converts to Catholicism and engages in what Homi Bhabha calls mimicry, in order to achieve a greater sense of power. Both Fleur and Nanapush also engage in mimicry, but the ways in which they emulate the colonizer become subversive and strive to challenge the power that Pauline hopes to gain.¹³

In order to discuss the political choices made by these characters, and how their allegiances lead to different uses of mimicry, I will examine the differing responses to colonization that arise in both *Tracks* and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Both novels reveal the ways in which Native traditions are destroyed by colonization, and as a result of the overwhelming increase in Western intervention, characters are forced to assimilate. In this chapter I will explore the comparison between Nanapush and Fleur, who both embody the "subversive mimic" (Horne 4), and Pauline, who is emblematic of the "colonial mimic" (Horne 3). Dee Horne analyzes mimicry in contemporary Native literature and portrays the ways in which marginal figures use mimicry for drastically different purposes. As I explored in my first chapter, Horne deals with Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and the different use of mimicry adopted by Agnes DeWitt and Pauline. In *Tracks*, Pauline is again emblematic of colonial mimicry. Pauline's problematic imitation of colonial behaviour and zealous belief in Catholicism is countered by Fleur and Nanapush, who become mimics to

¹³ Pauline, Fleur, and Nanapush all engage in Bhabha's complex process of mimicry. What distinguishes the characters is that Pauline engages in a self-loathing colonial mimicry, whereas Fleur and Nanapush perform a more complex and politically subversive mimicry. In order to articulate this distinction, I use Horne's descriptions of the difference between colonial and subversive mimicry.

challenge both colonial hierarchies and the increasingly capitalist values of the community.

Caught in a reservation divided by opposing political paths, Fleur and Nanapush struggle to maintain their cultural identity in the face of colonization.¹⁴ Erdrich uses “overtly engaging political and historical issues” (Peterson 176) to portray the ways in which a community of marginalized peoples is forced to reconcile its past with a rapidly changing future. The reservation must contend with the abuse of allotment Acts, changing government treaties, and the tragic loss of land. In order to maintain a claim to their allotments, which are sold out of Native hands, the people of Little No Horse choose political allegiances that shatter the community and result in the loss of traditional ways of life. Fleur is described by Pauline as “the hinge” (*Tracks* 139) that continues to link the reservation to the waning traditions of Native spirituality. Fleur’s essence, or spiritual power, rivals the capitalists whose greed destroys the valuable woods that surround the reservation. Although Fleur is ultimately unable to defeat the so-called civilizing process of colonization, her refusal to lose her land and her culture to the colonizers highlights the ways in which she continuously strives to maintain a link to the past. The dichotomous narratives in *Tracks* explore assimilation and the fight against colonization. Within the oppositions between Nanapush and Pauline, who represent a divided understanding of the changing policies that govern the reservation, the novel presents a historical unveiling that outlines the experiences of a people who witness the destruction of their community and culture, and how they must come to terms with their own marginalization.

¹⁴ The political upheaval responsible for the gradual fragmentation of the reservation is described by Thomas Matchie to have resulted from “[f]orces, ranging from disease to lumber companies buying up the land,” all of which contribute to the destruction of “the old life patterns of the Chippewas” (Matchie 51).

3.1—THE RELEVANCE OF HISTORY IN *TRACKS*

The deeply political nature of *Tracks* is evident in Erdrich's fictional exploration of the effects of "the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887" (Stookey 72). The Act was a government policy that made "it relatively easy to divide up land formerly held communally on reservations and to allot it to individual Indians" (Peterson 181). The Act developed out of the prevailing belief that "allotment promoted civilization" (Banner 261), and its imposition on Native land resulted from the hope that "Indians would become more assimilated into American life" (Banner 268). Stuart Banner explains that the government Act was a process of assimilation that people at the time considered a way to civilize the "savages" and "grind out American citizens" (268). Erdrich opens her novel in 1912, the year that signalled the end of the "initial twenty-five-year trust period" when "Native owners of allotted land" (Stookey 72) did not have to pay property taxes. The trust period was initially instated to "assimilate the Indians into the 'white man's' way of life so that they would become productive capitalists" (Peterson 181). When the twenty-five-year trust period was shortened, any Natives deemed "competent" were "issued a fee patent rather than a trust patent" which allowed the owners to "sell or lease—or lose" (181) their allotments. Allotment is revealed as a government law that inevitably helped to "accelerate land loss" since it was the period that saw "the Indians [lose] most of their remaining land" (Banner 257). Nancy J. Peterson explains the variety of ways that Natives were manipulated out of their land:

Some Indians lost their allotments because they could not pay the taxes after the trust period ended; others were conned into selling their allotments at prices well below the land's value; still others used their

allotments as security to buy goods on credit or to get loans and then lost the land after failing to repay the debts. (Peterson 182)

Many of these losses happen to families in Little No Horse. Erdrich's novel begins during the time of land allotment, when the members of Little No Horse are forced to contend with the difficulties of maintaining their land.¹⁵ The hardships faced by various members of the reservation highlight an exploration of the different ways land was lost or sold out of Native hands. Nanapush recites in detail the struggles faced by himself and the members of his recently developed clan to maintain what tentative hold they have on their land. Residing on the Pillager allotment with Fleur and her daughter, Nanapush, as well as Margaret Kashpaw and her two sons, Eli and Nector, struggle to earn enough money pay the taxes on their respective properties. Although the Kashpaw land is saved, Fleur's land is tragically lost. Situated next to Matchimanito Lake, the Pillager allotment is full of timber, and as such it is considered by the government agents to be "too valuable to be left to Indian ownership" (182). The manner in which Fleur loses her land is emblematic of the growing factions in the community, since Nector and Margaret use the allotment money to pay for the Kashpaw land so that they can have sole ownership. Similarly cheated by the Agent in Little No Horse, a powerful but nameless figure, Fleur's land is turned over to an eager lumber company who greedily destroys the woods for profit.

Nanapush, an elder who has witnessed the transition from tribal to reservation life, recognizes the rifts created within Little No Horse as a result of colonial interference and

¹⁵ Carlton Smith discusses *Tracks* and the personal effects of the Dawes Allotment Act. He explains that "beyond the material consequences of allotment policies are the fundamental ideological shifts they perpetrated" (Smith 112). Smith explains how, historically, "tribe members were pitted against one another, or against outside agencies" (112). The tensions that inevitably developed in Native communities are portrayed in *Tracks* through "the vying factions of the lumber company and neighbours who covet Fleur's land" (112).

rapidly changing government policies. Significantly, Nanapush's narrative portrays the ways in which the notion of supposed Western progress imposed on Native peoples is damaging and ultimately detrimental. Nanapush, who has "seen too much go by" (*Tracks* 33), witnesses the transformation of the community as "greed and desire divide the Anishnabeg" (Peterson 182). The transformation develops not only from colonization but also the shifting allegiances of the Native people who begin to desire the profit gained from collecting and selling allotments. The eagerness to make money from abusing government policies becomes both a colonial as well as a Native preoccupation. The development of colonial and capitalist desires within members of the reservation is described by Nanapush when he observes that the "Captain and then the lumber president, the Agent and at last many of our own, spoke long and hard about a cash agreement" (*Tracks* 33). The capitalist drive developed at the expense of those unable to keep their land is described as a "betrayal by their own people" (*Last Report* 282). The repeated notion of "our own" refers to the families on the reservation who reject community-oriented and tribal traditions in favour of integrating into Western modes of existence. The rupture created by the conflicting desires of those who wish to maintain their land and traditions and those who wish to assimilate results in colonial hierarchies within the reservation.

Bernadette Morrisey and her family of "well-off people, mixed-bloods who profited from acquiring allotments that many old Chippewa did not know how to keep" (*Tracks* 63) become emblematic of the "government Indians" (185), people who wholly adopt Western values and participate in the destruction of traditional ways of life.

Bernadette, a character that is also explored in *The Last Report on the Miracle at Little No Horse*, to a certain extent raises Pauline Puyat, and both share a similar disdain for

their culture. Like Pauline, Bernadette also repudiates her culture, since she “[calls] herself French and [despises] the old ones” (*Last Report* 168). The Morriseys harbour a deep disdain for the “full-blood blanket Indians” who fail to “understand that the money offered for the land and lumber [comes] around once and once only” (168). The Morriseys highlight the prevailing belief that to emulate colonial behaviour is to “go forward” (168). They adhere to the notion that progress is achieved through mimicry, a process that allows them to become affluent through their ability to maintain their land and profit from the allotments of others.

Conversely, Nanapush strongly contests the notion of “progress” in his narrative by “showing the costs of that ‘progress’ to native peoples” (Peterson 179). His story highlights that Western systems, like land-tenure, do not produce “progress towards civilization” but are instead a “path to destitution” (Banner 262). An aspect of the cost of colonial progress is evident in the constant and seemingly futile struggle faced by Nanapush and his family to maintain their land, since they still inevitably lose what they fight to maintain. Because they “resist assimilation” and “refuse complicity in the exploitation of their land,” they are able to maintain a grasp on their culture, but their refusal to become like the greedy capitalists leaves them “with insufficient means to pay the fees and taxes [...] that they owe” (Stookey 72). As a result, the “two families [range] on either side of the question of money settlement,” which creates a polarization within the community and results in a feud that divides the reservation “down the middle” (*Tracks* 109).

The rift between the families is most dramatically displayed on the map of the reservation allotments that Father Damien brings to Nanapush. Each allotment is shaded in various colours, showing which ones have been paid, which ones are still owing, and

those that have been sold. The growing Morrisey allotments that are “colored green” stand in contrast to the “yellow” (173) of the unpaid allotments belonging to Nanapush and his family. What stands in greater contrast to them both is “the lapping pink, the color of the skin of lumber-jacks and bankers” (173-174). It is the “pale and rotten pink” that marks the land now barred to the people of Little No Horse, and it is the colour that most preoccupies Nanapush as he realizes that not understanding Western policies and government laws only results in increasingly devastating loss.

Throughout *Tracks*, the Westernization of the reservation is presented as ultimately harmful. The damaging influence of colonialism, however, is unavoidable. The encroaching presence of Western society appears in various forms, and a notable instance in the novel is when Eli brings Lulu a pair of store-bought patent leather shoes. Because of their price and impracticality, Lulu wears them tied around her sash. The shoes become emblematic of colonial and capitalist presence and they exhibit a kind of influential power, as people find themselves being “hypnotized, calmed by their shine” (154). The shoes, which appear in stark contrast to the functional handmade makazinans worn by Fleur and her family, inevitably prove to be useless and harmful. When Lulu puts on the “shoes of thin reflecting leather” in “a night of deep cold” (165), her feet freeze and she suffers excruciatingly from the cold. Margaret, when attempting to save Lulu’s feet, wishes to destroy the shoes by throwing them in the fire. Moments later “they [begin] to melt and stink” (166) and are thrown out into the snow. In this instance, the colonial symbolism of the shoes is recalled because the stench from the burning leather links to the stink of “the whites who never wash themselves clean” (153). The shoes ultimately do not function within the specific Native context, similar to how other colonial systems, such as allotment and Western conceptions of land ownership, also fail within the Native

community. The shoes of the civilized colonial figure fail in the Native context and act as a microcosm of the damage caused by colonial presence in the reservation.

