

Narrative, Orality, and Native-American Historical Consciousness: The Critique of Logocentrism in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*¹

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Abstract

In view of the rising interest in resurrecting forgotten or invalidated modalities of aboriginal discourse, it seems timely to return to a pivotal text in the debate between traditional Western historical narrative and Native-American historical consciousness. Nancy J. Peterson, in a 1994 *PMLA* article titled “History, Narrative, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*,” champions Erdrich’s novel as a praiseworthy compromise between two extremes: the representational claims of conventional documentary history on the one hand, and the linguistic abyss proffered by poststructuralist anti-representationalism on the other. Such an assessment is both meticulous and apt. My contention, however, is that Peterson underestimates the strength Erdrich

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¹ The choosing of labels to represent aboriginal groups is increasingly highly politicized. I use the general designation “Native American” with the accompanying acknowledgement that there are significant distinctions to be made between the different tribes. Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (among many others) warn of the dangers of such essentializing, although the latter perceives a utility in the form of “strategic essentialism”—Spivak’s own neologism—necessary for subaltern voices to combat the exclusionary practices of dominant Western discourses. (See Spivak’s *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge, 1998.) Nevertheless, a number of common characteristics exist which makes the general term “Native American” useful at times.

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gives one of the novel's narrators, Nanapush, who refuses to capitulate to the Western paradigm of written discourse and instead celebrates the oral tradition of the Anishinabe Native Americans, giving it a place both outside and impervious to the hegemony of colonial written discourse. Peterson also seems to miss the extent to which Erdrich undercuts the validity of the narrative voice of Pauline (the novel's second narrator). Peterson's claim that "Erdrich's novel holds Nanapush's and Pauline's antithetical views in tension," while certainly true on a formal level, is questionable in light of two key issues: first, the deceitful and alienating nature of her narratorial recordings; second, the strength with which Nanapush's narrative flourishes within an intersubjective matrix fostered by those within his community as well as the natural world itself. Consequently, *Tracks* may not be as bipartisan in its compromise as Peterson claims it to be. A richer reading of the text, proffered here, proposes exploring the embeddedness of Nanapush's sense of identity and narrative voice within a sustaining and ever-nourishing multiplicity of human and animal life forms, a kind of democracy of animate life, to borrow and modify a phrase from contemporary material ecocriticism.

Keywords: narrative, orality, Native-American historical consciousness, logocentrism, *Tracks*, Erdrich

There are several reasons why *Tracks* remains one of the most significant works to emerge out of a body of contemporary fiction specifically concerned with the revival of the stilled voices of Native Americans. The novel succeeds at reinscribing a displaced historical account of the last days of the Anishinabe Indians before their way of life was permanently altered through the rape of their land and culture by white settlers with logging interests—a process all too familiar, sadly, to many other aboriginal cultures around the globe today. The novel merits much praise, too, simply for its literary value: its sensuous magic-realism and its elegant, lyrical prose.² Yet a further attribute for which the novel has been much acclaimed concerns the extent to which it serves to reconcile the divisive imbroglio which began in late twentieth-century literary theory over the question of referentiality in historical fiction: on the one side, Marxists and traditional historiographers, both adamant in their affirmation of an extra-textual referent to which historical discourse presumably has access; on the other side, poststructuralists and their followers, equally adamant that historical discourse has recourse to nothing but other texts, other signifiers.

Indeed, Nancy J. Peterson seizes precisely upon this last issue in what is probably the most informed and insightful analysis of the novel to emerge after its publication six years later, a 1994 *PMLA* article entitled “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*.” Peterson champions Erdrich’s fiction as a praiseworthy compromise between two extremes. She sees the difficulties Erdrich faces in writing the novel as being symptomatic of a crisis: the impossibility of writing traditional history in a postmodern, postrepresentational era” (982). Rejecting a naïve faith in the representational claims of conventional documentary history, while steering clear of the linguistic abyss proffered by poststructuralist anti-representationalism, Erdrich, Peterson maintains, negotiates a path down the middle which gives due deference to both the political need for an Anishinabe history as well as the inexorable textuality of that history (as it appears in the novel she writes). The narrative link between Nanapush, one of the narrators, and Lulu, Fleur’s daughter and the addressee of Nanapush’s narration, “signifies a kind of history writing and history telling that neither relinquishes nor oversimplifies its referential debt to the past, that is grounded in

² Hsinya Huang, in her 2004 *Concentric* article, juxtaposes Erdrich’s literary flair with the diametrically opposed style of fellow writer Winona LaDuke, who although much less prolific, accomplishes a similar political end with her widely acclaimed novel, *Last Woman Standing* (Stillwater: Voyageur, 1998). Huang summarizes each writer’s strengths as follows: “LaDuke is scientific and accurate in dates and places, representing tribal milieu in its historical and geographical specificities, whereas Erdrich is imaginative, inscribing tribal landscape into a magic world of human and non-human spirits” (40).

