CHAPTER 1

Understanding Louise Erdrich

Karen Louise Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, on June 7, 1954, to Rita Joanne Gourneau, enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe, and Ralph Louis Erdrich, the son of German immigrants. Both of her parents were teachers at a school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where Erdrich, the eldest of their seven children, was raised.[1] Wahpeton sits in the Red River Valley along the North Dakota–Minnesota border, and fictionalized versions of the town provide the setting of many of Erdrich's novels, revealing the profound impact this midwestern landscape had on her. Growing up, she was also exposed to and immersed in both sides of her rich cultural heritage—Ojibwe and Euro-American. As a child she found herself enchanted with the mysticism and mystery of the Old Testament: "I was at the age of magical thinking and believed sticks could change to serpents, a voice might speak from a burning bush, angels wrestled with people. After I went to school and started catechism I realized religion was about rules. I remember staring at a neighbor's bridal-wreath bush. It bloomed every year but was voiceless. No angels, no parting of the Red River. It all seemed so dull once I realized that nothing spectacular was going to happen."[2] Other than her Old Testament fascination, Erdrich's early reading habits involved simply raiding the stacks of the local library "indiscriminately" for writers such as Leon Uris, James Michener, Ayn Rand, Herman Wouk, and James Welch, though she preferred John Tanner's *The Falcon,* William Shakespeare's plays, "the *Dune* trilogy, Isaac Asimov and *The Prophet*."[3] Erdrich came from a family of storytellers, so she lived a richly imaginative early life. One of her greatest early literary influences was her father, Ralph Erdrich. Erdrich explains, "My father is a terrific storyteller and made his relatives and the characters in the towns where he grew up almost mythic."[4] In addition to being an engaging storyteller

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who would often break into spontaneous poetic recitations of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow or Robert Frost, he encouraged Erdrich to pursue her own creative star. To give the budding young writer even greater incentive, he would pay his daughter a nickel for each piece of creative writing she composed.[5]

Erdrich also received the creative benefit of hearing family stories from both sides of her ancestry. The history of her paternal grandparents, Ludwig Friedrich Erdrich and Mary Kroll, a German immigrant butcher and his wife, ultimately inspired such novels as *The Beet Queen* (1986) and *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003) and "The Butcher's Wife" poems in her early poetry collections. Though Erdrich's German background is the focus of these important works, her authentic voice seems to come forth more naturally from her Ojibwe roots. Arguably her maternal grandparents, Patrice and Mary Gourneau, were a more significant influence on her literary work, which has as its primary focus the Ojibwe part of her heritage. Though raised Catholic, Erdrich was exposed to a great deal of Ojibwe culture: she heard traditional stories, participated in cultural ceremonies, and learned tribal history. Pat Gourneau was a prominent tribal elder and political activist for tribal rights. In describing the position of Gourneau in the family, Erdrich explained, "He's kind of a legend in our family. He is funny, he's charming, he's interesting. He, for many years, was a very strong figure in my life. I guess I idolized him. A very intelligent man."[6] Gourneau was not only a beloved grandfather but also an undeniable force in the community. He served as the tribal chairman for the Ojibwe tribe on the Turtle Mountain reservation in North Dakota during the 1950s, when the U.S. government devised a solution called "termination" as a remedy to the "Indian problem."[7] Termination was designed to undo the relationship between the federal government and Native Americans, so individual tribes would be forced to dissolve and join mainstream American society. The policy would have transferred communal tribal land held by the reservation into privately owned parcels for sale—in essence taking away the Ojibwe's most prized possession. Erdrich explained the motivation behind her grandfather's tireless fight against this policy: "He recognized that this would be the end of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa as a people."[8] After Gourneau testified before Congress to ensure his reservation would be exempt, the tribe avoided a frenzied sell-off, which preserved the reservation and saved the tribe from possible extinction. Gourneau's efforts impressed upon Erdrich the critical relationship between Ojibwe survival and the land. Keenly aware of her grandfather's legacy growing up, she committed herself to telling the story of the Ojibwe people, since remembering through storytelling is a traditional and time-honored form of preserving Ojibwe heritage. Recognizing Erdrich's compassion and respect for the Ojibwe

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and the sacred view of the land embraced by her Anishinaabe ancestors is essential to understanding her body of work.

