

ANALYSIS

Tracks (1988)

Louise Erdrich

(1954-)

“I would rather that Native American writing be seen as American writing, that all of the best writing of any ethnic group here would be included in American writing. These are university-inspired divisions so that people can have courses and concentrate on certain areas.”

Louise Erdrich
Interview (1988)

“A crucial measure of the power of *Tracks* lies in its reconfiguration of mainstream literary representations of the dilemma of the last survivor, symbolic of his or her race and occupation, who acquires heroic qualities in the moment of dispossession. For purposes of comparison, I have chosen three well-known novels of different eras, regions, and fictional traditions: Howard Frank Mosher’s *Where the Rivers Flow North* (1978), William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* (1942), and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (1823). Considered collectively, these four texts suggest that the power of fictional scenes of dispossession has even more to do with a long-standing transracial cultural condition—apprehensive regret at the loss of everything that the wilderness represents—than with the very real wrong done by the dispossession of particular Native American peoples. My essay is thus intended as a challenge, though not an affront, to those who, like me, teach courses based on the ‘university-inspired division of literature into so hypothetical and separatist an entity as ‘Native American literature.’

First, two paradigms. As long as dispossession was seen in predominantly racial terms as the relentless combined force of white land speculators, cavalry, railroaders, and homesteaders taking over the red man’s tribal lands, the controlling image of dispossession remained the plight of the aged male chief whose isolated dignity evoked the loss of ancestral lands, tribal customs, and a natural life attuned to circular rhythms of earth and sun. The tone of elegiac despair could range from rueful acceptance of the white man’s superior technology to rage over genocide, but the keynote of this solitary patriarchal voice—as recorded by whites—was the inevitability of Indian demise....This prevalent image of dying native cultures has provoked guilt over past wrongs while relieving the white man of any responsibility for future restoration. It is not surprising that the apogee of pictorial representations of this image occurred in the turn-of-the-century photographs by Edward Curtis and the paintings by Frederic Remington, images that were created shortly after the close of the Indian Wars and after Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the closing of the American frontier. Its literary prototype can be traced back at least to the famous closing words of the aged Tamemund in Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826): ‘The pale faces are masters of the earth and the time of the red men has not yet come again’....

This long-standing convention of quasi-epic melancholy was to acquire new life during the Native American Renaissance of the late 1960s and 1970s through the immense popularity of two books: the republication of John Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (1932,1961) and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1971). Indian women do not even seem to exist in Dee Brown’s panorama of the wronged nobility of the West’s last, doomed Indian warriors. Similarly, Neihardt renders Black Elk, whose vision quest had once allowed him to see the sacred hoop, as a reluctant warrior who lost his blood people at Wounded Knee, but not the spiritual values he shared with them. Black Elk’s last words, lamenting that ‘a people’s dream died there,’ declare an absolute closure for a ‘nation’ that is seen as exclusively Sioux....

The second paradigm uncovers a common pattern in the shaping of the narrative climax of all four novels. As white economic forces of commercial development take over tribal lands, a courageous Indian, who is sometimes a survivor, sometimes a holdout, and usually a full-blood, demonstrates contempt for his or her bodily displacement at the hands of ‘progress.’ All four of the fictions symbolize the primacy and priority of tribal ways of life through the survivor’s commitment to preserve a particular sacred place,

sacred because it has remained undefaced by white civilization and has long been cherished by its first inhabitants. All these sacred places combine three life elements into one visualization of an ecologically balanced way of living: a stand of first-growth trees, a body of water, and a cabin or hut that remains, ironically, as the sign of a right of prior land possession, whether that right be individual, familial, or tribal. Leatherstocking's hut by the shores of Lake Otsego, the hunting camp in [Faulkner's *The Bear*]...and Fleur Pillager's cabin near Lake Matchimanito must all, at the end of their respective novels, yield to the combined powers of written statute law and moneyed commercial development (farmers in *The Pioneers*, an electric power company in Mosher's novella, a lumber company in the novels of Faulkner and Erdrich). Indeed, the cutting down of a patch of first-growth forest, in all four fictions, is the culminating sign of natural decline, cultural change, and the need for departure.