tradition and [yet] ready to adapt to (post)modern conditions” (990-91).³

Peterson’s assessment of the way in which Erdrich navigates the minefields of historiographic metafiction is meticulous, apt, and timely. Her analysis of the novels’ two narrators—Pauline and Nanapush—leads unquestionably to the certain conclusion that “[t]he new historicity that *Tracks* inscribes is neither a simple return to historical realism nor a passive acceptance of postmodern historical fictionality” (991).⁴ Such a view is a welcome affirmation that seemingly irresolvable conflicts in theory can, in fact, be resolved, serving as it does as a bridge over the widening chasm between poststructuralist thought and postcolonial imperatives.⁵ Furthermore, the novel acknowledges the salient fact that native/aboriginal writing is still implicated in strategies of containment which do not yet warrant the label “post”—colonial or modern. The novel thus deftly addresses the paradox facing native writers in our time—a still existent challenge well into the twenty-first century. The suppressed histories of native peoples

³ As we shall see a little later, however, the process of adapting brings commensurate losses of another order. While a number of critics, including Peterson, have applauded and celebrated Nanapush’s adaptability, another critic points to the dangers lurking behind it: “Certainly, survival depends upon adapting; yet in Erdrich’s view adaptability can also lead to assimilation and even to a collapse of identity. Although Nanapush’s knowledge of English makes him an authority within the tribe and a tribal representative to the government, his attitude toward his own bilingualism is deeply ambivalent” (Smith 82). Pauline’s own assimilation is, of course, much more radical than Nanapush’s and unequivocally leads to a collapse of identity—or, to be more precise, an erasure of identity altogether.

⁴ The argument can be made that the absence of Fleur’s voice is actually a third form of narration in the form of an “absent presence” inhabiting a narrative realm all to its own, albeit inaccessible to the reader. Peter G. Beidler seems to support this notion with his claim that “[i]n many ways the central character of *Tracks* is Fleur” (118), while Maria DePriest argues that “the narration itself acts as a medium through which Fleur’s agency and power is translated, both visually and acoustically” (250). The significance of such an absent narration, I would argue, lies in its inviolability. That her voice does not appear in the pages of the novel as written words protects it from implication in the colonial oppression the novel seeks to indict. The disappearance of Fleur’s footprints, or “tracks” when it is rumored by the villagers that she has become an animal or a fowl, lends metaphorical support to this view.

⁵ To a large extent, the widening of this chasm has been exacerbated by a misunderstanding of the now (in)famous claim by Derrida that there is nothing beyond or outside of the text—“il n’y a pas d’hors texte.” (158). I would argue, however, that poststructuralism has never denied an extra-textual reality. It has merely insisted that our access to historical reality is necessarily mediated by discourse. Such a claim does not necessarily have to lead to any form of political quietism or apathy but instead may very well be used as the basis for effective critique and political activism. Pérez Castillo’s analysis of Erdrich’s fiction helps clarify this issue. Of the plight of the Anishinabeg, she says, “[w]hat is naïve is to insist that we can somehow accede to their suffering without recourse to language, and that resistance to hegemonic or totalitarian systems of discourse which have excluded or attempted to diminish them can be attempted beyond discourse itself” (291). Pérez Castillo suggests what seems to me the only reasonable course of action: “Rather than yielding to the nostalgic desire to return to a pre-lapsarian world in which there existed an immutable, one-to-one correspondence between sign and referent, it might be more productive to analyze the discursive systems that authorize some representations and suppress others” (291). This is, of course, exactly what most postcolonial endeavors are engaged in midway through the second decade of the new century and millennium.

deserve to be inscribed in the legitimizing archives of our time. Yet the ontological claims of those historical records cannot be accorded any greater status than those to which any other discourse lays claim, no matter how “real” the represented histories are experienced to be by those who record them in first person narratives. Thus, a very fine balancing act is required here.

Indeed, the novel’s two narrators offer the reader an oscillating view of history, a view which outlines the complex relations of ideological forces at work in the (re)construction of historical narrative. Whereas Pauline’s narration embraces the Western tradition of historical progress, Nanapush’s narration resists assimilation by disdaining the written word of the bureaucrats, “the storm of government papers” which threatens to engulf his people (1). Nanapush, however, is forced to acknowledge that if the Anishinabeg are to survive, they must learn to wield the white man’s tools—most significant among them the pen and paper.⁶ Reluctantly, he acquiesces on a number of occasions in order to secure a future for Lulu and, by extension, the descendents of the Anishinabeg. Thus, there is a future-oriented aspect in Nanapush’s narrative, as Jacqueline Scoones observes in a doctoral dissertation exploring environmental ethics in fiction. “Nanapush knows that if he can imbue Lulu with some sense of the value of the past, in particular the value of dwelling within the earth instead of simply upon it, she will not settle for the values of the whites and will long for something not lost, but necessarily forsaken. Thus, his story is not an attempt to return nor to retrieve, but to summon forth new growth. His is the long view” (68).