Erdrich's educational background includes a bachelor of arts in 1976 from Dartmouth College, where she was part of the first class of women to gain admission to the college. Far from her hometown of Wahpeton and attending an Ivy League school, with all of the attendant cultural and social norms of New England, Erdrich faced an authentic culture shock and intense adjustment period. She admits her success was due to the kindness of instructors, advisers, and the community of Native American scholars at Dartmouth, who took under their collective wing the "wide-eyed, chainsmoking, wild-haired, disorganized, red-booted young woman from North Dakota, and managed, with their love and examples, to bring me through."[9] Among those generous individuals was Michael Dorris, chairman of the newly established Native American Studies program and an instructor in the department. Erdrich extolls Dorris's contribution to the program and to those Native American scholars, like herself, who joined the nascent program: "He gave himself utterly to the task, and used his tough humor, tenacity, and courage to make sure the program and the department would be of ongoing integrity. So it continues. Without him, there would be no voices to collect."[10] Dorris eventually became Erdrich's husband, and together they created one of the most celebrated literary partnerships of the late twentieth century.

The Dartmouth years, then, significantly altered the course of Erdrich's life and career, but not only because of Dorris. Dartmouth's Native American Studies program offered a young Erdrich the opportunity to explore, cultivate, and refine her Ojibwe voice. Along with the other students in the program, Erdrich developed a "reliance on community and an appreciation of the blessings of connection."[11] Decidedly these two themes, community and connection, are central to Erdrich's literary work—the communities of the fictional Argus, Hoopdance, and Little No Horse figure in almost all of her novels, and connections of kinship and genealogical ties abound in her stories. Though Dartmouth's Native American students were of different tribal backgrounds, both mixed-blood and full-blood, there was a common need shared among them in terms of identity: "the need to integrate, a need to make sense of a world that does not include them, a need to return to places deeply longed for and understood."[12] The creation of a cultural identity, the struggles of tribal members and their communities to belong in the world at large, and the overwhelming pull of place, of home, take up much of the striving and conflict in Erdrich's work. Her time at Dartmouth precipitated an enriching and liberating seismic shift in her world that would irrevocably affect her art and her life.

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After graduating from Dartmouth, Erdrich remained in New England for a time before returning to North Dakota. Eventually the call to pursue her creative writing talents led her back east to graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University, where she had the opportunity to study under various literary luminaries, including John Barth, Edmund White, Richard Howard, and C. Michael Curtis.[13] Upon receiving her master of fine arts degree in 1979, Erdrich ultimately returned to Dartmouth as a writer-in-residence, where her professional relationship with Dorris, who had remained in contact with her, evolved into a romantic one; they married in 1981. Erdrich settled in New Hampshire with Dorris and his three adopted children, Reynold Abel, Jeffrey Sava, and Madeline, whom Dorris had previously adopted while single. During the course of their nearly seventeen-year marriage, Erdrich gave birth to three daughters, Persia, Pallas, and Aza, all while embarking in earnest on a literary career. Dorris, a writer himself, published a number of works, including *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987), and received the 1989 National Book Critics Circle Award for his critically acclaimed memoir, *The Broken Cord: A Family's Ongoing Struggle with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome,* which includes a foreword by Erdrich. The book describes the condition known as fetal alcohol syndrome, which afflicted their adopted son Reynold, who died after being struck by a car in a hit-and-run accident.

Erdrich and Dorris's literary partnership became the subject of public admiration and fascination. They collaborated on a number of early stories and books; throughout their relationship Dorris supported Erdrich professionally as a trusted adviser, literary agent, editor, tireless promoter, and sounding board. On his suggestion a reluctant Erdrich entered the short story "The World's Greatest Fisherman" in the competition for the Nelson Algren Literary Award, which she won. The story became the first chapter of the novel *Love Medicine* (1984), winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. Her poetry was gaining critical attention at this time, as well, with the publication of *Jacklight* (1984) and *Baptism of Desire* (1989), parts of which appear with newer poems in *Original Fire: New and Selected Poems* (2003). Though some of Erdrich's early works, parts of *Love Medicine* (1984) and the coauthored *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) and *Route 2* (1991), were written in collaboration with Dorris, there is some confusion about which other of her novels were the product of shared creative effort. The task to parse who authored what portions of the early novels, including *The Beet Queen* (1986), a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994), would be impossible. Indeed early interviews with Erdrich failed to clarify the extent and depth of their joint efforts: "In the course of it [the writing of a novel], we'll continuously plot and continuously talk about

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who the characters are, what they eat, what clothes they wear, what their favorite colors are and what's going to happen to them. In that way, I think it's a true kind of collaboration: we both really influence the course of the book. You can't look back and say which one made it go this way or that way, because you can't remember."[14] Of course, at that time Erdrich was a woman who loved her husband and the father of her children, admired him as a gifted educator, depended on him as her literary agent and first reader, and shared her writing with him as a trusted editor and adviser. Dorris was present at most of those early interviews, which number more than one hundred, and the pressure on Erdrich to maintain the impression that she and Dorris were engaged in a wholly collaborative literary partnership must have been compelling for a number of professional and personal reasons.