The counterweapons employed by the resisting survivor are limited to physical defiance (usually by the rifle), to trickery, to calling on the aid of natural forces, and to the spoken word. Although physical resistance and trickery prove effective only momentarily, the power of the words spoken by the dispossessed, especially in the novels of Cooper and Erdrich, remains in the reader's mind long after the survivor has become half resigned to leave the sacred place and to abandon or destroy the symbolic dwelling built upon it. What sets the paradigm of the four novels clearly apart from the doomed melancholy of the dispossessed patriarch chief is the interracial, and sometimes bi-gendered, doubling of the last survivor. *The Pioneers* [1823], prototype for all historical fiction about the American West, is the novel in which Cooper first establishes the bond between his two heroes, Leatherstocking and Indian John, the first a white frontiersman who dresses, looks, and often acts as an Indian and the second a dispossessed sachem...

Why this need, among the three 'mainstream' white novelists, to link Euro-Americans and Native Americans within the already surrounded spaces of the last survivor?... Whether legally or not, white frontiersmen and seeming squatters like Natty Bumppo were in fact driven off the very lands that their scouting skills had opened for settlement. In the North and South, lumber companies have for decades clear-cut seemingly inexhaustible forests that once provided initiations into manhood through the rituals of the hunt. Rivers long used for logging have repeatedly been dammed to serve the interests, corporate and consumer, of 'cheap' electric power. In sum, many a white man, who was both competent in and respectful of the wilderness, has been callously dispossessed along with the Indian....

Erdrich's way of doubling the last survivor alters this traditional, almost stereotypical, pattern of the last survivor in multiple ways. To begin with, her last survivor is a young woman rather than an old man. Although Fleur Pillager has all the courage, wilderness skills, and defiant determination that characterized her patriarchal literary predecessors, she is also a fully sexual being possessed of all the powers needed to call up tornadoes, to best men at the poker table, and to unite her body with a lake monster. Neither a flower nor a pillager, Fleur has remarkable abilities that are focused on preservation of sacred places and traditional ways, not simply for their own sakes, but because they might be handed down, together with her personal powers, to her daughter Lulu. By contrast, Leatherstocking, Indian John, Sam Fathers, Ike McCaslin...had all remained insistently childless. Their dying without issue is mentioned so often that it seems to define their entire future.... Perhaps because Erdrich is no longer primarily interested in the Lockean change from 'the state of nature' to 'the state of civilization' (Locke), she has no interest in eliciting melancholy from the racial doubling of the barren traditionalist. In fact, Erdrich's novels develop in the opposite direction. As readers of *Love Medicine* well know, the life force that Fleur passes on to Lulu will in later years virtually mother the reservation as Lulu gives birth to nine children by many different men.

Although Fleur allows Eli Kashpaw to spend lover's time with her, she inhabits her cabin alone. Fleur's stature as lone survivor is, however, complicated by the presence of two persistent visitors who alternate and divide the novel's narrative. The fascination that Nanapush and Pauline Puyat have for Fleur's character and way of life, their attempts to support or thwart her, associate them forever with her, making them not only narrators but alternative models for ways of surviving the impending loss of Ojibwe lands. Nanapush is also a comically subversive variant of the aging childless patriarch familiar to readers of Cooper and Faulkner. Contemptuous of the Turcot Land Company, committed to the old ways, Nanapush nonetheless will make the accommodations necessary to best serve his people. His claim to father Lulu is

neither sentimentality nor wish fulfillment; it is a seriocomic way of linking Ojibwe bloodlines and providing for the future. His constant sexual banter (and activity?) with Margaret Rushes Bear, his teasing of Pauline for her sexual repression, and his delight in outwitting the paper bureaucracy of the BIA demonstrate what Erdrich calls 'survival humor'—a kind of humor, often about not surviving, that enables one to survive and that therefore could have no place in characterizations of the aged Indian patriarch from Cooper to Neihardt.