3.2—THE ELDER AND THE NUN: SUBVERSIVE AND COLONIAL MIMICRY

Nanapush realizes the importance of working within colonial structures and becomes a “tribal chairman” in order to fight against the sweeping colour on the map that represents the irrevocable loss of land and increasing destruction of Native traditions (225). By adopting certain behaviours associated with the colonizer, Nanapush enters into a kind of mimicry. However, his use of colonial systems can be seen in stark contrast to the kind of mimicry enacted by Bernadette Morrisey, who rejects her people in favour of so-called progress alongside the “white Christian capitalists” (Peterson 185). Nanapush’s entrance into bureaucracy does not signify a repudiation of his culture. Instead, Nanapush’s manoeuvring of written documents becomes a subversive act. He “assumes the guise of the oppressor to defuse the oppressor’s power” (Peterson 186) and uses his knowledge to the benefit of his community. For Nanapush, “conserving Anisnabe history and worldview is not by itself a successful political strategy for withstanding the threat of colonialism,” and so, he becomes a bureaucrat to fight “paper [...] with paper” (Peterson 186). Even before Nanapush becomes a tribal chairman, his narrative reveals his earlier functions within colonial systems and his constant use of his knowledge to attempt to protect his people:

There were so few of us who even understood the writing on the papers. Some signed their land away with thumbs and crosses. As a young man, I had made my reputation as a government interpreter, that is, until the

Beauchamp Treaty signing, in which I said to Rift-In-A-Cloud, “Don’t put your thumb in the ink” (*Tracks* 100).

Nanapush, who was educated by the Jesuits, gains the rare and crucial ability to understand the deceit hidden within the jargon of the treaties and the horrific implications of signing these documents. His warning to Rift-In-A-Cloud causes him to lose his job as a government interpreter, but it is Nanapush’s experience with working alongside the colonizer that makes him realize the seriousness of debt and the tentative hold that he and his family have on their land. He realizes that it is important to “become a bureaucrat” in order to “wade through the letters [and] the reports” if he is to be able to protect himself and his family (225). Fleur, who initially attempts to distance herself from the realities of colonization, fails to understand the precariousness of her own hold on her land. Fleur’s blindness to the changing facts of land ownership is a disastrously common problem. Nanapush counters this ignorance by striving to understand and thus challenge the deadly confusion created by the many documents that govern life on the reservation.

The manner in which the white capitalists “paper[] over their conquest” of Indian land with the design “to make the process look proper and legal” (Banner 1) creates the appearance that the documents have a fixed, concrete meaning. Nanapush challenges the stability of the “blizzard of legal forms” (*Tracks* 225) by highlighting the interpretive possibilities of these documents. For example, to save his adopted granddaughter from government school, Nanapush “uses the ‘authority’ of the written word” (Peterson 186) to challenge the colonial system. By showing Lulu’s birth certificate that falsely lists Nanapush as her father, Nanapush is able to bring Lulu home because the piece of paper is “recognized as an authentic document by white authorities” (187). Nanapush realizes the ability to manipulate government documents early on. At Lulu’s birth, and the arrival

of Father Damien who “must complete the records,” Nanapush insists that he will be recognized as Lulu’s father on the birth certificate. He intentionally lies to the priest, and does so because “[there] were so many tales, so many possibilities, so many lies,” and the “waters were so muddy,” that he thought he would “give them another stir” (*Tracks* 61). Nanapush’s subversive challenging of the fixity of these documents allows him to save Lulu, for a time, from the irrevocable damage committed in government schools. Nanapush’s desire to alter the priest’s official documents reveals the manner in which supposedly concrete government papers can be manipulated and used for some benefit to the Native people.

Nanapush’s ability “to use the system of written discourse [...] against itself” (Peterson 186) thus highlights his position as a subversive mimic. The manner in which he uses mimicry to rescue Lulu highlights how “the subversive mimic engages in partial repetition of colonial discourse to contest its authority” (Horne 13). Nanapush’s subversive mimicry is also suggested in his desire to speak English. Because colonizers forced Native peoples to “use settler discourse” (Horne 6), Nanapush knows the language and emulates the colonizers when he “spoke aloud the words of the government treaty” (*Tracks* 2). However, he subverts this act of mimicry when he “refused to sign the settlement papers” (2). Nanapush does not replace the language of the Anishinaabeg with English, but instead speaks “both languages in streams that [run] alongside each other” (*Tracks* 7). The image of the English and Anishinaabeg languages that exist beside each other in Nanapush’s speech can be compared to the Two Row Wampum Belt used by Haudenosaunee nations to suggest the “Mutual Respect [...] between Haudenosaunee and non-Haudenosaunee nations” (Akwesasne). The Wampum Belt “is a visual instrument that was made with two parallel rows of Purple Wampum on a bed of white beads”

(Akwasasne). The two lines of purple beads that exist side by side are believed to represent the Haudenosaunee and the Europeans who entered into treaties, and the white beads between the lines symbolize “the purity of [their] agreement” (Akwasasne). The significance of the belt lies in its importance as “a treaty of respect for the dignity and integrity of the other nation” (Akwasasne).

Like the Two Row Wampum, Nanapush’s speaking of both languages “alongside each other” highlights how he attempts to emphasize his equality with the Western Agents with whom he works. By being fluent in his own language as well as English he can function subversively within the colonial system. Nanapush’s knowledge of the language of the colonizer gains him the position of government interpreter, but it is through his use of the Anishinaabeg language that he is able to warn his people of the treacherous meanings behind treaties he interprets. With his knowledge of the colonizers, Nanapush attempts to subvert from within by warning others, such as Rift-In-A-Cloud, not to put their “thumb[s] in the ink.” In this regard, although Nanapush engages in mimicry, he “critically interrogates those elements which he [...] imitates” (Horne 13) which allows him to challenge, rather than perpetuate, unjust power dynamics.

Pauline Puyat, whose narrative “runs contrapuntally” with Nanapush’s, presents an “assimilationist version, which interprets the Anglo settling of America as progress” (Peterson 184). Pauline’s relationship with colonization is set in stark contrast to Nanapush’s subversive challenging of colonial authority, since she engages in mimicry to achieve a greater sense of power. Pauline is “concerned with repeating” (Horne 3) colonial hierarchies as opposed to challenging and revealing the injustice of the power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized. In her desire to assimilate, Pauline is emblematic of the colonial mimic. As an outsider in *Little No Horse*, Pauline’s desire to

emulate Western behaviour derives from her precarious position between two cultures. Born in a family of “mixed-bloods” from a “clan for which the name was lost” (*Tracks* 14), Pauline is immediately separated from her heritage and family history. Because she does not know her clan, Pauline’s self-identity is cut off from traditional tribal ways of life, and she grows up in a state of “forgetfulness” that results in her “embracing a colonized mind” to “better assimilate into the white world” (bell hooks, qtd. in Peterson 184). In her detachment from her history, Pauline increasingly identifies with the white nuns in Little No Horse. Her acceptance into the convent severs her tie to the people on the reservation to the point where the other members of Little No Horse believe Pauline to be only “Indian to some slight degree” (*Last Report* 145).

Pauline’s separation from her heritage is further suggested by her skin colour. Because her “blood is at least half Polish” (*Last Report* 145), she is more apparently white skinned than others in the reservation. In both *Tracks* and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Pauline’s whiteness is constantly, and dramatically, emphasized. For example, her complexion is described as “bone white” (*Last Report* 108), as “white as flowers and dead as bone” (110), “alabaster white” (127) and “dead white” (128). She is also associated with the buildings most emblematic of colonial whiteness. She lives a great deal of her religious life in “the convent painted a blistering white” (65) and serves in the “rectory [that] was made of the same whitewashed brick” (139). Pauline’s association with whiteness is integral to her mimicry since it allows her to circumvent certain racist barriers that prevent aboriginals from participating in specific colonial systems. For example, Pauline’s whiteness gains her entrance into the church although the nuns have clearly stated that the “order would admit no Indian girls” (*Tracks*

138). As a result of her physical appearance, Pauline's mimicry takes on a greater authenticity and provides her with higher levels of colonial power.

Pauline's narrative reveals her eagerness, even from childhood, to reject her culture. She expresses early on her belief that "to hang back [is] to perish" (14), revealing her belief in the notion that colonialism equals civilization. To progress beyond the stigmas placed on the members of her community, especially those that cling to the old ways, Pauline quickly begins to mimic white behaviour. Forcing her father to send her to "the white town" (14) of Argus, Pauline physically distances herself from her ethnic ties to Little No Horse. Pauline refuses to speak anything other than English and begins modeling herself after her "mother, who showed her half white" and her "grandfather, pure Canadian" (14). However, despite her attempts to integrate herself into the folds of white colonial society, Pauline is soon hit with the realization that she "hardly rinsed through the white girls' thoughts" (15). The white girls who do not recognize Pauline as one of their own, despite Pauline's vehement attempts at imitation, highlight how the process of mimicry is "constructed around an ambivalence" since mimicry "emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha 122). No matter how hard Pauline imitates the colonizer and no matter how white her skin, she is unable to achieve acceptance within white society. Bhabha explains how colonial mimicry is a "flawed" (125) process when he looks at the example of a "mimic man" who is an "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (124-25). Despite the intensity of the mimic man's emulation of the English, he is ultimately othered because "to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English" (Bhabha 125; emphasis in original). A similar process is evident in Pauline, since despite the thoroughness of her assimilation, her position as a colonized other emphasizes the

ways in which she is “*emphatically not*” (125) a colonizer. Pauline’s emulation of colonial behaviour highlights her position as “a reformed, recognizable other” (122) who only perpetuates her difference from the white girls.¹⁶ Drawing from Bhabha, Dee Horne explains how “no imitation is ever exact” (Horne 4) and that through imitation “the mimic reveals [...] her differences” (5). In this regard, Pauline’s desperation to be like the colonizer emphasizes her position as “*as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 122; emphasis in original). Despite the lightness of her skin, in the white town of Argus, Pauline’s imitation does not afford her any power because she will always be defined by her ethnicity.

The only colonial power that Pauline is able to achieve occurs in *Little No Horse*. It is through comparison to other aboriginal people that Pauline’s whiteness is emphasized. Her entrance into the Catholic community signals her full rejection of her culture and the resulting ascendancy she gains over others. In the convent, Pauline’s repudiation of her Native heritage is most evident when she has a vision of Christ. In an imagined dialogue with the spiritual figure emblematic of the colonizer’s “civilizing” process, Pauline thoroughly believes that “despite [her] deceptive features, [she is] not one speck of Indian but wholly white” (*Tracks* 137). By fully siding with the colonizers, Pauline shows how “[colonial] mimics internalize colonialism” (Horne 11). Through her internalization, Pauline participates in the colonization process and aids in the effacement of her people. Through her belief in Christ and her internalization of the supposed civilizing possibilities of Catholicism, Pauline dedicates herself to converting members of

¹⁶ In her essay “Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich,” Catherine Rainwater discusses the ways in which Pauline is unable to fully assimilate into Catholicism because of her ethnicity. For example, Pauline cannot fully reject her belief in Native spirituality, something which is emphasized when she “becomes a nun, [and] still believes in the lake creature” (Rainwater 409). Although she refers to the monster as Satan, Pauline continues to acknowledge the presence of the Anishinaabeg creature.

the reservation. In contrast to Father Damien's belief that conversion is "a most loving form of destruction" (*Last Report* 55), Pauline believes it is her holy mission "to name and baptize, to gather souls" (*Tracks* 141). She believes that Christ commands her to "[f]etch more" (140) aboriginal souls, causing Pauline to war against the "old longhair[s]" (208) in order to expunge traditional Native beliefs. Pauline's desire to colonize and convert is made increasingly possible when she is "assigned to teach arithmetic at St. Catherine's school" (205). Teaching the community's children, Pauline vows "to guide them, to purify their minds" (205). With her authority in the school, Pauline engages in a process that seeks to mould the younger generations by eradicating their ties to Native spirituality. In this regard, Pauline "becomes one of the agents that blind and deafen children to their native culture and language" (Peterson 184). Pauline thus perpetuates the assimilatory process that damages the community irreparably.