In the intervening years, particularly since Dorris's death, Erdrich has opened up about the collaboration in more candid terms. For those curious in learning more about the extent and the nature of their creative partnership, she has set the record straight: "I would have loved for Michael to have had his own life as a writer and not covet my life as a writer. But he couldn't help himself. So in agreeing to write *The Crown of Columbus* I really made a deal, at least in my thoughts, that if we wrote this one book together, then we could openly work separately—as we always did in truth, of course."[15] The early novels were published under Erdrich's name alone, officially crediting her as the sole author. There is no question that Erdrich valued Dorris as a keen and intuitive editor of her works, but the notion that her novels should actually be considered collaborations should be called into question, particularly as evidenced by her ongoing list of publications since 1997. In a 2012 interview promoting *The Round House,* Terry Tazioli asked Erdrich how different it was to write on her own compared to writing collaboratively with Dorris, and Erdrich gave a straightforward answer: "It's not any different. I wrote it all. . . . So, collaborating wasn't like . . . he would write a page and I would write a page. It was more that I had someone who gave me very, very wonderful editorial advice."[16] The Erdrich-Dorris literary partnership effectively came to an end in 1996 when the couple separated. Dorris committed suicide in 1997. The loss of Dorris left Erdrich a single mother and the focus of unwanted attention and speculation on the part of the literary community about her personal affairs.

During this difficult period in her life, Erdrich continued publishing novels regularly: *Tales of Burning Love* was published earlier in the same year as Dorris's death, followed by *The Antelope Wife* (1998). Erdrich continued her creative output with *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), a finalist for the National Book Award; *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003); *Four Souls* (2004); and *The Painted Drum* (2005). After a brief hiatus,

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Erdrich followed this stream of novels with another prolific period, publishing some of her most critically acclaimed novels—*The Plague of Doves* (2008), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; *Shadow Tag* (2009); and *The Round House* (2012), winner of the National Book Award—as well as *The Red Convertible: Collected and New Stories* (2009). In addition to her adult fiction and poetry, Erdrich has written an award-winning series of children's books that includes *The Birchbark House* (1999), *The Game of Silence* (2005), *The Porcupine Year* (2008), and *Chickadee* (2012). She has also written nonfiction, including a memoir of motherhood, *The Blue Jay's Dance* (1995), and *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003), a memoir of her travels through Ojibwe country and a catalog of various cultural aspects of Ojibwe life.

Erdrich lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she owns an independent bookstore, Birchbark Books, which specializes in Native American literature and Ojibwe-language publications. The bookstore proudly displays a handmade canoe hanging from the ceiling and an authentic confessional salvaged from an old church, in a nod to her Catholic heritage and perhaps a smirk from her Ojibwe self. In her continuing commitment to preserve Ojibwe language and culture, Erdrich established the Birchbark House Fund to support indigenous language revitalization and, with her sisters, formed the Wiigwaas Press to publish material in Ojibwe and bilingual Ojibwe/English. Paralleling her growing list of publications, Erdrich's family has expanded as well. She had a fourth daughter, Nenaa'ikiizhikok, in 2000, who is featured in *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country,* and married a local businessman from Minneapolis, Dan Emmel, in 2008. Erdrich remains engaged with Ojibwe life and community: she continues her studies in the language, runs regular writing workshops with her sister Heid Erdrich, also a creative writer, and travels regularly to Ojibwe retreats and sacred places. During her acceptance speech at the 2013 North Dakota Theodore Roosevelt Rough Riders Awards ceremony, an honor bestowed to exceptional North Dakotans, Erdrich remembered her Ojibwe ancestors: "I want in this context to thank the old people who really sacrificed to keep alive Anishinaabe culture, ways, and language."[17] Clearly evidenced in her thanks to those Ojibwe who have gone before is Erdrich's unwavering commitment to preserve the fruits of their sacrifice.