Pauline Puyat, a mixed-blood Ojibwe, wishes to see herself as victimized survivor turned virtuous reformer. Because she presumes that the Ojibwe are a vanishing race and an inferior culture, she obsessively longs to supplant Fleur Pillager and all she represents. Her jealousy of Fleur's sexuality assumes the most perverted forms: fantasizing that Fleur is sexually insatiable, dwelling on Fleur's 'rape' in the Argot butcher shop, imagining that she (Pauline) is seduced by the Devil, putting love potions in Fleur's lover's lunchbox, and, finally, stripping herself naked in order to combat Fleur's lake monster, with the ironic result that she apparently rapes and then kills her own former lover who is attempting to rescue her. Pauline's notions of worthy conduct during her people's crisis include leaving her family during the outbreak of tuberculosis, trying to kill her newborn child, and mumbling condemnatory Latin prayers over the Pillagers to show her purity before God. As narrator and would-be savior for her people, Pauline is Nanapush's exact opposite; readers of *Tracks* have repeatedly been struck by the fact that its two narrators agree on little or nothing.

The ways in which the characterization of Pauline transforms the literary tradition of racial doubling reveal Erdrich's subversive, comic purpose. Pauline fantasizes that her greatest moment of self-vindication occurred when God told her she was white, entitled to become Sister Leopolda, bride of Christ. Instead of the doubled white survivor sharing vicariously in Indian values, Erdrich's 'white' survivor thus prides herself on trying to disavow and eliminate Indian traditions entirely. To Erdrich, the hidden face of the last survivor is violent conversion to the white Christian missionary tradition. The sado-masochistic fantasies that prompt Pauline's mad violence could have caused deadly ruin, were they not controllable through the comic power that Nanapush's narrative voice finally exerts over them. One cannot imagine so grotesque a character as Pauline Puyat being introduced among the Indian survivors of the 'mainstream' literary tradition. Because Sister Leopolda is in fact a mixed-blood Ojibwe, her characterization tempts the reader of *Tracks* to conclude that, whenever Pauline is speaking, a temporary plague seems to have descended, in perversely comic ways, on both racial houses.

In all four fictions, the doubling of the last Indian survivor is accompanied by a divided response to the disappearing frontier. As a symbol of wilderness, the first-growth forest, with its static associations of age, dignity, splendor, and the impress of the Deity, is contrasted with the last survivor's hunting of a particularly feral, violent, almost protean beast.... Because the lake monster Misshepesu, an Ojibwe spirit force dwelling in Lake Matchimanito, derives from tribal legend rather than authorial invention, its identity as a beast must remain unverifiable. Misshepesu may be a real natural power, a fantasy for arousing sexuality and violence, or a legend invoked to scare away possible intruders and unify the Ojibwe survivors—or perhaps all three, depending on the uses of the occasion. We can be sure only that the feral, uncontrollable, violent qualities ascribed to Misshepesu correspond to, perhaps strengthen, the same qualities in Fleur herself. This evasive association, however, confirms the troubling insight all four fictions offer into the juxtaposition of first-growth forest with murderous beast. Nature's sacred grandeur may be symbolized by a stand of first-growth forest, but within that forest is a beast that represents the primordial ferocity of nature from which human beings have become at least partially—and perhaps thankfully—separated. Despite the remarkable similarities of situation at novel's end, the survivors' attitudes toward their dispossession range tellingly along a spectrum from resignation to defiance....

Instead of the memorable death of an aged chief, Mosher and Erdrich conclude their plots with scenes of dispossessed Indian women enacting ritualistic departures.... Fleur Pillager, by contrast, does everything she can to meet the yearly fees due on the Pillager land allotment, only to be foiled by trusting her fellow Ojibwe, Nector Kashpaw, to make the payment at the land agent's office. When the Turcot Company, 'leveler of the whole forest,' moves in to surround 'the square mile of towering oaks, a circle around Fleur's cabin,' Fleur at first summons the kind of strength needed to commit suicide in the lake rather than yield up the Pillager land and trees. Rescued by Eli and Nanapush, she then summons a quite different kind

of strength. After secretly axing the oaks nearly through the trunk, she awaits the tornado that will level the trees and crush the lumber company's machines and men, including paid Ojibwe day laborers, beneath the weight of the tree fall. Fleur anticipates her triumph in a gesture that combines animal revenge with trickster calculation.