Figures like Pauline who act as agents of assimilation by enforcing colonial systems on the children of the reservation contribute to the fragmentation of the community. The destruction of the children's ties to their heritage that is caused by forcefully replacing traditional beliefs with competing Western values is often seen in government schools. Lulu Nanapush, Nanapush's granddaughter, is a firsthand victim of the destructive power of government schools. How she comes to be left at, and eventually rescued from, this school is an integral story in the novel. Nanapush's narrative is directed at Lulu as he tells the many reasons why she was abandoned by her mother. Nanapush explains the ways in which political forces result in the loss of Fleur's land, culminating in Fleur's perceiving the need to leave her daughter and Little No Horse at the end of *Tracks*. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* unravels the story of how Fleur regains her land. In *Tracks*, Nanapush and Pauline's narratives pivot around the

figure of Fleur, connecting the two narratives. She is the central character in the novel and is linked to both traditional Native life and the emulation of colonizers. Fleur is often presented as the antithesis to Pauline because she lives according to Native traditions and refuses to acknowledge the influence of the advancing colonial presence. As a result of her failure to realize the importance of working within colonial structures, Fleur is dispossessed of her land and irrevocably separated from her family. Her losses are what cause her to engage in mimicry, since it is the only process that affords her the power required to regain her land.

Although Fleur and Pauline are often presented as opposites, the similarities between the two characters are increasingly suggested in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. For example, Fleur's adamant rejection of colonial power in *Tracks* changes when she resorts to mimicry in order to regain her land. In this regard, both Fleur and Pauline eventually adopt dominant colonial behaviour in order to gain power.

Although their motives are different, both women engage in mimicry since they both undergo "a process of reform" (Bhabha 124). Through the imitation of white colonial behaviour, Pauline and Fleur attempt to escape the stigmas imposed on their community while also attempting to gain a greater sense of power. To challenge the injustice of Western capitalist forces, such as greedy lumber companies, Fleur's politically motivated mimicry becomes subversive, since she emulates normative colonial behaviour in order to challenge the injustice of "the acquisition of tax-forfeited Indian land" (Beidler 194) by such wealthy businessmen as John James Mauser. The wealthy owner of a lumber company, Mauser becomes representative of the "white plunder of Indian land" (194) when he destroys the forest where Fleur lives. Fleur abandons her tribal life to reverse the reality that "once [the land] was gone, it was gone forever from Anishnaabeg hands"

(*Last Report* 186), a process she is able to accomplish, but not without great cost. In order to fully emulate and play the role required to manipulate Mauser into returning her land, Fleur leaves her daughter Lulu in a government school where she is “blinded and deafened” (*Tracks* 205) to her heritage. The effects of losing both her mother and her culture irrevocably alter Lulu, and her lifelong struggle with reconciling her childhood lived according to traditional tribal ways with the Westernization of the reservation is something I will examine in detail in my third chapter.

Like Nanapush’s, Fleur’s mimicry is part of a political strategy. It is also a means to gain power, highlighting the way the colonial and subversive mimic share a similar desire for “the powers and privileges of the colonizer” (Horne 13). What makes Fleur’s movement towards achieving power different from that of Nanapush or Pauline is her ability to subversively work within the confines imposed on her gender and her ethnicity. For example, Fleur uses the invisibility of being a poor, Native woman to gain access to Mauser: “If only I could get to him, she thought, but I am nothing [...] But nothing can go anywhere. Nothing can do things. People don’t see nothing, but nothing sees them” (*Last Report* 187). The nothingness that Fleur inhabits allows her to gain access to Mauser, whom she eventually marries. Her marriage causes her Westernization, something which is evident when she returns to Little No Horse to retrieve her daughter. Fleur arrives at the government school “wearing eye paint and lipstick, white woman’s clothes” (*Last Report* 251) and Lulu is struck by the way her mother exudes “that high, white-woman attitude” (*Last Report* 251). Fleur’s mimicry affords her the power to regain her land, an accomplishment that highlights the subversive power of her mimicry since she is able to “contest colonial power and [...] subvert the colonial relationship” (Horne 4). Fleur achieves the unthinkable by gaining back an allotment already lost to capitalist hands.

However, Fleur's success is only partial, since she returns to her land on "the ruined shores of Matchimanito" (*Last Report* 262) that has already been plundered and destroyed by Mauser's lumber company.

The subversive and political nature of Fleur's mimicry is also evident in her return to Little No Horse in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Instead of living on the reservation and continuing her process of assimilation, she rejects her image of Western success and resumes living according to tribal traditions. The precarious power gained through mimicry is utilized by Fleur for revenge. No longer ignoring the influence of the colonial presence, Fleur enters into the political fight over Native land through mimicry, and like Nanapush, she uses the power she gains against the colonizers. After manipulating Mauser into returning her land, Fleur returns to her former life. By going back to the old ways, Fleur helps to battle notions of the Indian's "victim status" and the idea that they "have to assimilate or perish" (Allen 5). Fleur's return to Matchimanito allows her to be described as "the funnel of our history" (*Tracks* 178), since her ability to maintain a tribal lifestyle after Westernization results in the continuation of the traditions of her people.¹⁷

3.3—THE DIVISION BETWEEN THE BODY AND THE SPIRIT

Fleur's status in *Tracks* as "one of the few unassimilated full-bloods among the Anishnabeg" (Peterson 178) is highlighted through her consistent practice of traditional spirituality. In the novel, Fleur is often described as a mythic character who shares a powerful connection "with the Anishnabe spirit world" (Barton 246). Barton describes

¹⁷ Caroline Rosenthal explains how Fleur "serves as the trace of history different from official historiography" (Rosenthal 129). In this way, the narratives that focus on Fleur reveal often conflicting accounts, but provide a more accurate depiction of reservation life.

Fleur's power as "uncanny and dangerous" (247), but it is this power that allows for the continuance of Native traditions that are threatened by colonization. Like Fleur, Pauline lives in a world where the supernatural coexists with visible reality. However, Pauline rejects native spirituality in favour of Catholicism. Pauline's dual nature is emphasized in *The Last Report on The Miracles at Little No Horse* through her supposed ability to perform miracles, a power that is accredited to both God and the Devil.¹⁸ The ability of the two women to inhabit both sides of the cultural binaries of their world allows reality and the spiritual to combine. Both women not only "[straddle] the space between two cultures" and must come to terms with the "double-coded" snares that "[define] a cross-cultural reality" (Rainwater 150), but they must also reconcile their extreme spiritual beliefs with the world around them.

The importance of spirituality in Erdrich's novels is linked to the ways in which she represents individuals as having an "essence." The essence is an integral aspect of understanding how Pauline and Fleur, seemingly diametrically opposite characters, share a similar bond that unites them. Both are outsiders from "marginal reservation [families]" (Van Dyke 137) and face being othered to a further extreme because of their ethnicity when they go to the predominantly white town of Argus. Despite their eventual adoption of opposing political paths, the two characters share a connection that develops when they work together for "Kozka's Meats" (*Tracks* 16). Pauline narrates this section of the story, recalling Fleur as a deeply sexual and powerful character feared in *Little No Horse* as a woman with "raw power" (7) who has the supernatural ability to "[kill] men off" (12). The dark mystery behind Fleur's spiritual force causes her to be subject to hostility, and

¹⁸ For further information on the dual nature of Pauline's character, see Thomas Matchie's essay "Flannery O'Connor and Louise Erdrich: The Function of the Grotesque in Erdrich's *Tracks*." Matchie suggests that Pauline is a "split personality" who is "externally 'holy,' but internally distraught" (Matchie 55).

before being asked to leave Little No Horse, Fleur ventures to Argus. Pauline leaves for the same town, a journey she undertakes not as a result of victimization, but from a desire to become a part of a white community.

Although they leave the reservation for different reasons, Pauline and Fleur are linked because they inhabit marginal ethnic and gendered positions. Pauline recalls her ability to “[blend] into the stained brown walls” (16), since she is ignored to the extent that she becomes “invisible to most customers” (15). Pauline’s ability to hide herself in her surroundings highlights the ways in which she remains defined by her ethnicity. Her invisibility is also tied to her gender, since she is ignored by the men in the shop because she is less sexually attractive than Fleur. Pauline’s inability to be accepted as a colonial figure results from the fact that, in the white town of Argus, she is always defined by her ethnicity. Pauline’s whiteness is only acknowledged amongst the aboriginals of Little No Horse since, in Argus, Pauline is perceived to be as “brown” as the walls of the shop. Fleur is similarly defined by her race and gender. Hired for manual labour, Fleur challenges the gender divisions in the workplace by playing cards with the men. Fleur’s repeated success at poker is eventually used as an excuse by the men to rape her, an event that is witnessed by Pauline. It is during this horrific incident that the division between the physical body and the essence or spirit is emphasized. Pauline explains that the men were “blinded” and “stupid” because “they only saw [Fleur] in the flesh” (18). The men see only Fleur’s ethnicity and gender, calling her “the squaw” (20). Their failure to see beyond her physicality and acknowledge her spiritual power becomes a fatal blindness. In retaliation against the violence committed against her body, Fleur disappears back to Little No Horse, leaving behind the three rapists, who are murdered by Pauline.

The way that the men only see Fleur “in the flesh” highlights how Fleur is defined because of her body. Because of their physical appearance and anatomy, both Fleur and Pauline are repeatedly stigmatized by a racist and sexist dominant culture. The seeming powerlessness attributed to the women because of their ethnicity and gender is emphasized in Pauline’s invisibility and Fleur’s position as “nothing” (*Last Report* 187) in comparison to such colonial authorities as Mauser. However, throughout the novel, both women highlight the distinction that exists between the body and the spirit. Fleur and Pauline challenge the ways in which they have been essentialized by dominant culture by refusing to adhere to racist and sexist expectations of normative behaviour. For example, Fleur’s spirituality is integral to her destruction of limiting stereotypes, since she uses traditional Native shamanic powers to counter her marginality. By causing the tornado that rages through Argus after her rape, and causing other equally destructive forces in response to colonial injustice, Fleur opposes her supposed nothingness within white society with her powerful spirituality, and that spirituality is closely tied to power over nature.