Understanding the Literature of Louise Erdrich

Louise Erdrich has created a literature of place in her novels, short fiction, children's literature, poetry, and nonfiction. To put her work in a larger cultural context, Erdrich's is a literature of the land, of home, where identity is clearly constructed out of the climate, the seasons, the natural world, and Ojibwe tribal culture and tradition. Native American identity had to be radically renegotiated

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in this space when European traders and settlers, the *chimookomanag,* arrived in the New World.[18] A colonial identity had to be constructed because of this cataclysmic encroachment. And unlike the postcolonial circumstances of the populations of the Far East, the Indian subcontinent, Africa, the West Indies, and other historically colonized nations, the occupation for Native Americans has never ended. To be sure, the trappings of colonial rule remain in many of those countries, but the daily reminders of occupation—the vestiges of the loss of land and the fight for sovereignty—cannot be ignored by a Native American living in the United States. Shifting population boundaries, once limitless, foreclosed traditional Native American identity and greatly compromised the freedoms and liberties of the indigenous populations with the occupation of European colonists and, ultimately, American settlers. During this transitional time, there was great upheaval, as disease, famine, Christianity, and eventually the U.S. government and land allotment acts overwhelmed the Native American community. Erdrich's work reflects this shift in Ojibwe identity and history. The loss of land and culture devastated many in the Ojibwe community. Government allotments, land deeds, illegal taxes, and boarding schools became the new conditions of the land rather than tribal law, kinship, and community. In fact the bureaucratic U.S. government system, with its papers and documents, replaced the traditional tribal way of transacting and negotiating, which was through sacred verbal promises, the sincere exchange of gifts and goods, oral tradition, and storytelling.

Historically the plight of Native Americans has been largely ignored in mainstream American history and literature. The prevailing images of Native Americans have been limited to depictions of "cowboys and Indians," whoops and war paint, the noble savage, and the 1970s "Keep America Beautiful" public service announcement, with a tear rolling down the face of an actor impersonating a Native American. In the popular imagination, Native American history is obscured with scenes of the first Thanksgiving or neat little teepees peppering a vast and arid landscape. For Erdrich writing against these absurd and belittling stereotypes is a formidable task. Alternately there is no all-encompassing Native American identity; the term is a tidy and easily managed category by which vastly different groups of indigenous people, with distinct languages, beliefs, and traditions, have been grouped. Instead there is a Cherokee or Sioux or Ojibwe identity and attendant literature, and within those larger designations exist distinctive clans, communities, families, and individuals. The problem ethnic writers continually face, and one Erdrich has had to contend with, is the pressure to provide a general and accurate representation of "their people" for popular consumption by the dominant culture. Identity is a fluid construction, not a fixed material reality. The facile picture

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of the noble savage or the victimized primitive has served for centuries as the all-encompassing symbol of the Native American.[19] This two-dimensional depiction aims to give non–Native Americans a definitive understanding of tribal and reservation life. It is a ridiculous assumption that one or two stock characters—who generally speak broken English, if they speak at all, and never seem to feel the normal human range of emotions, such as joy, love, nostalgia, loneliness, rage, and pain—could ever offer a rich enough vision of this complex and diverse people and their culture. Erdrich questions the idealized version of Native Americans that is perpetuated by the commonly romanticized and, in fact, unrealistic portrait of unique tribal peoples. She regularly subverts the dominant culture's desire to find the grand, totalizing narrative of Native American identity by offering competing small narratives in most all of her work to date; this move is a signature of her distinctive narrative style.

Narrative Style

Erdrich's work is peopled with various storytellers and their stories—deeply felt, personal accounts of events, people, and places in a central geographical community in Ojibwe country. Obviously this feature of Erdrich's writing is not exceptional—a narrative generally tells a story with an implied or explicit narrator. What makes her writing unique is the presence of multiple narrators, with their often competing narratives, occurring within the space of a single text. More problematic for Erdrich's first-time readers is reconciling the assortment of stories, which are regularly at odds with one another or focused on a singular, subjective aspect of the plot. Consequently an ordered sense of plot is often elusive in Erdrich's work, hard to pin down and rein in. For unaccustomed, beginning, or casual readers, her narrative style can be challenging and engaging or even confusing and frustrating. Indeed some early critics of Erdrich's novels dismissed her style as intentionally confounding, privileging an academic and experimental style rather than a substantive, politically engaged, and meaningful one.

The most infamous of these critiques is Leslie Marmon Silko's review of *The Beet Queen* titled "Here's an Odd Artifact for the Fairy Tale Shelf." Silko, the Laguna-Pueblo author of the critically acclaimed *Ceremony* (1977) and a central figure in the renaissance of Native American literature in the 1970s and '80s, leveled the claim of insensitive, ivory-tower disengagement against Erdrich: "[her] prose is an outgrowth of academic, post-modern, so called experimental influences. The idea is to 'set language free,' to allow words to interact like magical chemicals in a word sorcerer's pristine laboratory, where a word and its possible relationship with other words may be seen 'as they really are, in and of themselves,' without the tiresome interference of any historical,