As the tornado gathers strength, the Turcot Company's laborers 'bit their lips, glancing over their shoulders at Fleur, who bared her teeth in a wide smile that frightened even those who did not understand the smiles of Pillagers.' The climactic felling of the Pillager oaks thus associates the power of a full-blooded Indian woman's will with a sweeping natural force capable of subduing, if only momentarily, the forces of corporate legality and male strength. But Erdrich's climactic scene also reminds us, as Cooper, Faulkner, and Mosher never do, that those 'progressive' Indians (Morrisseys and Lazarres mainly), who have eagerly bought up land allotments and labored profitably for white corporations, have contributed significantly to their people's collective dispossession....

Out of the Pillager oaks [Fleur] fashions the green cart whose wheels will make the tracks of her ongoing life. Instead of burying her old way of life, as Bangor does, Fleur literally takes her ancestors' grave markers with her, fastened to her cart as witness to her belief in generational continuity, her a faith in a future that will contain her past. Although the occasion for the telling of the novel is Nanapush's need to inform Lulu of the admirable truth about her mother's strength, it is also true that the indomitable Fleur, and not Lulu of the many children, is the only character who appears in the four novels. The closing scene of *The Bingo Palace* leaves the reader with a virtual dream vision of Fleur returning to the shores of Matchimanito as its presiding spirit, dragging Pillager bones back to repossess the lakeshore, no matter how many times the land may have been sold, rebought, gambled away. The responses of the doubled white character to final dispossession again show Erdrich's divergence from the pattern of literary tradition....

The drive to closure evident in the way these doubled white characters face dispossession has no equivalent in *Tracks*. Pauline's mad fantasy that she is the 'white' bride of Christ is her way of entirely renouncing a woods life and her Ojibwe heritage. The character in *Tracks* who, in age, endurance, skills, courage, and decency, is most closely linked to the Leatherstocking tradition is Nanapush. But instead of publicly defying dispossession as Leatherstocking and Indian John had done, Nanapush refuses to sell his allotment to the lumber company, but then uses the benefits of his Jesuit education to retain and regain whatever he can, by craft and language, for his people. A year before the lumber company closes in on Fleur's square mile of first-growth oaks, Nanapush has a dream... Nanapush's dream is prophetic of the novel's resolution in more than the obvious way. Fleur's oaks may be flattened like matchsticks, but Nanapush will remain, weakened but standing, because he knows how to bend to the ground while remaining rooted. Is it any wonder that the simile in the last sentence of the novel describes Nanapush and Margaret holding on 'like creaking oaks' against the rush of Lulu, returning from government Indian school to confront them in her smoldering orange dress?

A last measure of the ways *Tracks* reconfigures its fictional tradition is the crucial moment of Lulu's birth. Nanapush recalls, 'You were born on the day we shot the last bear, drunk, on the reservation.' True to his grammar, Nanapush reminds Lulu that it was indeed the bear, not Fleur or Nanaush himself, who was drunk. After consuming Nanapush's jug of wine, the bear 'then lost her mind and stumbled into the beaten grass of Fleur's yard.' Because there has continued to be much talk among the Ojibwe about this legendary moment, Nanapush is not quite certain that the intruder was not 'a spirit bear,' but he remains sure of one thing: "So I know that when Fleur saw the bear in the house she was filled with such fear and power that she raised herself on the mound of blankets and gave birth.' Given Erdrich's often proclaimed admiration for Faulkner's novels, it is hard not to read this moment as her playful recasting of *The Bear*, as well as a reference to the Pillagers' belonging to the Bear Clan.