The discrepancy between how the women are initially perceived and their powerful actions that develop out of their spirituality highlights how they challenge the racist assumptions that dictate how they are understood in Western society. Fleur’s mimicry can be examined in this context since her emulation of Western behaviour is a performance she enacts in order to subvert the power of the colonizers. Her initial signs of assimilation are revealed as false when she returns to tribal life after regaining her allotment. The discrepancy between what is being performed and what exists in essence is also strongly evident in Pauline. She challenges essentialized conceptions of what it means to be an aboriginal woman. Initially presented as a negative figure who strives to

eradicate Native traditions in favour of perpetuating the injustices of colonization, Pauline is revealed to be a complex character who does not adhere to limiting definitions of assumed “Indian” behaviour. In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Pauline is viewed as dichotomous since it is never entirely certain if her actions result from good or evil motives. Even after her transformation into the tyrannical Sister Leopolda, Pauline is described as “a fiercely masterful woman whose resounding bitterness of spirit had nonetheless resulted in acts of troubling goodness, inspirations, even miraculous involvements” (*Last Report* 52). Father Damien acknowledges how Pauline is both “nemesis and savior” (102) and “a creature of impossible contradictions” (123). In this regard, the discrepancy between performance and essence is highlighted in Pauline’s character since the image she portrays does not always coincide with her inner self.

The contradictory nature of Pauline’s character is increasingly evident in *Tracks*. Her repudiation of her culture in favour of fundamentalist Catholicism is an assimilatory process, but one that results from a love of her people. Although she appears to detest the people who cling to traditional tribal lifestyles, throughout the novel Pauline is drawn down the path to Fleur’s allotment on Matchimanito lake. Her desire to be with Fleur suggests the ways in which she shares a connection, no matter how small, with her heritage. It is also alongside Fleur that Pauline witnesses the destruction of the old ways and the terrible loss suffered by those who fail to understand the treaties. Pauline understands this destruction to come as a result of the failure of the old gods to protect their people. In *Last Report*, Father Damien recognizes the split between Pauline’s performance and her essence, explaining that in her nature she still harbours love for the people of Little No Horse:

The love of a mixed blood for what is darkest communion in her nature, both the comfort and the downfall, source of pain and expiation, a complicated love. She loved her people but she had no patience with them [...] She, too, went to the gallows in an effort to free her people from what she saw as spiritual bondage. Their gods had not, in recent times, served the Ojibwe well. (238)

The contradictions of Pauline's character develop out of her battle with her own personal desires, since despite her repudiation of her culture and her assimilation into colonial life she also wants a better alternative for her people. Because Pauline sees colonialism as progress, she strives to make the people on the reservation progress alongside her. Thus, Pauline is forced to wrestle with the identity she has constructed for herself. After renouncing her name to become Sister Leopolda, Pauline creates a new identity that does not allow for a harmonious combination of the dualities of her nature. Instead, as a nun dedicated to the faith, Pauline is forced to wrestle with her hate and love for her people and her own desires to join Fleur and her family in the old ways.

The importance of spirituality is evident in the ways that it connects such characters as Fleur and Nanapush to their land and heritage. Fleur and Nanapush appear to be similar in their natures since both inhabit a world of traditional spirituality. The powerful and supernatural link between the two characters is evident in their "special powers" and "conjuring skill[s]" (*Last Report* 73). Because they are so enmeshed in tribal traditions, it is their spirituality that connects them so deeply to their land. For Fleur, losing her allotment is similar to losing a fundamental part of her identity, since the Pillager land is where the bones of her parents are buried and where the spirits of her ancestors exist. The traditional and spiritual world that exists as Fleur's reality is

threatened by the lumber companies, but her return to the allotment prevents the magic of the woods from being irrevocably destroyed.

Fleur's and Nanapush's spirituality is also deeply linked to their history, suggesting how land, beliefs, traditions and history are enmeshed as one dynamic entity. Nanapush's narrative seeks to describe the history of Little No Horse during the political upheaval of colonialism, and the story he conveys is based strongly on both his spiritual and political experiences. However, Nanapush presents only a specific version of the story since he focuses primarily on the overwhelming desire to maintain traditions in the face of Westernization. In this regard, Nanapush's narrative alone is incapable of giving an accurate description of the lived experiences of the people on the reservation. Pauline, who "present[s] an opposing force" (*Last Report* 261), is also integral in conveying an essential piece of the story. In this regard, "Nanapush's and Pauline's points of view are both necessary to provide an 'indigenous' account of what happens in *Tracks*" (Peterson 185). It is their "conflicting stories and visions" that "reflect a tribal vision of the world" (185), highlighting the importance of dichotomous perspectives to create a dynamic and encompassing historical narrative. The political agenda of the novel reveals the overwhelming hardships faced by aboriginals who are forced to reconcile their traditional lifestyles with Westernization. By presenting the often opposing versions of those who seek different political actions, Erdrich not only reveals the terrible rifts created in the once communal psyche of traditional Native life, but shows how the characters are linked in their desire to destroy their marginality in order to convey a truer version of their experience.

CHAPTER 4

“A SUBJECT OF DIFFERENCE”: FRAGMENTATION AND CONNECTIVITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH’S *LOVE MEDICINE*

Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* explores the ongoing hardships faced by aboriginals who lose their heritage as a result of the overwhelming Westernization of their community. Originally published in 1984, Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* has “a complicated textural history” (Chavkin 86), since she republished the novel in 1993. The difference between the 1984 version of *Love Medicine* and the revised and expanded version is the altered chapter sequences and the inclusion of “four new chapters and a new section” (84). Erdrich’s decision to significantly change the novel nine years after the original version brought her critical attention has caused controversy. There has been debate about whether or not *Love Medicine* is a novel or a series of short stories. The changes added in the 1993 edition have been considered problematic since readers and critics are unsure of how “the addition of the new chapters should influence one’s reading of the entire book” (84). Erdrich has stated that *Love Medicine* is ““a novel in that it all moves towards a resolution”” (Erdrich qtd. in Chavkin 85), and Michael Dorris, Erdrich’s husband, who assisted in the writing of the novel, explains that the book ““has a large vision that no one of the stories approaches”” (Dorris qtd. in Chavkin 85). In order to examine in detail a part of Erdrich’s larger vision as represented by both the 1984 edition and the expanded 1993 version, I have decided to focus solely on the original novel. This chapter will examine the characters and events depicted in the 1984 edition in order to provide an analysis of the specific vision created in the first publication.

As with *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and *Tracks*, *Love Medicine* depicts the stories of the same families over a large span of time on the same North Dakota reservation. Progressing over the years, the novel delves into “the complex interrelationship of three families: the Kashpaws, the Lazarres, and Lulu Nanapush’s extended family” (Beidler 17). The significance of the time frame, spanning the 1930s to the 1980s, allows for an exploration of the repercussions of colonization and its continued effect on newer generations. Erdrich reveals the “themes of fractured community, loss, dislocation, and oppression” (Stirrup 70) that continuously haunt the members of the reservation. The overriding Western influence that governs the community results in the internalization and perpetuation of unjust colonial hierarchies. Many characters, including Marie Lazarre and Nector Kashpaw, engage in colonial mimicry in order to gain a greater sense of power. The negative implications of their mimicry are revealed, as Nector becomes complicit in the exploitation of Native land. The internalization of Western values results in the dissolution of Native traditions and simultaneously contributes to the destruction of the community. The fragmentation that resounds in the reservation is both a communal and individual problem. However, despite highlighting the growing alienation of the characters from their culture, Erdrich presents a sense of community that links the people on the reservation through interconnected genealogies and histories. Erdrich suggests that there is a transcendental essence that becomes a uniting force, collapsing “the boundary between [...] the individual and the collective” (Ferrari 147). This connectedness, which results from the interweaving families and histories, aids in the rejection of Western understandings of identity categories. Although cultural and personal differences persist in the reservation, there remains a link to Native traditions, highlighting how characters struggle to reach a harmonious combination of both systems.

Robert F. Gish explains that the “controlling metaphor[s]” of the novel are “erotic and familial love, the power and ‘love medicine’ of characters facing life’s temporal and transcendent transmutations” (Gish 69). Through erotic relationships and familial ties, *Love Medicine* outlines the experiences of a people who witness the destruction of their community and culture. In order to combat the dissolution of their community, the families on the reservation attempt to come to terms with their own marginalization as they seek to maintain a connection with their past.

4.1—MIMICRY IN *LOVE MEDICINE*

All three of Erdrich’s novels explore the ways in which Westernization has resulted in the rejection of traditional Native beliefs in favour of assimilating into colonial systems. Pauline Puyat, who repudiates her Native heritage to become Sister Leopolda, is the most emblematic of the colonial mimic in *Tracks* and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. In *Love Medicine*, the reader is introduced to Marie Lazarre, a character who is revealed in the later novels to be Pauline’s daughter. What connects both characters is not just their bloodline, but also the ways in which they emulate colonial behaviour. Like Pauline, Marie is often noted for her whiteness. Nector immediately notices her skin colour when he describes her as “pale as birch” and repeatedly calls her a “skinny white girl” (*Love Medicine* 59).¹⁹ As a result of her genealogy and light skin, Marie believes that she does not have “much Indian blood” (*Love Medicine* 40). Marie’s desire to mimic colonial behaviour is initially suggested when she leaves her home to enter the Sacred Heart Convent. At fourteen, Marie desires to be accepted within the

¹⁹ Nector again calls Marie “skinny white girl” (*Love Medicine* 207) when they are in the old age home, highlighting how Marie’s whiteness is still referred to in her old age.

building that is most emblematic of colonial whiteness. Painted a “[g]leaming white” (41), the religious convent becomes a physical manifestation of the Catholic God on the reservation. For example, the building is described as “[so] white the sun glanced off in dazzling display to set forms whirling behind your eyelids. The face of God you could hardly look at” (41). The convent represents colonial authority, since its “white face” (61) looks down on the reservation from a central location. When inside the convent, Marie encounters Sister Leopolda, who violently attempts to force the young girl to undergo the process of becoming a nun. Leopolda explains to Marie that because of her ethnicity she has two options: she can either “marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog,” or “give [herself] to god” (45). After enduring physical abuse at the hands of the nun, Marie leaves the convent and meets Nector, whom she later marries. Despite her refusal to give herself to God, Marie similarly refuses to “marry a no-good Indian” (45) and spends her married life urging Nector forward in his political career.