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political or cultural connections the words may have had in the past."[20] Silko's tirade continues, but the focus shifts from an attack on Erdrich's novel to a general screed against postmodern writing and its ineffectiveness in conveying political messages or acting as an appropriate vehicle by which issues of identity politics can be expressed: "Self-referential writing has an ethereal clarity and shimmering beauty because no history or politics intrudes to muddy the well of pure necessity contained within language itself. Post-modern, self-referential writing reflects the isolation and alienation of the individual who shares nothing in common with other human beings but language and its hygienic grammatical mechanisms. Self-referential writing is light years away from shared or communal experience that underlies oral narrative and modern fiction."[21] Silko misreads postmodern strategies as antithetical to identity politics, declaring categorically that they are inappropriate for an ethnic writer to adopt and adapt. She fails to acknowledge postmodern fiction's inherent questioning of power relations, idealized versions of history, and the objectivity of totalizing narratives; postmodern fictional strategies provide the disenfranchised writer a space to renegotiate, recast, and interrogate subjugating narratives of the past. An interesting aside, and a glaring irony, is that Silko's own novel *Ceremony* appears, in abridged form, in the Norton anthology *Postmodern American Fiction* (1997) while none of Erdrich's works is included.

In their collection of interviews with Erdrich and Dorris, Allan and Nancy Feyl Chavkin ask Erdrich what might account for Silko's extreme response; Erdrich at first playfully responds, "Drugs." She goes on, though, to speculate that Silko misunderstood that the German part of her ancestry was the intended focus of *The Beet Queen:* "Honestly, here's what I think happened. Leslie Silko didn't read the book carefully. It happens. I've done it myself. She thought the main characters were Chippewa when they were actually depression-era Poles and Germans. It is no wonder she wrote a diatribe. They must have seemed shockingly assimilated."[22] Although it is unlikely that Silko mistook the European immigrant characters for Native Americans, Erdrich graciously dispelled any notions of a brewing feud between the two authors by dismissing the review as a misunderstanding. Susan Pérez Castillo argues that "it is possible that some of her [Silko's] differences with Erdrich arise from misunderstandings related to a limited concept of ethnicity, and an essentialist, logocentric view of referentiality" rather than an intentional meanness or petty jealousy.[23] Silko and Erdrich simply have profoundly different perspectives on the nature of representation and how it operates in Native American literature.

Writers must deal from time to time with public criticism, of course, and Erdrich's reviewers have sometimes, though not often, been lukewarm in their reception of this or that work. To date, however, Silko's review remains the

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most scathing review of Erdrich's career, though it does open up the discussion of artistic choice (form) and its relation to ideological matters (content). Another takeaway of value in the review is an opportunity to explore the question of Erdrich's political engagement. Her writing is politically charged; moreover through her distinctive narrative style, particularly the use of multiple narrators, she reflects the history and politics of the Ojibwe arguably more effectively than she could writing in the tradition of Western realism. Only through an exploration and interrogation of the many fictions of the Ojibwe can Erdrich begin to deconstruct the received grand narrative of Native American identity and reconstruct a fair, authentic representation of the Ojibwe. And through this reconstruction Erdrich arrives at a world that comprises a myriad of individual subjectivities that do not claim to know the whole truth but regional, local, and personal truths, which are equally valuable and viable in constructing a portrait of her Ojibwe community and their history. Any claim to grand narratives is fueled by ideology, hubris, and delusion rather than lived reality. Erdrich steers clear of any such notion that her fiction and poetry can speak for the whole of the Ojibwe people or the greater Native American community. It is only those who wish to pigeonhole that would lay claim to a static and fully reliable representation of a people. The constructions of ethnicity, cultural identity, and history are largely determined by the dominant culture and by those in power. Often cultural tags, such as "Native American," "woman," and "black," are meant only to oppress and subjugate rather than disclose a fluidity and fullness of being. Nancy J. Peterson observes that "for writers such as Erdrich . . . the history of America has often been exclusionary—a monologic narrative of male Anglo-American progress that constructs others as people without history." In light of this, Peterson concludes that "writing history . . . has become one way for marginalized peoples to counter their invisibility."[24] The historical record is said to be written by the "winners," so Erdrich offers an alternate, revisionist history that questions and critiques the historical representations of her people. In the popular imagination, Native Americans, living cloistered lives on their reservations, merely add to the biological landscape like the wildlife, which suggests an absence rather than a presence on the scale of intellectual, artistic, or emotional pursuits. Mainstream America must imagine that since colonization the various indigenous tribes comprise cheerful denizens of isolated Native American communities, simpleminded and lacking in sophistication, blissfully and ignorantly living out their days.