The sacramental gravity with which Faulkner had rendered the hunting of the decidedly male Old Ben is here replaced by comedy of accident as the she-bear stumbles drunkenly into the moment of Lulu's birth. The 'fear and power' with which Fleur confronts the she-bear and brings Lulu into the world provide a model of counterheroism to Faulkner's ultimately barren male hunt. For Louise Erdrich, the ongoing force of sheer human vitality, embodied in such different ways in Fleur and in Nanapush, compensates for, even

overwhelms, the rage or melancholy long associated with being the last survivor. Fleur's dispossession will prove to be a beginning, not an end."

John McWilliams

"Doubling the Last Survivor: *Tracks* and American Narratives of Lost Wilderness"

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich
eds. Greg Sarris, Connie A. Jacobs, and James R. Giles
(MLA 2004) 158-68

"Perhaps the darkest of Louise Erdrich's early novels, *Tracks* opens breathtakingly, deep in the Ojibwe woods near the medicine line, the borderlands shared by Canada and the United States. This novel is stunningly lean in its central tale of starvation and decline in the early years of the twentieth century, yet strangely full of dense life-giving imagery that emanates from the animal essence of the human characters. Fleur Pillager and Pauline Puyat, for instance, are wolf and crane, respectively, and conduct their lives consistently with their embedded animal natures.... Moses Pillager, a reclusive hunter and Fleur's cousin, is wolf, buffalo, and lynx.... Pauline in *Tracks* is readily identifiable as crane and crow, two large birds who, white and black, rise to have an unusual perspective on the human community.... Pauline uses her white and black crane and crow identities to mirror her wrestling with love of God and the devil.... Because of her need to transcend her earthly circumstances, Pauline fancies herself crane.... A primary reason the Ojibwe understand animals so well is that their spiritual and physical essences are intertwined with each other and have been so since the dawn of creation....

The novel's title, *Tracks*, orients readers toward the impressions left behind as human beings and animals pass beneath the oaks of the North Dakota forest. Early on in chapter 2, Pauline describes Fleur's hunting powers and clearly indicates that Fleur physically transforms from human being to bear and back again into her human body.... When we meet this haunting description of Fleur as bear, we already know her as wolf. 'She was wild as a filthy wolf, a big bony girl whose sudden bursts of strength and snarling cries terrified the listening Pukwan.' Even though Erdrich uses similes, likening her characters to native animals, there can be no doubt that this device indicates the centrality of the animal nature of the characters, so sustained are the animalistic descriptions and do consistent are they with traditional Ojibwe worldview.... The crane, bear, and wolf are among the progenitors of the major families of the tribe. All these totem clan animals appear in the novel as well as fifty or so more mammals, birds, fish, and insects....

Ojibwe are descended patrilineally from totem animal ancestors who are the progenitors and keepers of their clan and Ojibwe express themselves ritually and interpersonally through both these hereditary clan affiliations and animal associations gained from life experiences. Those who have a central identity through their clan names, obligations, and restrictions may add on other identities as they mature and acquire life experiences. To further complicate these identity issues, it should be understood that human beings may take on an animal form to accomplish certain tasks and then return to their human form to carry on in that bodily shape.... In Ojibwe culture much shape-shifting is seen as positive.... The intimate reciprocal life-giving relationship between hunter and game is revealed in *Tracks* in the scenes where Fleur is butchering the deer Eli had been tracking and where Eli becomes moose man as he binds the steaming meat of moose to his body to carry the carcass home to Nanapush. Eli *is* moose. The spiritual connection between hunter and game holds Spirit power is transferred to the hunter....