However, while Marie rejects the colonial position of being a nun, she strenuously continues throughout her youth to mimic colonial behaviour. Marie’s light skin colour affords her a greater degree of power in the reservation, and as a result she can have “any damn man on the reservation” (45). Her marriage to Nector is significant in the ways that both characters become colonial mimics. Nector is also noted for his light skin colour, something which is emphasized when he is seen in comparison to his brother Eli. Described as “paler than his brother” (25), Nector is separated from his brother, and from his heritage, from an early age. Nector and Eli’s mother, Margaret Rushes Bear Kashpaw, participates in this separation by sending Nector to the government school while hiding Eli from the influence of the colonizers. In this way Nector learned “white reading and writing,” Eli learned tribal traditions and “knew the woods,” and Margaret thus “gained a

son on either side of the line” (17). Both Marie and Nector undergo “a process of reform” (Bhabha 124) by rejecting their ties to traditional tribal life, and emulating colonial behaviour. Each raised to some degree in marginal families on the reservation, Marie distances herself from her impoverished childhood as “a girl raised out in the bush” (41) and Nector willingly uses his government education to learn how to write and to manoeuvre within legal documents.²⁰ Marie’s mimicry becomes an attempt to escape the stigmas imposed on her because of her ethnicity as well as her familial ties. Described as coming from a “low” (*Love Medicine* 59) family and initially referred to as a “dirty Lazarre” (60), Marie repudiates her ties to her family and her ethnicity in order to achieve a greater sense of power in the reservation. She understands that the emulation of colonial behaviour results in a greater sense of authority, and she thus decides “to make [Nector] something big on [the] reservation” (66). Marie’s efforts to mould Nector into a political leader, and his eventual success as a “tribal chairman” (113), highlights their desire for “the powers and privileges of the colonizer” (Horne 13). Marie’s dogged adherence to the belief that progress is achieved through mimicry allows her eventually to become a respected member of the reservation. To emphasize her improved status, since she believes that she is now “solid class” (*Love Medicine* 113), Marie returns to the convent with her daughter Zelda to confront the dying Leopolda. Wanting the nun to see who she has become, Marie emphasizes her status by wearing an expensive, store-bought “Royal Plum” (113) dress. Despite her success, Marie’s mimicry only reveals her position as “a reformed, recognizable other” (Bhabha 122). When Leopolda sees Marie, the nun is not

²⁰ In the *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, it is revealed how “when only a boy,” Nector learns the ability to “manufacture documents” (171) that cause him to be favoured by the commissioner. As a result, Nector gains “the power of the pen” (169), highlighting his entrance into colonial systems from an early age.

deceived by the supposed grandeur of Marie's appearance: "I feel sorry for you [...] So poor that you had to cut an old Easter shroud up and sew it" (*Love Medicine* 117).

Although the dress is made from expensive wool, Leopolda's mockery emphasizes how Marie remains "a subject of difference" (Bhabha 122). Marie is ultimately still defined by her ethnicity and her history since Leopolda refuses to see Marie as anything other than a Lazarre. Marie's attempts to prove her superiority ultimately fail, since Leopolda sees through the performance and recognizes how Marie's colonial authority is attributed to the success of her husband: "'So you've come up in the world,' [Leopolda] mocked, using my thoughts against me. 'Or your husband has, it sounds like, not you, Marie Lazarre'" (118). Although Nector "is what he is because [Marie] made him" (118), their success within the colonial system is limited and confined. Because of her ethnicity, Marie's emulation of colonial behaviour only emphasizes her otherness since the inherent ambivalence of mimicry causes it to be "a process of disavowal" (Bhabha 122). As a result, Marie can never fully surpass the stigmas placed on her.

Nector's colonial mimicry also results in a constant process of disavowal, since his success in the colonial world is always limited and defined by his ethnicity. For example, his physical appearance gains him access to Hollywood, where he is hired to play "the biggest Indian part" (*Love Medicine* 89) in a western. However, the only option for him in the movie, and in the film industry, is to die, since death is "the extent of Indian acting in the movie theater" (90). Nector's experience in Hollywood, and his subsequent posing for an artist who uses Nector as a model for the famous painting "*Plunge of the Brave*" (91), reveals the "cultural representations" (Stirrup 73) of aboriginals in colonial society. The ways in which Nector is asked to pose and act in order to emulate romanticised notions of aboriginality exhibits "the constructedness of

such representations” (74). Despite their falsity, the colonial representations revealed in film and art highlight how Native Americans are defined. In this regard, Nector’s success in colonial society is only possible because he exists within these specific constructions. In Western society, his ethnicity governs how he will be both understood and portrayed, and thus, in order to gain power, he engages in his own disavowal.

When Nector returns to the reservation and marries Marie, he continues to emulate colonial behaviour by entering “Chippewa politics” (*Love Medicine* 102). His success remains tied to the colonizers, since his eventual position as “an astute political dealer” (17) develops from his relationship with the government. In the position of an influential bureaucrat, Nector adopts colonial and capitalist values. For example, Nector’s involvement in the “area redevelopment” (103) of the reservation causes him to become complicit in the exploitation of Native land. Nector perpetuates colonial injustice by dispossessing the Lamartine family of their home in order to build a factory on the land. The powerful desire for “government money” (104) causes Nector to betray Lulu, his lover and friend from childhood. Nector’s eventual decision to evict Lulu from her home so that the reservation can acquire the profits gained from the factory, highlights how Nector participates in the harmful Westernization of the reservation. Nector reveals himself as being “concerned with repeating” (Horne 3) colonial injustice, which contributes to the dissolution of his heritage. The increasing Westernization of the reservation causes a rupture in the community. Although Nector seems firmly rooted in his desire to emulate colonial behaviour, he is also affected by the gradual destruction of his community. David Stirrup explains how Nector’s eventual senility becomes one of the many “depictions of [...] community disintegration” (Stirrup 66). Nector’s gradual destruction, which occurs as a result of his dementia, is one of the many negative

consequences of the loss of Native traditions. His loss of mental stability becomes one of the manifestations of personal disintegration that occurs as a result of assimilation.

Nector's dementia also reflects the greater communal disintegration that pervades the reservation because of the colonial destruction of Native culture.

4.2—JUNE AND THE BODY AS SHELL: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL FRAGMENTATION

The initial effects of the Dawes Allotment Act, a government policy that resulted in a vast loss of land for Native people, are explored in *Tracks* and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, and it is something I explore in detail in my second chapter. *Love Medicine* examines the continuing repercussions of this Act on later generations, since the fragmentation of the reservation which comes as a result of the Allotment Act is mirrored in the personal fragmentation that plagues various characters. Stirrup explains that June Morrisey's story in the beginning of *Love Medicine* becomes emblematic of the theme of destruction that pervades Erdrich's novel. The "sense of potential disintegration" (Stirrup 66) is emphasized in June, who is waiting to return home to the reservation. To kill time, she wanders the streets of the "oil boomtown Williston, North Dakota" (*Love Medicine* 1) until she enters a bar. Inside, a man named Andy sits thumbing the shells off "colored eggs" (2), and gives them, freshly peeled, to June to eat. June mirrors the fragility of the eggs when she describes the "hard and brittle" (4) feel of her skin. She also associates her pink turtleneck to a shell, which signals the "immanence of breaking apart, through its emphasis on surface" (Stirrup 66). Andy furthers the images of potential disintegration when he refers to her clothing and offers to "peel that for her, too" (*Love Medicine* 2). As a white man with "a good-sized wad of money" (3) in a white

town where “an Indian woman’s nothing but an easy night” (9), Andy’s proposal is both overtly sexual and seemingly rooted in colonial destructive power. Because June’s feelings of breaking apart are personal as well as cultural, her focus on the man’s “hand, thumbing back the transparent skin” and her belief that her body is a fragile shell at risk of “[falling] apart at the slightest touch” (4), both highlight her personal fragility as well as the ways that her culture has been destroyed at the hands of colonizers. When June accepts Andy’s sexual offer, she feels increasingly at risk of dissolution: “[S]he knew that if she lay there any longer she would crack wide open, not in one place but in many pieces that he would crush by moving in his sleep” (5). The destructive potential of Andy’s weight puts June at risk of disintegration. To escape his crushing power, June exits the isolated vehicle and wanders in a snow storm that eventually leads to her death.

The repeated images of shells and fragility signal the prevalent theme of “personal and social disintegration” (Stirrup 66). In *Love Medicine*, June represents a “powerful ‘substance’ [...] for members of her home community” (Stirrup 66). Her life is interwoven with many of the families in the novel and it is her connection to the reservation that causes her personal fragmentation to mirror the greater disintegration of the community. Albertine, June’s niece, recognizes how the ruination of the reservation comes as a result of colonization. Years after its enactment, the Dawes Allotment Act, the devastating influence of which is explored in *Tracks*, is revealed to still negatively influence the Native community. Stirrup explains that the theme of fragmentation in the novel is “encapsulated by tribal dissolution and familial dysfunction in the wake of the Dawes Severalty Act (allotment)” and that this destruction “is further reflected in the individual conflicts of the characters themselves” (Stirrup 69). Driving home to the reservation, Albertine states that the “policy of allotment was a joke” since she is able to

see “how much of the reservation was sold to whites and lost forever” (*Love Medicine* 11). Despite the years that have passed since the allotment Act was ended, the effects of colonial systems still resound in the community. The loss of land is revealed to still be a problem in the reservation since Lulu Lamartine becomes the victim again of dispossession. *Tracks* chronicles the disastrous effects of Lulu’s childhood and how she comes to be sent to government school after her mother’s allotment is lost to a lumber company. In *Love Medicine*, Lulu is again forced off her land. In this instance, Lulu’s dispossession does not come as a direct result of colonizers, but instead because of reservation politics and the desire for “government money” (104). Although Lulu is not the rightful owner of the property according to the tribal council, her removal from the land highlights the ways in which she is betrayed by the members of the community who have internalized colonial and capitalist agendas. Like the lumber companies in *Tracks* that dispossess the people of their land in order to profit from the destruction of the landscape, Lulu is removed from her home so a “tomahawk factory” (223) can be built. By becoming like the colonizers and turning their own people from their land, the reservation becomes divided: “Indian against Indian, that’s how the government’s money offer made us act. Here was the government Indians ordering their own people off the land of their forefathers” (223). Lulu confronts the tribal council’s blindness towards the needs of the community by revealing how their desperation for the “crumbs” (223) of government money results in the perpetuation of colonial injustice.

In hopes of swaying the council into allowing her family to remain in their home, Lulu attacks the desire to build a “modern factory” (223) by emphasizing how it contributes to the dissolution of Native traditions. Lulu explains the problematic implications of the factory by revealing how it is built to manufacture “equipment of false

value” such as “bangle beads and plastic war clubs” (223). The keepsakes become another example of the harmful colonial representations of Native heritage. Native objects are reduced into cheap, mass produced trinkets for white tourists, signalling how cultural symbols are transformed into the commodities of white culture. The desire to commercialize their heritage emphasizes the ways in which Native people have assimilated into colonial and capitalist culture. Lulu challenges the growing greed in the reservation by revealing the damaging effects of the factory.²¹ She describes the objects produced in the factory as “dreamstuff” (223), since they have no true importance or relevance to their culture. The sad fact remains that Lulu is inevitably forced off the land, and the factory built in her place. The manner in which Lulu is willingly replaced by a modern commercial enterprise signals the rapid loss of traditions. Although Lulu is not distinctly traditional, she was raised according to tribal traditions and is the daughter of one of the last “unassimilated full-bloods among the Anishnabeg” (Peterson 178). Because of her genealogy and familial ties to Native traditions, Lulu maintains a link to the history of her people. However, despite her important cultural position as a character who remains tied to Native traditions, she is ultimately betrayed by her community. The tribal council’s decision to remove Lulu and her family from their land in order to replace them with a colonial factory emphasizes the ways in which the reservation engages in the dissolution and fragmentation of its own people.