Where the Ojibwe were absent in the official story of history, Erdrich casts the tribe as a presence rather than an absence in the history of the United States and in contemporary life. In what Gerald Vizenor calls the literature of survivance, an effort to portray perseverance and survival, Native American authors

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practice a form of resistance through storytelling, which depicts Native American characters as engaged participants in the history and culture of North America; they continue to survive colonialism and are not simply tragic victims or ignorant savages.[25] Native American history, as well as identity, is perpetuated through its discourse, its stories; it is a communal narrative of events that serves to protect and preserve the culture and tradition. Pérez Castillo describes Erdrich's Ojibwe "not as Noble Savage victims or as dying representatives of a lost authenticity, but as tough, compassionate people who use the vital capacity of discourse to shape—and not merely reflect—reality."[26] The stories her characters share, in the form of oral histories, local myths, and family fictions, often create a contestable version of events. In order to offer a "realistic" version of Ojibwe existence, Erdrich effectively uses multiple narrators that act as buffers for one another. By not privileging one narrative over any other—no narrator/speaker can claim absolute authenticity or authority—Erdrich creates texts that reflect the diversity and often diametrically opposed realities of Ojibwe life. By using distinct, at times conflicting, narratives within a single text, Erdrich creates a tension similar to that surrounding the crisis of history and identity, a true struggle for survival that the Ojibwe experienced particularly in the late nineteenth century through the twentieth and continue to feel today. So through her unique narrative style and prevailing thematic concerns, Erdrich dispels notions of fixed ethnic identity and cultural history, which allows for the construction of new ways of being and being perceived in the world and offers more choice, opportunity, and liberty for the Ojibwe, despite the enduring condition of colonialism.

Colonization, Assimilation, and Cultural Identity

The central theme of colonization is rooted deeply in Erdrich's body of work. From it a number of related thematic concerns emerge, particularly the harrowing processes of assimilation and the attendant cultural identity crises faced by the Ojibwe. Much of Erdrich's literature is taken up with the struggles of full and mixed-blood Ojibwe to reconcile their Native American identity with the mainstream Euro-American culture within and around their respective Ojibwe communities. The land is the enduring symbol for Ojibwe identity, community, and survival, though it also serves as a daily reminder of colonization and what was lost. Most directly colonization is tied to the land, to place, for Erdrich. The communities of Ojibwe depicted in her fiction are centrally located in a specific geographic section of the United States—the upper northeast quadrant of North Dakota. Erdrich's birthplace, Little Falls, Minnesota; her hometown of Wahpeton, North Dakota; the Turtle Mountain Reservation in Belcourt, North Dakota; neighboring Fargo; Minneapolis–Saint Paul; the Lake Superior

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islands; La Pointe, Wisconsin; the Lake of the Woods area of Ontario, Canada; and various small towns along the way are all contained within the periphery. Erdrich creates a fictional world—the reservation of Little No Horse and the fictional border towns of Argus, Hoopdance, and Pluto—as an amalgam of places in the real world and has even included a map in the front matter of many of her books to approximate their location. Though cartography is usually the province of those wishing to divide communities, trace jurisdictions, define ownership, and situate power, Erdrich uses maps to illustrate the once broad expanse of Ojibwe territory, which is now reduced to neatly categorized units of officially demarcated land. The land is crisscrossed with boundaries both real and symbolic. The Ojibwe, accustomed to an ancient freedom to roam their once vast territories, an essential part of their cultural DNA, were confined to claustrophobic resettlement camps, or reservations, and their environs. The loss of land, of home, of natural resources and a centuries-old, self-sustaining independence, signaled a profound shift in Ojibwe identity and required a complete reimagining of how to be and survive in the world; it was earth-shattering. Erdrich's stress on the fundamental nature of place clearly reflects Ojibwe attitudes. A strategically well-defined sense of geographical boundaries in the New World, however, is only one of many consequences of colonization on the land depicted in Erdrich's work.

From an ecological perspective, colonization was as devastating to the natural habitat as it was to the human population, a concept Erdrich regularly explores. The Ojibwe traditionally do not live *on* the land but *with* and *for* and *because of* the land—the land is animate, a kind of sentient Mother Earth. The notion of ownership, of land deeds and treaties, was patently absurd to the Ojibwe and required a new way of thinking about the relationship between humans and nature. To be sure the Ojibwe engaged in skirmishes with neighboring tribes, particularly the Dakota Sioux, in order to ensure the reasonable distribution of land. These disputes surely were not meant to lead to the extinction of the other and often resulted in a collectively agreed upon, mutually advantageous resolution, which ensured a fair and adequate means of survival for the warring parties involved. The Ojibwe and Sioux understood the vital connection between humans and the natural world; each tribe strictly observed and respected the conservation and preservation practices of the other.