In the Ojibwe universe there is a sky world, an earth world, and a water world. The earth was created with the assistance of Muskrat during an earth-diving event and is presided over by Kitche Manitou, the Creator or Great Spirit.... In this animated Ojibwe universe, human beings, animals, and manitou spirits all have multiple interchangeable identities that bind this fluid world together in kinship or, on occasion, in enmity. Awareness of these multiple identities is the primary means of fully knowing one's relationships and powers in the cosmic landscape.... Nanapush of the novel is a manifestation of Nanabozho, for Nanapush is another form of the name Nanabozho.... The Christian order that Father Damien represents in *Tracks* is so disrespectful of the spiritual animal nature of the Ojibwe that the church is implicitly in collusion with the federal government and the Turcot Company that is clearcutting the forests. And as the loss of habitat spreads like a wildfire, the eco-system deteriorates in Ojibwe land, leaving Nanapush witness to the destruction. Nanapush is tree, akin to Nanabozho, who is stump in the old stories....

Tracks is a striking cosmic drama depicting the clash of 'old way' Ojibwe and Christian worldviews during the leanest years of the early twentieth century. Even Father Damien appears gaunt and hungry, and the animals likewise are thin and weak. Erdrich makes it clear in the narrative that it is the aftermath of the encounter between cultures that has devastated the Ojibwe homelands. The animals are the physical gauge of this tragic decline in the quality of life... Margaret and Nanapush really are beautiful 'creaking oaks' embracing Lulu in the final scene of the novel, just as Fleur becomes lakeweed and Napoleon transforms into 'roots, stalks like threads, thin white blooms and blue moss'... As Nanapush declares to Father Damien, 'We Indians are like a forest.... The trees left standing get more sun, grow thick'."

Susan Scarberry-Garcia
"Beneath Creaking Oaks: Spirits and Animals in *Tracks*"
Approaches 42-50

"Drawing on Ojibwe oral traditions while challenging the hierarchical imbalances of power underlying the colonial relationship, Erdrich takes issue with the ways in which the settler society has attempted to define First Nations, specifically within Eurocentric epistemologies. By articulating cultural differences through a discourse written in English, the language of the colonizers, Erdrich creates a hybrid narrative. Instead of replicating the colonial relationship, she deconstructs and subverts colonial discourse from within. Erdrich's subversive narrative offers readers an alternative perspective in which colonizers may see images of themselves through the eyes of the colonized. For instance, readers who choose to identify with Pauline and her narrative may find that they (like Pauline) become the butt of Nanapush's jokes....

In *Tracks*, narratives elude definition and classification, as different stories unfold through the alternating voices of Nanapush and Pauline. Telling stories is, as Nanapush notes, a way to resist cultural genocide... Erdrich suggests multiple connotations for tracks while using them as a pervasive image of survival. For instance, the title alludes to the need for communities to survive, to continue to leave tracks. Tracks can be signs in the snow as well as signs on a blank page. One can follow tracks in a hunt. A person can step into tracks, circle tracks, backtrack, or even become sidetracked.... Just as it is necessary to learn how to decipher tracks when hunting, so readers decipher the tracks, or words, on the printed page.... The text, like Ojibwe oral stories, resists any single interpretation and does not offer one story or one meaning or one narrative; rather, there are many stories.... Erdrich is careful to point to the dangers of the printed word and validates oral stories over the written word that government agents use to break promises and treaties....

It is Nanapush who sees the tracks of Eli's snowshoes and guides Eli on his hunt. Eli's vision clears, and he is able to track the moose. Nanapush's song and drumming help Eli reserve his strength so he can come home. Similarly, Fleur's tracks attest to her powers.... Lack of tracks often signify the spirit world and spiritual empowerment. In her vision of a visit to the spirit world, Pauline observes, 'There were no fences, no poles, no lines, no tracks.' Near the end of the novel, when Fleur laments her powers diminishing and feels the loss of her child, her land, and her community, she is, according to some stories in the community, said to 'walk now without leaving tracks.' This image suggests death and loss of power as well as Fleur's ability to gain power on a different plane; her spirit is untrackable.... Fleur escapes settlers who attempt to track her; she eludes capture. Fleur has the ability not to leave tracks and not to be hunted or tracked....