As a result of straddling two cultures, Lulu’s division physically manifests itself on her body. In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Lulu attempts to

²¹ In the 1993 edition of *Love Medicine*, there are added chapters that explore the factory from Lulu’s son Lyman’s perspective. The 1984 edition that I focus on in this chapter only explores the factory in detail from Lulu’s perspective. What is revealed through Lulu’s story is the ways in which the internalization of colonial values harms the reservation. Lulu is revealed as the victim of the perpetuation of colonial injustice by the members of her community.

escape the colonial influence of government school by hiding on a shelf underneath a bus leaving for the reservation. At this moment in the novel, Lulu inhabits a liminal space between two cultures. Half way between home and the government school, Lulu is discovered. Because of her hiding spot, perched on top of a pipe that gathers heat during the trip, she bears a “central scorch mark—a thin stripe of gold [...] a line evenly dividing her” (*Last Report* 249). Despite her division, Lulu always remains connected to her heritage, which is evident when she combats the assimilatory process of the government school by finding strength through speaking with “a spirit” (247). It is also Lulu’s bloodline that maintains a link to Native shamanic religion, since her son, Gerry Nanapush, who is the “only full-blood of the third generation” (Jacobs 92), and her grandson, Lipsha Morrissey, are gifted with certain traditional powers. By being removed from her land, Lulu and her family become marginalized by their own people. Forced to live in “a crackerbox government house” (*Love Medicine* 227), the Lamartines fall victim to the capitalist greed of their own people. Lulu’s division, which initially is a result of colonialism, is perpetuated to a further degree by her community, highlighting how her personal struggles come as a result of the fragmentation of the reservation, since Native traditions are replaced with colonial and capitalist systems.

The division of the community results in “communal and individual struggles, and searches for emplacement in a changing world” (Stirrup 68). The dissolution of Native traditions is suggested in Uncle Eli, one of the last “real old-time Indians” (*Love Medicine* 28). Eli’s connection to traditional tribal life is explored in *Tracks*. In *Love Medicine*, he is an old man who, like Lulu, holds one of the remaining links to the past. Lynette, a white woman married to one of June’s sons, drunkenly confronts the disintegration of the past when she says: “Tell ’em Uncle Eli [...] They’ve got to learn their own heritage!

When you go it will all be gone!” (30). Although Lynette cannot be considered an authority on the cultural problems within the reservation, what she says contains a partial truth. The link with the past is weakening, and as such, it is at risk of becoming severed. With the destruction of traditions, the newer generations on the reservation become increasingly “culturally and socially displaced” (Rainwater 405). The search for emplacement becomes a process of reconciling two conflicting cultures. In a society where traditions are forgotten in favour of colonial and capitalist systems, those who strive to keep a tentative hold on their traditional lifestyles exist in a state of liminality. Lipsha Morrissey, who is caught between traditional Native beliefs and the pervasive Westernization of the reservation, represents the struggles faced by those “from dual cultural backgrounds” (Rainwater 405) to achieve a stable identity. Lipsha, who is born “with the shaman’s healing touch” (405) has a depth of knowledge in both the Catholic and shamanic Native religions. Because he straddles two cultures and two religions, Lipsha is often “paralyzed between contradictory systems of belief” (405). Albertine, who is close with Lipsha, notices how he is caught between two states of being when she describes him as “being both ways” (*Love Medicine* 36). In this regard, despite Lipsha’s desire “to return to his ancestral belief[s]” he is unable to because “his knowledge is so fragmented that such a return is impossible” (McKinney 157). Both Catherine Rainwater and Karen McKinney explain that Lipsha is able to gain some benefit from his knowledge of both religions, but his knowledge often “freezes him to inaction” because he is ultimately unable “to combine the two religious systems” (McKinney 157).²² Because he

²² In her essay “Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich” Catherine Rainwater states that “[Lipsha’s] knowledge of both religions is sometimes an advantage, but at other times he is merely paralyzed” (Rainwater 405).

is divided between two cultures, Lipsha is ultimately unable to claim one belief system over another.

Lipsha's inability to effectively incorporate Catholicism with his shamanic powers is evident when Marie asks him to make her a love medicine. The problems that arise when he attempts to amalgamate both religions into a powerful medicine that is meant to rekindle the love between Marie and Nector comes as a result of his initial lack of faith in both Catholicism and traditional Native spirituality. Lipsha "believes that he has seen through the falseness of the Catholicism the whites have thrust on his people" (McKinney 157). He explains his belief in the falseness of this religion when he states that the Catholic God has "been going deaf" (*Love Medicine* 194) to the plights of his people. His criticism of Catholicism is heavily linked to his dislike of the government, since he equates both to "Higher Power[s]" who "[make] promises [...] they can't back up" (203). Lipsha's dislike for Catholicism is a result of the ongoing process of colonization that is still marginalizing the Native population. He recognizes that his anger towards the religion of the colonizers develops out of his remembrances of what the whites have done to his people and what they are "doing still" (195). Despite his dislike for Catholicism, Lipsha is still influenced by his Catholic upbringing. Because he also maintains a deep connection to his heritage, Lipsha inhabits a liminal position between two cultures. As a result of the division created because of his ties to two separate belief systems, Lipsha also questions the relevance of traditional Native spirituality. For example, when he is in the process of making the love medicine, he tells himself that "the old superstitions was just that—strange beliefs" (203). Lipsha admits his belief in the existence of the old Gods, but understands that because of colonization, his people have lost their connections to the past:

Our Gods aren't perfect, is what I'm saying, but at least they come around. They'll do a favour if you ask them right. You don't have to yell. But you do have to know, like I said, how to ask in the right way. That makes problems, because to ask proper was an art that was lost to the Chippewas once the Catholics gained ground. (195)

Lipsha explains how the Native people have lost contact with their traditions and thus their ability to effectively communicate with their Gods. Lipsha's feelings of dislocation result from living in a culture that is alienated from both religions. Lipsha states that without the Gods "we got nothing but ourselves"; however, he immediately states, "[a]nd that's not much" (195). In this instance, Lipsha reveals how the deafness of the Catholic God and the failure of the white government to effectively aid the Native population have resulted in a seemingly irreparable loss of culture. The loss of their own belief systems has fragmented them to the point where they are unable to help themselves.

When Lipsha is asked by Marie to make the love medicine, he realizes that he is being asked to engage in a process that is "an old Chippewa specialty" (199). Because he lacks the knowledge required to fully understand the spirituality he is being asked to work within, Lipsha's love medicine results in a "tragic outcome" (202). After being unable to get the hearts of a pair of Canadian geese to feed to his grandparents, Lipsha takes an "evil shortcut" and buys the hearts of birds who are "dead and froze" (203). To compensate for his shortcut, Lipsha takes the hearts to be blessed by a priest, who refuses, and then to a nun, who also avoids the task. In a moment of desperation, Lipsha dips his fingers in holy water and "[blesses] the hearts, quick, with [his] own hand" (205). The process that Lipsha engages in to make the love medicine portrays his attempt to use elements from two systems that he cannot effectively function within. Although he puts

his “whole mentality to it,” Lipsha’s lack of knowledge about true Chippewa love medicine causes him to speculate on “things [he’d] heard gossiped over” (199). He increasingly questions the potency of the love medicine, wondering if “it’s all invisible” (200) or if it is truly magic. To compensate for his lack of knowledge about traditional shamanic practices, Lipsha turns to Catholicism, a religion “in which he has no real faith” (McKinney 157). As a result, Lipsha is unable to properly create the love medicine because he lacks accurate knowledge of Chippewa traditions and questions his faith in Catholic practices.

The issues of division and loss of culture are reflected in individuals and the ways in which they struggle with their own dissolution. The fragmentation that results from being trapped between two cultures is suggested in the novel through the repeated images of stones being eroded by waves. For example, Marie contemplates the disintegration of the stones at the bottom of the lake as the waves “[grind] them smaller and smaller until they finally disappear” (*Love Medicine* 73). She describes her relationship with Nector in similar images: “I rolled with his current like a stone in the lake. He fell on me like a wave. But like a wave he washed away, leaving no sign he’d been there. I was smooth as before” (72). The manner in which Marie compares herself to the stones that are gradually reduced into nothing suggests her feelings of personal disintegration in her marriage. Nector exhibits a similar sense of disintegration when he describes how time has rushed past him “like water around a big wet rock” (94). The focus on personal disintegration within the community is further emphasized in the repeated metaphors of “[c]racking, splitting [and] falling apart” (Stirrup 66). Stirrup explains that the symbolism of destruction is “figured in June’s death” (66). The initial description of June’s body like a fragile shell that is at constant risk of splitting apart is mirrored in several other

characters. Eli's face is described "like something valuable that was broken" (*Love Medicine* 25), and Gordie, June's ex-husband, in a moment of mental disintegration feels as though he is "cracking, giving way" (181). The permanent damage caused by fragmentation is highlighted in the image of the pies that are destroyed by King and Lynette in a drunken rage. Albertine attempts to reassemble them, but quickly comes to the realization that "once they smash there is no way to put them right" (39). The cultural and personal disintegration that resounds in the community highlights how the damage of colonization can never be undone. In response to the irrevocable harm caused by Western intervention, *Love Medicine* does support certain strategies for healing, something which I explore further on in my thesis.

4.3—INTERTWINING GENEALOGIES AND CONNECTIVITY

The divisions that arise in the community as a result of the internalization and perpetuation of colonial hierarchies highlight how people are distanced from their heritage as well as from each other. When confronting the tribal council, Lulu addresses the division when she reveals how colonialism has turned "Indian against Indian" (223). The fragmentation results in feuds, like the violent and deadly rift between the Morriseys and the Nanapush clan in *Tracks*, and betrayals that perpetuate colonial injustice. The disintegration of traditional communal life occurs as a result of the increasing capitalist mindset, as the desire for personal gain replaces how the community once "[lived] close together, as one people" (*Tracks* 180). However, despite the ongoing animosity that pits the people of the reservation against each other, there is a uniting force that links each character through genealogies and history. As in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and *Tracks*, there is a spiritual essence in *Love Medicine* that continuously links

the people on the reservation. Erdrich elevates a humanness that transcends binaries and oppositions, suggesting that despite political affiliations and religious beliefs, the genealogies and the stories of the people are an overriding uniting factor.

Rita Ferrari explains that Erdrich's novels explore a greater sense of connectivity through the "dissolution of boundaries" (Ferrari 146). Erdrich's characters portray Native Americans as being "confined within and defined by the borders of a reservation and the boundaries of ethnic definition" (145). However, Erdrich simultaneously uses her characters to reveal how these borders are detrimental. Forced to contend with hierarchal binaries imposed on their culture because of colonization, the members of the community reveal how boundaries are ultimately limiting, since many characters challenge restrictive definitions in favour of achieving a more dynamic sense of identity. Erdrich creates "border dissolution" through the "breakdown of binary oppositions" (Ferrari 148), which is evident in such characters as Agnes DeWitt, who, in *Last Report*, reveals the ways in which boundaries between genders are nonexistent. Erdrich portrays characters who combine opposing forces in order to achieve positive alternatives to restrictive understandings of identity. The desire to integrate seemingly oppositional categories to create a dynamic whole becomes increasingly difficult. In *Last Report*, the freedom Agnes finds amongst the Anishnabeg that allows her to recognize the coexistence of the opposing forces in the world around her is threatened by the loss of a culture that accepted these dualities as a necessary part of identity. The effects of colonization on the reservation portray how traditional Native beliefs are replaced with Western conceptions of normative identity. The characters in *Love Medicine* strive "to get beyond stifling containment" (Ferrari 148), as the characters become increasingly limited by the categories that constitute proper behaviour and identity.