An ecocritical look at Erdrich's work points to a grave lack of environmental concern on the part of colonizing entities, revealing a genuine picture of ecological colonialism suffered at the hands of settlers and colonizers. The natural world itself was, and continues to be, colonized. The wildlife (buffalo, sturgeon, bear) and the landscape (trees, plants, wild grasses) are all impacted by

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colonization. Colonizing practices disrupted the natural balance and harmed the biodiversity of the land. Natural resources, once in great abundance, have become scarce due to want rather than need determining land use. A manageable and sustainable balance cannot be restored—this wound cannot heal—if the land continues to be abused. Ojibwe lands are facing a new type of colonizing threat, but one with the same goal as historical colonization: acquiring the land and its attendant economic advantages. As Erdrich explains, "Native land is under huge pressure now from the fossil fuel industry, the mining industry, the nuclear industry. In every way it can be taken, the land will be exploited or taken. If we want a future for our children and for our people we have to protect the land. And in my view, not just our land but the greater picture—the earth. After all, Native people can't disappear onto reservations when our climate begins to shift."[27] Erdrich's literary engagement with the natural world, then, is a call to action to prevent further damage and misuse of the earth to the benefit of all, not only the Ojibwe.

The advent of Euro-American settlement necessitated a new manner of being in the world. Ojibwe tribal values, attitudes, and means of existence, so inextricably linked with the land, the seasons, the weather, and natural resources, required a radical ontological and epistemological revisioning in order to survive the onslaught of colonization. Ultimately the Ojibwe had to choose whether to hang back and fight in order to save their heritage against insurmountable odds or to assimilate and trust in the ancient perseverance of their aboriginal tribe. Erdrich's dramatization of these negotiations, based on a mix of oral tradition, personal testimony, family history, documentary historical evidence, and intuitive imagination, is a hallmark of her literature. Through institutionalized religious, educational, economic, and political means, the colonizers employed a campaign of assimilation, humiliation, shame, and racism to facilitate the acculturation of generations of Ojibwe. In more subtle ways, mission churches scattered throughout Native American territories, English-language schools, and intermarriage or cohabitation contributed to the pressure on Ojibwe to become a part of a seemingly innocuous foreign community, a new "tribe" interested in sharing the land. By conflating the ideas of whiteness and piety, the Western world employed Christianity in many subversive ways, resulting in many Ojibwe experiencing shame and cultural dislocation. Erdrich offers a procession of full and half-blooded Ojibwe characters who testify to those who suffered humiliation, confusion, and psychological, emotional, and spiritual fragmentation trying to balance on a cultural hinge between two diametrically opposed worlds. This cultural identity crisis, often framed in terms of religious fanaticism, historical trauma, familial dysfunction, political strife,

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economic hardship, and psychological instability, represents a very real part of Ojibwe existence during the time of colonization and persists well into the twenty-first century.

In many of Erdrich's texts, dislocation and isolation from the community is evident. Many Ojibwe ultimately distanced themselves from their Native roots and embraced a decidedly Western way of being. Where many elders remain elegiac and reverent when describing the terrific loss suffered by their people, the younger generation has found interests outside of the community, in the world at large. Instead of putting emphasis on the "we" of the clan, their focus is on "I," the individual apart from the community, in characteristic "each man for himself" Western, capitalist fashion. This privileging of the self—this self-centeredness—is in direct opposition to the traditional Ojibwe idea of communal living. Part of this emotional and cultural retreat from Ojibwe values resulted initially from Catholic mission schools and then from the Indian boarding school experience of many Ojibwe children, an assimilation practice adopted by the U.S. government with the goal of deracination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The emotional, spiritual, and cultural toll on these children, their progeny, and the generations to follow is a key concern in many of Erdrich's texts.

The education provided in the boarding school system created disparate, often competing allegiances in Ojibwe children. The students, who were forbidden to speak in Native languages, perform indigenous spiritual ceremonies, follow Native customs, or dress in traditional clothing, utterly relied on their Euro-American caretakers, complete strangers whose language and customs were largely foreign to them. The children were compelled to accept the boarding school conditions, not by choice but in order to survive—where else could they turn for food, shelter, and clothing so far from home or the reservation? In terms of the education provided, patriotism was the prevailing goal of the boarding-school curriculum rather than preparation for successful lives in a discipline of the students' choosing. Erdrich explained that "much of patriotic culture is also based on the fact that boarding schools were run by the U.S. government, and so included pledges of allegiance, flags, lots of patriotic propaganda, and patriotic pageantry in the curriculum."[28] Tied up with the boarding school system was the U.S. military, which might account for the number of veterans in Erdrich's writing.