Near the end of the novel, Pauline continues to re-create herself when she renames herself Leopolda, an allusion to King Leopold II (1835-1909) of Belgium, who organized 'development' in central Africa and financed an expedition to the Congo River (1879-84). Leopold is known for his exploitation of the Congo; hence, his name is suitable for Pauline, who attempts to 'civilize' her community.... *Tracks* is a testimony to the struggle and survival of First Nations. Erdrich adapts oral storytelling techniques to print and infuses the multiple stories with humor. She illustrates the importance of community—of family relations and of ancestors—while also demonstrating how settler society fosters and preys on internal divisions in its attempts to divide and diminish First Nations and their communities and cultures.

In these respects, the narratives affirm cultural differences and unsettle the colonial discourse that positions settlers as dominant and First Nations as subordinate. In telling Lulu the story of the Ojibwe

community and her mother, Nanapush's narrative is itself a process of commemorating and 'rememorating' Ojibwe oral stories and traditions. Erdrich's novel opens with Nanapush telling Lulu, 'We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall.' Nanapush goes on to tell of the ways in which settler society has attempted to eradicate this community. He tells of the 'spotted sickness' and the treaty and 'exile in a storm of government papers.' He tells his granddaughter that she is 'the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared,' and he tells her about the 'new sickness,' consumption, which led to the further dwindling of the clans....

Through Nanapush, Erdrich also exposes and challenges the cultural binarism and colonial stereotyping underlying much of settler thinking and language. His name alludes to the trickster Nanabush and, like trickster, Nanapush is 'a healer and comic liberator in narratives.... He is a powerful figure and is well versed in traditional medicine. It is Nanapush who takes in Fleur when others are afraid to go near her. It is Nanapush who instructs Eli in ways to approach Fleur initially and in ways to return to her when Fleur later shuns Eli. And it is Nanapush who sets the snare to trap the Morrisseys, using Father Damien's piano wire....

Nanapush's stories as well as Erdrich's hybrid narrative strategies illustrate how First Nations can combat cultural dispossession through self-determination, through telling their stories in their own ways. In telling of the disasters their community has experienced over the years, Nanapush describes how he saved the last Pillager in a story to Fleur's daughter. Lulu represents the next generation, which can survive and resist cultural genocide through practicing its culture. Despite the bleak picture that Nanapush's story presents, the telling of the story is affirming because it is part of the process of resistance and survival.... Nanapush's stories give Lulu the context and history of her family and community. The elaborate genealogy in *Tracks* illustrates how members of the community need to remember their ancestors and respect their relations. Power, as Pauline points out, lies in relations and relationships, in community."

Dee Horne
"A Postcolonial Reading of *Tracks*"
Approaches 191-98

"In *Tracks*, both of the narrators, Nanapush and Pauline, assume knowledge of Ojibwe culture that will be shared by most readers; well beyond discrete and annotatable allusions to phenomena like Misshepeshu, both narrators' stories include events whose causal processes defy secular Euro-American 'common sense'.... Erdrich has created a contemporary postmodern trickster cycle, then Nanapush, as the most literal and obvious personification of the trickster, can serve as a point of access not only to *Tracks* but also to the entire series of novels.... He can be seen as the 'hinge' between some of the discrepant aspects of *Tracks*: its distinct cultural codes, the Ojibwe and the Catholic; its invocation of the world of myth and its specific historical context; its reliance on traditional oral narratives and its undeniable postmodernism. In sum, if Erdrich writes a kind of magic realism, then Nanapush—as trickster—is a hinge between the magic and the realism...

That Nanapush should offer access to seemingly opposed aspects of the novel should not be surprising; after all, as he reminds us, his namesake is Nanabozho, the traditional trickster and the central figure of Ojibwe narrative, who combines aspects of the human, the superhuman, and the animal; the sacred and the profane; the clown and the revered culture hero. Indeed, it is the very nature of the trickster to combine or reconcile opposites.... Erdrich draws closely and extensively on the traditional trickster cycle (more so than criticism to date seems to have recognized), even as she revises, modernizes, and extends the tradition.... Perhaps the crucial aspects of Nanabozho to emphasize are his inherent ambiguity and self-contradictions—suggested already—and (the physical manifestation of this) his shape-shifting ability, for the Ojibwe belief in bodily transformation is one of the givens of the novel....