The freedom that exists beyond these categories is suggested through the spiritual connection shared by the members of the reservation. Linked because of their history, genealogies, and culture, the Native people share a connection with each other and with the world around them. The endless spiritual connection that exists in traditional Native beliefs is suggested in the epigraph to *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Nanapush explains that: “*In saying the word nindinawemaganidok, or my relatives, we speak of everything that has existed in time, the known and the unknown, the unseen, the obvious, all that lived before or is living now in the worlds above and below.*” The epigraph suggests the familial connection that the Native people share with the spiritual as well as natural world that surrounds them. Gish explains that Erdrich highlights the ways in which aboriginal cultures are “linked closely to the land” and gain “cultural identity reciprocal with it” (Gish 67). The connection that characters feel with the landscape suggests that the division between the physical and the transcendental is collapsed. Ferrari argues that specific moments in Erdrich’s novels exemplify “a collapse of the boundary between the tangible and intangible, the past and the present, the individual and the collective, the collective and the universe” (Ferrari 147). Ferrari suggests that this level of spiritual connection with the natural world is explained when Albertine watches the Northern Lights and feels as though she is a deeply united with the world around her. She states that “[e]verything seemed to be of one piece. The air, our faces [...] and the ghostly sky. [...] All of a piece. As if the sky were a pattern of nerves and our thought and memories traveled across it. As if the sky were one gigantic memory for us all” (*Love Medicine* 34). In this instance, Albertine feels as though she is a part of

the natural world. She engages in a transcendental experience that emphasizes her connection, as opposed to alienation, to the world and thus to everyone in it.²³

The dissolution of borders and boundaries allows for a “fluidity of identity” (Ferrari 146). Similar to the exploration of gender in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, *Love Medicine* challenges Western conceptions of normative gender identity. Sexual expression becomes linked to the disintegration of gender boundaries, as the relationships that develop between certain characters creates a greater sense of freedom. Ferrari explains that the “desire for release from a life defined by constricting borders and the desire for the freedom of connection finds expression in the novel’s many erotic moments” (Ferrari 149). Although sexual experience is deeply rooted in the body, Ferrari explains how an “erotic moment allows a self-transcendence and a breakdown of opposition” (149). To support her claim, Ferrari turns to the theory of Georges Bataille who, states that in erotic relationships there is a concern “to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity” (Bataille qtd. in Ferrari 149). Lulu’s sexuality becomes emblematic of the erotic desire for continuity, since her various relationships result in transcendent experiences for herself and her partners. For example, Nector escapes the confines of his body in his relationship with Lulu, and together they reach a greater level of connection: “I was a flood that strained bridges. Uncontainable. I rushed into Lulu, and the miracle was she could hold me. She could contain me without giving way” (*Love Medicine* 100). In Lulu’s sexual relationship with Beverly Lamartine,

²³ In Jeanne Rosier Smith’s book *Writing Tricksters*, Smith explains that Albertine “experiences a merging” with the natural world around her and her description of the event “shows how a physical connection to myth, community, and landscape provides strength” (Smith 74). Albertine’s vision that is inspired by the northern lights suggests how “[e]verything connects and interrelates in living, breathing patterns, and rhythms that Albertine inhabits both physically and mentally” (75).

Bev feels as though he “wasn’t man or woman” (87). In this instance, Bev is able to transcend gender categories and exist fully in his essence.

Bev expresses a feeling of profound connection when he explains that the “flesh was only given so that the flame could touch in a union” (87). The image of the flame that exists separate from the flesh suggests the notion of the essence. Howard, June’s grandson, a child in the first grade, recognizes his identity as a spiritual force that is separate from his physical being: “For a moment he was heavy, full of meaning [...] *Howard* was living in this body like a house” (239). Living in poverty and raised by alcoholic parents, Howard has a deep intelligence and understanding that thrives despite his surroundings. His recognition of the essence that lives inside of his body clarifies the division that exists between the external flesh and spiritual and intellectual presence that defines one’s identity. The way that the people on the reservation are defined as a result of their ethnicity and gender emphasizes how certain members of dominant society use the body to ascribe meaning. The essence, which exists separately from the physical and tangible, is what allows a sense of escape since it inhabits a realm free from social constraints. Lulu, who is often attacked for her sexual appearance and numerous lovers, expresses her desire for release from the restrictions imposed on her because of her body:

How come we’ve got these bodies? They are frail supports for what we feel. There are times I get so hemmed in by my arms and legs I look forward to getting past them. As though death will set me free like a travelling cloud [...] I’ll be out there as a piece of the endless body of the world feeling pleasures so much larger than skin and bones and blood (*Love Medicine* 226).

The notion of continuity is expressed in this statement since it is through her spiritual essence that Lulu will be able to become a part of the “endless body of the world” (226). The ability to achieve a sense of continuity through sexual relationships shows how rigid identity categories are ultimately false. The challenging of categories manifests itself throughout the novel through the ability of different characters to transcend gender binaries. For example, Lulu’s son Gerry, who possesses traditional Native shamanic powers, challenges gender expectations through his movements, which mirror those of “a beautiful courtesan” (166). In *Tracks*, powerful emotions also result in transcending gender categories, since Nanapush recalls his sorrow at the loss of his family: “I gave birth in loss. I was like a woman in my suffering” (*Tracks* 167). In this regard, the ability to challenge rigid understandings of normative gender behaviour highlights how these categories are false constructions. The ability to perform behaviours simultaneously that have been socially deemed as oppositional represents how prevailing conceptions of normative identity are limiting, and ultimately detrimental.

The destruction of the community and the dissolution of traditional Native beliefs that develop as a result of colonialism are countered by the desire for connection and continuity. By revealing gender categories as false, the people on the reservation challenge the relevance of the colonial systems that have overwhelmed their community. The family connections on the reservation also contribute to the destruction of these limiting systems, since the intersecting genealogies link various generations to their history. Lulu’s children represent a spiritual connection that is strongly tied to their family, which is suggested when they are described as being “[clearly] of one soul” bound together by the “unquestioning belongingness of part of one organism” (*Love Medicine* 85). The importance of connection through genealogy is also emphasized in

Lipsha who, at the beginning of *Love Medicine*, does not know who his biological parents are, and is adopted by Marie Kashpaw. As a result, Lipsha is plagued by a sense of displacement; he is victimized by King for not being one of the “*real children*” (249). When Lipsha finally learns that he is the son of June Morrisey and Gerry Lamartine, a “Nanapush man” (244), his connection to the community drastically changes. By learning his position within the complex interrelating genealogies of the reservation, Lipsha “realizes that he has inherited his powers from his ancestors” and begins to “[see] himself as part of a community” (McKinney 158). As a result of his changing relationship with the community, he no longer feels as if the reservation is a place where he has been “consigned simply by circumstance and imperial power” but instead he becomes “redefined by his vision of himself in relation to his culture” (Ferrari 149). After learning of his parentage, Lipsha comes to the realization that he now “belong[s]” (*Love Medicine* 255). Because he understands that the “blood tells” (255), Lipsha feels the need to “get down to the bottom of [his] heritage” (248). He waits in King’s apartment to meet his father in order to see “what kind of seed [he] had sprung from” (256). When he finally encounters Gerry, Lipsha is fundamentally changed: “So many things in the world have happened before. But it’s like they never did. Every new thing that happens to a person, it’s a first. To be the son of a father was like that. In that night I felt expansion, as if the world was branching out in shoots and growing faster than the eye could see” (271). Gerry’s powerful influence on Lipsha can also be seen as a political one. Respected in the aboriginal community as a “famous politicking hero,” Gerry is a radical yet “charismatic member of the American Indian movement” (248). By finally meeting his father, Lipsha achieves a greater connection not only to his genealogy, but also to the cause of his people. The significance of the togetherness that Lipsha feels with his family and

community is emphasized when he perceives that the world is suddenly expanding around him. Lipsha begins to see himself as a member of a respected family that remains tied to traditional Native beliefs, and as a result he is able to understand the significance of his healing powers that have been passed down through the generations. For example, Lipsha, like Gerry, is a “Nanapush man” (244). They share a significant and powerful bloodline since they are the descendants of Old Man Pillager, a full-blood known for his shamanic powers and solitary life lived according to tribal traditions. The powers passed down from Old Man Pillager and shared by Gerry and Lipsha allow the two men to escape certain confines, since “[t]here ain’t a prison that can hold the son of Old Man Pillager” (244). As a result of these hereditary powers, Gerry is able to repeatedly escape from prison and Lipsha is able to avoid entering the army.

Now recognizing that he is Lulu Lamartine’s grandson, Lipsha believes that the powers he has lost, as a result of his bad love medicine, will return. The relationship he will have with his grandmother suggests a continuing of Native heritage, since Lulu becomes known for “her knowledge as an old-time traditional” (268). Even Marie, who initially dedicated herself to colonial mimicry in order to repudiate her culture, returns to her connection with Native spirituality. For example, when Marie returns to the convent years later she no longer sees the blinding whiteness of the building as a powerful and attractive force. Instead, she perceives the whitewash that coats the building is “cheap” (115) and that dust hangs a dirty gray “around the convent walls” (114). Marie is no longer blinded by the whiteness of the convent, and does not feel the same awe for the Catholic God that once struck her when she was fourteen years old. Marie eventually realizes that the power achieved through colonial mimicry comes at a dire cost. Marie enters into a process of returning to her culture: Lipsha notes that despite her previous

repudiation of her culture, there is “no doubt in [his] mind” that “she’s got some Chippewa” (198). Marie also exhibits her belief in the power of Native shamanic religion when she asks Lipsha to make her a love medicine.

Marie’s return to her heritage highlights the ways in which the feelings of division and dislocation that affect the community as a result of colonization do not entirely separate the community from their traditions. Even before Marie renews her belief in Native shamanic powers, she remains linked to her heritage. Despite the colonial mimicry that Marie enacts throughout her youth and the better part of her married life, she aids in the continuation of Native traditions through the numerous children she raises, either her own or adopted from other reservation families. Lulu is also an important mother figure who raises a large family. Gallego explains that motherhood is important in Native communities because it “is central to the creation and maintenance of the Native American community” (Gallego 149). Mothering “implies continuity” and challenges colonialism since “having children [...] repopulates the reservation, re-membering the community and disavowing past policies of extermination of the entire Native American population” (149). The mother also “represents the direct link to one’s tribe and therefore to one’s tribal identity and heritage” (150). The importance of recognizing one’s position within a specific genealogy in order to feel connected with one’s tribal identity is evident in Lipsha, who remains linked to the community through his position as an adopted son in the Kashpaw family, but only truly feels connected to the reservation once he learns who his biological parents are. Marie and Lulu share Lipsha between their two families, and it is their position as mothers that contributes to the genealogies that aid in the continuation of the reservation and allow for a continued link to Native traditions.