Patriotism for the Ojibwe is obviously problematic, as it would seem at odds with tribal nationalism or the fight for sovereignty. Many of the Ojibwe children of the mid-twentieth century were the product of boarding-school-educated parents and grandparents, whose alliances and loyalties were split between two worlds—Native American and the United States. In this way

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many younger generations of Ojibwe feel an authentic connection to both cultures. Erdrich notes that "the American Flag comes out first with Tribal Flags and the Eagle Staffs in powwows. War Veterans carry the flags and are always honored."[29] Of course the central question remains: why would the Ojibwe trust that the U.S. government would treat Native American soldiers any better than Native American civilians? With so many damaged and neglected Anishinaabeg veterans, choosing military service seems ironic and tragic. Yet Native Americans continue to fight for the United States, as Erdrich portrays in the characters of Henry Lamartine Jr. in *Love Medicine* and Morris in *The Painted Drum,* two examples of the tragedy of fighting in U.S. wars. On one level the high rate of enlistment among Native Americans is a matter of patriotism; on another it is an economic issue, as it is for many Americans who join up at age eighteen because they have no other prospects. Erdrich explains the tendrils of connection binding patriotism, military service, economics, and the boarding school system:

> Native Americans have always enlisted in great numbers for a very small statistical population. My relatives have served in all branches of the American military. The reasons for this particular form of patriotism are complicated. First and foremost, I think, is the opportunity the military has always presented in terms of training and economic incentives. Unfortunately, it is one of the few options for people in a country where higher education is not subsidized. But historically it is more than that. Many children attended military boarding schools, or boarding schools run on a military model from the late nineteenth century to the 1930's when some of the regulations were relaxed. . . . Native people were trained into the military—many reported that going into the military felt comfortable. They had been living with bells and discipline all of their lives.[30]

Eventually the Ojibwe took back a measure of control in the general education of their children, which stimulated a growing interest in Ojibwe youth to learn about a lost cultural heritage and provided an opportunity for tribal communities to restore and reinforce Ojibwe values. Erdrich explained that "now tribal cultures are finding ways to resurrect their own histories and philosophies in teaching their children."[31] In fact the frame tale in Erdrich's *Tracks,* the occasion for telling the story, is the narrator Nanapush's effort to reacculturate Lulu Nanapush, his adopted granddaughter, on her return from boarding school by sharing the history of the community, in which her mother, Fleur Pillager, figures prominently. Connection becomes the overwhelming message of Nanapush's tale and, more generally, of the Ojibwe historical narrative, as evidenced in Erdrich's oeuvre. Erdrich regularly creates various and complex

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ties of kinship and family history in her fiction. Kinship takes on particular significance and urgency in the reservation world. In the insular communities of Ojibwe, the unity of the inhabitants, in the face of ever-encroaching U.S. government policies and culture, is vital to the tribe's proliferation and success. Many of Erdrich's texts include genealogical charts illustrating the complex connections between and among several families; the family names Nanapush, Pillager, Kashpaw, Morrissey, Lazarre, Lamartine, and Shaawano commonly appear, cross, and divide in these charts. In terms of narrative intrigue, the charts also expose long-buried historical connections and shocking family revelations. The same families persist from story to story, novel to novel. The reason for these elaborate genealogical charts is not only to prove the inherent connectedness of the community but also to serve as evidence of the perseverance of the Ojibwe.

Finally storytelling is the means by which Ojibwe cultural heritage and history is communicated in Erdrich's writing. Traditionally the history of the tribe, its customs and behaviors, ceremonies and beliefs, were passed down through storytelling. The history of colonization and its effect on the Ojibwe was passed down through oral tradition as well. Storytelling is the means by which Ojibwe history is remembered and preserved and an integral cultural component of Ojibwe identity. Erdrich has explained that "memory is all. Memory is where the language resided, because it was an oral language. The stories were not written down."[32] From Nanapush and Father Damien to Mooshum and Joe Coutts, the multitude of Erdrich's storytellers function as documentarians of time and place, in and around the reservation. With humor and pathos, in the face of adversity if not extinction, these storytellers—poets, prophets, tricksters, teachers, sinners, and saints—are on the continuum between loss and recovery, both personally and culturally. Like so many of her characters, Erdrich will not be deterred in her singular purpose of bearing witness to the trials and tragedies, the victories and accomplishments, and the recovery, perseverance, and survival of the Ojibwe people.

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