The story of the flood that Nanapush tells to Pauline is a bawdy transformation of the Ojibwe version of the earth-diver creation story... One of his most obvious tricksterly characteristics is his pride in his sexual exploits, which are, at the time of the novel's events, mostly behind him.... Examination of Erdrich's gesture in historicizing Nanabozho by reincarnating him in Nanapush is a useful way of getting at the subtle implicit politics of *Tracks*, which alludes quite specifically to the history of the Turtle Mountain

Chippewa of North Dakota.... The years bracketing the action in *Tracks*, 1912 and 1924, are respectively the first year in which Indian land allotted under the Dawes, or General Allotment Act of 1887 could be sold (after the expiration of a twenty-five-year period during which allotments were held in trust by the federal government) and the year in which American Indians were first granted citizenship.... For the Turtle Mountain tribe the twenty-five-year period...was greatly foreshortened. The machinations among the various factions of the tribe—the holdouts and the sellouts—regarding taxes on allotments and leasing or selling of allotments to timber companies are a function of this legislation. In any case, in *Tracks* (and the rest of the series), as in other modern-day trickster novels, the trickster confronts colonialism, with its aggressive methods of making American Indians into Indian Americans...

In *Tracks* a good deal of Nanapush's libido goes not into sexual conquest but rather, by means of practical joking, into sexual aggression directed at Pauline; the bawdy story he tells her of the flood, which causes her to wet herself, is a variant of the Ojibwe creation myth.... The threatening flood that the trickster barely survives can be read as the engulfing forces of Euro-American culture, into which Pauline is all too ready to immerse herself. Nanapush's sexual provocation is a reality check; his tricking her into wetting herself is a way of puncturing her conceit that she can control her body, making it over into that of a Euro-American nun. (He does not simply retell an episode of the classic Ojibwe trickster story; he adapts it to contemporary circumstances and tribal needs—thus illustrating the proper use of oral traditions and enacting the role of trickster as protector and preserver of Native culture....

Other examples abound in modern Indian fiction. But in my experience of Native American novels, *Tracks* is unique in employing a trickster as a narrator. To do this (as Erdrich does it) is to make him not merely an avatar of the trickster but an agent in the perpetuation of oral traditions—and thus an exemplar of the power of oral narrative in Native culture.... As narrator as well as character, [Nanapush] enacts the traditional trickster's role—as culture hero (as savior of Fleur and adoptive parent to Lulu) and not just as clown. (Indeed, one could argue that his chapters, which are addressed to a young woman at a particularly difficult state of her life, are intended to take the place of the vision quest Lulu never has the opportunity to undertake: in recounting these chapters to her, Nanapush 'appears to her' and offers himself to her, again, as her guardian and spiritual guide....

Nanapush's chapters are traditional not only in content—drawing heavily on stories of Nanabozho—but also in purpose: their announced goal is to reintegrate Lulu into her immediate family and her tribal context; to challenge her rejection of her mother, who seems to have betrayed and abandoned her; and to counteract the acculturating effects of her time in boarding school. Nanapush seeks to make of her a good Pillager and a good Ojibwe, and to do so he tells her stories rooted in tribal tradition in a manner faithful to tribal practices.... Because *Tracks* concludes with Nanapush's account of Lulu's reunion with her adoptive parents, himself and Margaret, one must of necessity look to the sequels for evidence of the success of his oral rhetoric on Lulu's values and life. Whatever their eventual influence on Lulu, Nanapush's spoken narratives are clearly derived from traditional Ojibwe narratives, which they artfully revise and adapt to specific historical circumstances. As the hinge between traditional Ojibwe oral narratives and the history of Ojibwe people in the twentieth century, Nanapush thus offers a way of reconciling the 'magic' or Erdrich's series with its political and historical 'realities'."

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"Tracing the Trickster: Nanapush, Ojibwe Oral Tradition, and *Tracks*"
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Michael Hollister (2015)