Despite the similarities between Marie and Lulu, who live as strong matriarchs to large families, they remain antagonistic towards each other throughout the majority of the novel. Because of their shared affection for Nector, a seeming rivalry develops between the two women. Gallego explains that the initial contention that exists between Marie and Lulu can be “understood as a result of the internalization of certain damaging patterns springing from a Western legacy that eroded the original organization of tribes in matriarchal units” (Gallego 152). After Nector’s death, Marie and Lulu develop a nurturing friendship that is comprised of maternal tenderness. For example, Marie volunteers to help Lulu after an eye operation, and together they give each other “deep comfort” (*Love Medicine* 236). When Lulu’s bandages are removed and Marie administers eye drops, the first image that Lulu sees is of Marie “sway[ing] down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just born child” (236). Gallego suggests that Lulu’s vision of Marie is “directing the reader’s attention to the possibility of new beginnings, metaphorically encoded in the crucial figure of the mother with a child” (Gallego 153). The close relationship between the two women fosters a reconnection with Native traditions and they “are honored, especially later in life, for their powers and their important contributions to the community” (151). The important positions that Lulu and Marie eventually adopt in the community suggest a “possible return to a traditional sense of matriarchy which has to break away with centuries of Western domination” (152). Although a return to a pre-colonial life is ultimately impossible, the reinstatement of certain traditions allows for a process of rupturing ties to Westernization. The women’s matriarchal positions are also balanced by a return to shamanic beliefs, something which is evident in Lipsha’s observations about the two women. Lipsha describes how Marie and Lulu, who are now “thick as thieves”

(*Love Medicine* 241), “scare[] people” with their mysterious intuitive abilities and their possession of “some kind of power (241):

Insight. It was as though Lulu knew by looking at you what was the true bare-bone elements of your life. [...] She saw too clear for comfort.

Only Grandma Kashpaw wasn't one trifle out of current at the insight Lulu showed. [...] If you'll just picture them together knowing everybody's life, as if they had hotlines to everybody's private thoughts, you'll know why people started rushing past their doors. They feared one of them would reach out, grab them into their room, and tell them all the secrets they tried to hide from themselves (241).

Both Lulu and Marie contribute to the continued existence of shamanic powers in the community. Their positions as mothers are also integral to the continuation of Native culture, since the maintaining of a connection to history and traditional magic is possible through family lineage. Gerry and Lipsha's shamanic powers suggest the existence of traditional beliefs in newer generations.

The significance of the continued use of and belief in Native spirituality emphasizes that although ties with history have been largely lost, the importance of genealogies and family history help maintain a persistent link to traditional ways of life. June, who is emblematic of the destructive potential of a broken and divided community, is also central in uniting families on the reservation: “by the time of her death in 1981, all of the major reservation families are related. The lines have blurred between the Metis and the full-bloods” (Jacobs 92). This blurring reveals the deep connections that link the people on the reservation together. The existing fragmentation of the community also becomes an essential part of the whole, since the different narrators who “frequently

recount the same story from differing perspectives” (Ferrari 146) become essential to giving an accurate depiction of life on the reservation. Just as Nanapush’s and Pauline’s oppositional narratives were necessary in *Tracks* to present a more accurate description of Native experience during the advent of the Dawes Allotment Act, the various narrators in *Love Medicine* all contribute to the entirety of the story. The different perspectives of characters who inhabit varying positions within the community help to create a dynamic and accurate depiction of the events that unfold on the reservation while also preventing the creation of a “totalizing viewpoint” (Ferrari 146). The encompassing narratives that explore various perspectives do not result in an “either/or of the ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’”; instead, *Love Medicine* is a novel that examines “the process of engagement whereby individuals, both with and despite their communities, respond to changing circumstances” (Stirrup 72). Erdrich’s novel thus highlights how the people on the reservation are forced to contend with the damaging effects of colonization, as they strive to maintain a link to their past while reconciling their traditional lifestyles with Westernization.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In Erdrich's connected series of novels, the gradual dissolution of their culture forces members of aboriginal communities to reshape their own traditions in the face of colonization. Erdrich presents the way in which "[t]he loss of tradition and culture fosters new adaptations to the basic human need to belong" (Jacobs 105). As Gallego explains, *Love Medicine* suggests that "[t]he quest for a satisfying sense of personal identity runs parallel to a rediscovery of the collective sense of community" (Gallego 145). The fragmentation of the reservation comes as a result of the individual struggle to reconcile marginalized ethnicity within a colonial environment. Erdrich's novels explore the difficulties faced by "mixed-blood or diasporic characters" who try to "come to terms with their multicultural heritage and their multiethnic allegiances" (145). For these characters, their sense of identity exists in a liminal "in-between space," which helps to "destabilize the powerful influence of Western dominant discourse and its trend toward categorization and homogenization" (146). However, the process of dismantling colonial modes of thought is an arduous process that is made increasingly difficult because of the internalization of Western systems.

The individual and communal struggle towards creating "new adaptations" (Jacobs 105) happens amidst a fragmented community divided by opposing political affiliations, religious beliefs, and shifting allegiances. Out of the fragmentation comes conflicting perspectives. The numerous and often opposing narrators who pervade Erdrich's novels are essential to developing an accurate portrayal of Aboriginal life. The mixed perspectives of those who inhabit marginal positions on the reservation reveal the different political and religious beliefs that add to the internal strife of the community. Father Damien's gradual renouncing of Catholicism in favour of Native spirituality is

dramatically countered by Pauline Puyat's desperation to be recognized as a Saintly authority in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. The animosity that the priest and the nun share for one another develops from opposing opinions, which reflect the tension between those who strive to undo the damage committed against traditional lifestyles and those who side with the supposed progress of colonization. Pauline's vehement desire to see her heritage replaced with Western systems is also explored in *Tracks*. Nanapush and Fleur Pillager stand in contrast to Pauline, since they are two characters who actively combat the eradication and dissolution of their heritage by living tribal lifestyles and practicing traditional shamanic powers. The variety of narrators in *Love Medicine* reveals the struggles faced by Native people as a result of the lingering devastation of colonization, and the political divisions that continue to shatter the community. What each character adds to the novel is essential in creating "an 'indigenous' account" that "reflect[s] a tribal vision of the world" (Peterson 185). *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, *Tracks*, and *Love Medicine* outline a historical progression that reveals the experiences of the families living on the same reservation, and each novel "contribute[s] a piece to a picture of Chippewa life during the last century" (Jacobs 105). By creating a series "of interlocking novels," Erdrich is able "to accumulate layers of complexity by presenting conflicting versions of events" which "span a wider view of contemporary Indian life" (105). In this regard, the political and religious battles that unfold between characters, and their conflicting, yet often intersecting, versions of events help to depict a dynamic and untotalizing depiction of Native life on the reservation.

The rift between the desire to conform to colonial dictates and the effort to maintain ties to Native traditions reveals a liminal space that exists in the community as

well as in the individual. Gallego explains that liminality is “defined by its marginal position with respect to the social system of values” (Gallego 147) and that a person who exists in a state of liminality, or transition, ““wavers between two worlds”” (Van Gennep, qtd. in Gallego, 147). The characters in Erdrich’s novels inhabit positions of liminality since they are trapped between “two universes” comprised of “Chippewa and Western legacies,” and as a result they are forced to “constantly negotiate between those two divergent worlds and allegiances” (147). Characters like Fleur Pillager and Nanapush in *Tracks* inhabit liminal positions because of their marginality within the reservation. Isolated from the greater community because of their adherence to tribal traditions, Fleur and Nanapush are inevitably subjected to colonial forces. Because of the destruction of their way of life, both characters are forced to balance their heritage with colonization. In *Love Medicine*, Lipsha’s precarious shift between two worlds exists in his attempts to reconcile his shamanic powers with a Westernized community. He lacks a stable family identity for the greater part of the novel, which causes him to feel further disjointed from his heritage. Agnes DeWitt, in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, not only negotiates between two cultures, but also between two genders. As a result of her acceptance within the reservation, Agnes is able to achieve a more unified sense of self, as she is able to incorporate the supposedly oppositional parts of her identity into the figure of Father Damien.

The individual struggle to balance seemingly opposing characteristics into a harmonious whole is reflected in the community’s attempt to encompass a variety of different identities. The importance of the community is emphasized for Lipsha, because he achieves a greater sense of belonging once he realizes his place within a family that is respected for its return to tradition. Finally recognized as a “Nanapush man” (*Love*

Medicine 244), Lipsha finds his place in the reservation. Agnes' construction and performance as Father Damien allows her to spend her life challenging notions of gender stability. Amongst the Anishinaabeg, Agnes is able to recognize the coexistence of opposing forces that comprise her identity and the world around her. Because of her existence outside of gendered norms, Agnes is forced to integrate the various parts of her psyche into a dynamic whole in order to achieve a positive alternative to restrictive understandings of identity. Nanapush and Fleur's recognition and acceptance of Agnes' transgressive sexuality highlights the ways in which many of the characters in Erdrich's novels reject limiting categories in favour of the coexistence of binary forces. The people on the reservation undergo other, similar, transformations of identity in an attempt to reconcile their beliefs with the hierarchies of binarisms imposed on their culture because of colonization. Gallego addresses the ways in which Erdrich "depict[s] characters who figuratively and successfully waver between two worlds and, hence, consistently break away with constraining racial and sexual binary opposition and rigid categories promoting a more fluid constitution of the [...] self" (Gallego 148). The process by which certain characters challenge dominant notions of gender and other forms of identity in order to create a more dynamic understanding of the self helps to create a community where cultural and personal differences exist in a state of harmony.

In her North Dakota series, Erdrich explores the "decidedly Native American way of focusing on the blending of all elements that make up the whole" (Jacobs 108). Similar to the various perspectives that help comprise an accurate depiction of reservation life, the families that inhabit Little No Horse are also integral to revealing the dynamics of the greater community. Ongoing family feuds between groups like the Morriseys and the Kashpaws tell the history of the reservation, as each family story reveals significant

events that affect the community. Each story is a “narrative thread from different tribal families, intermingling and writing the story of the tribe” (108). Nanapush’s narrative in *Tracks* is a family history that he recites to his granddaughter Lulu. By explaining the events that altered the reservation and traditional tribal life, Nanapush strives to use his story to unite Fleur with her estranged daughter. By telling Lulu her history, Nanapush also relates her connection to her family and her tribe, and although Lulu refuses to see her mother, she is irrevocably tied to the reservation.

What Nanapush stresses to his granddaughter reflects a greater message that is present in Erdrich’s novels, and that is that “a strong sense of self must be based not on isolation but on personal connections to community” (Smith 74). The significance of the continued use of and belief in Native spirituality emphasizes that although ties with their history have been largely lost, the importance of genealogies and family history help maintain a persistent link to traditional ways of life. The link is exemplified in *Love Medicine*, when the warring factions that divided the reservation are slowly dismantled because of the eventual intertwining of the generations of families. Lulu’s marriage to a Morrissey connects two enemy families, causing a uniting force, since it is the interweaving of lineages that strengthens the connection between individuals and their community.

The blending of families mirrors the individual desire to incorporate supposedly dichotomous elements into a creative and dynamic whole. Smith explains that paradox “is a part of Native American [...] conceptions of identity (Smith 73) and Erdrich’s characters exemplify this paradox, which allows for a more fluid understanding of the self. Erdrich creates “transformative spaces” (McNab 85) that reflect Aboriginal understandings of identity. Her novels suggests that to return to traditional understandings

of identity, it is necessary to utilize methods like mimicry subversively in order to challenge colonial hierarchies that create categories that are then polarized and marginalized. By portraying the ways in which “Catholic and Anishinabe religious systems can be made compatible” (Chapman 150), characters like Nanapush, Agnes DeWitt, and Lipsha Morrissey destroy hierarchical modes of thought. In her novels, Erdrich encourages a journey towards reappropriating and transforming previously damaging concepts into dynamic interpretations. What her characters ultimately reveal is the possibility of healing shattered communities through the “syncretism” (150) that exists between Native culture and Western beliefs.

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