Consequently, to view the evolution of Nanapush’s narrative as a capitulation to the Western paradigm would be to miss some of the more well-executed rhetorical strategies employed by Erdrich, as well as to misconstrue the significance of a number of episodes in the novel. *Tracks* may not be as bipartisan in its compromise as Peterson suggests. According to Peterson, “Erdrich’s novel holds Nanapush’s and Pauline’s antithetical views in tension, showing point of view to be inherent to any historical narrative. Moreover, these conflicting stories and visions reflect a tribal vision of the world that allows for competing truths and, according to Paula Gunn Allen, for gender balance rather than gender oppression” (989). On a formal or structural level, Peterson’s point here is certainly valid. The novels’ resistance to a monologic narrative depends to a great

⁶ I adhere to the distinction Gerald Vizenor makes, cited by Peterson, between the terms Chippewa and Anishinabe. The former is a name invoked by white Americans while the latter is the original tribal name, the plural of which is “Anishinabeg.” As Peterson points out, only Nanapush uses the latter term in the novel (991-2). The Anishinabeg inhabited the Great Lakes area of North America in the time in which this novel is set; it is believed that they migrated there in an earlier time from the East Coast of North America.

extent on the tension created by the conflicting stories and visions proffered by Nanapush and Pauline, unequivocally engendering, as Scoones observes, a narrative “with no fixed point of view and no fixed meaning” (71). Indeed, as James Ruppert argues, the goal of most Native American writers seems to be to “maneuver readers into different ways of knowing” rather than to elevate one epistemological category over another (11), a position endorsed by Peter G. Beidler, who points to the ways Native American writers “complicate” rather than naively endorse the stereotypes readers tend to have about colonial oppression (113-114). Furthermore, the gender equilibrium maintained by this tension does indeed provide a firm basis for favorable feminist readings of the novel, as Allen affirms. A close textual reading, however, yields some significant disparities in the relative strengths of Nanapush’s and Pauline’s narratives. While the former is one which is empowered by an intersubjective matrix through which it derives significance, the latter attains only a superficial validity and is undermined by its dependence on a logocentrism disconnected from the intersubjective relationships which constitute community and a shared narrative vision.⁷ While Pauline’s narrative is alienated and weakened by isolation, Nanapush’s narrative is consistently linked with healing, growth, and life-sustaining powers. If both narratives are held in tension, it is only on a formal level.⁸

Both narratives derive from a logocentric impulse, from the power of the word. Indeed, the ineluctability of orality is one prominent theme which runs through the novel, along with its problematic relationship to the written word, as Nanapush begins to acknowledge the latter’s threat to the oral tradition. And while it is true that Nanapush indeed acknowledges the necessity of learning to write, his commitment to the traditional form of oral narrative subverts in its own way the Western privileging of the written word, divorced as it has become from the originating act of orality. As Jennifer Sergi argues, “Nanapush’s narrative style points to the novel’s roots in Chippewa’s oral tradition. Erdrich is sensitive to the immediate difference between the printed word and the spoken,

⁷ Catherine Rainwater seems to agree, describing the opposition of Pauline’s and Nanapush’s narratives as that between “privileged narrative voices” and “dialogical polyphonic narrative development” (407), a distinction emphasizing the richer, more community-embedded character of Nanapush’s narrative voice.

⁸ Claudia Egerer offers an opposing view, arguing that Pauline, not Nanapush, is ultimately triumphant: “Pauline’s attempt to combine two different religious views into an amalgam that both fits and ameliorates her own position on the margins singles her out as one of the survivors. It is important to remember that, however incongruous her composite religion seems to us, Pauline manages to do what Nanapush does not: she makes a life for herself in the face of her community’s disapproval and ridicule” (91). True, Pauline *does* manage to eke out a living, if that is what Egerer means by making a “life for herself.” The quality of that life, however, in comparison to Nanapush’s, is certainly debatable, as I argue below.

and she effects an accommodation between her printed text and her narrator's delivery" (279).

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida traces back to Plato the originating impulse to subjugate writing to speech. He follows the development of this impulse to its evolution in twentieth-century linguistics—in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, to be precise. In deconstructing the hierarchical relationship of speech to writing, Derrida's goal is not to reverse it—to elevate writing over orality—but to liberate the written word from its connection to a determinate signified. Peterson herself invokes this very work to support a different point. "Derrida demonstrates the degree to which historicity is linked to writing: 'Before being the object of a history—of an historical science—writing opens up the field of history—of historical becoming'" (983). While such a claim can be viewed within the context of the liberating and much desired goal of postcolonial writers seeking their share of the historical pie, so to speak, *Tracks* also illustrates the ways in which the written word oppresses and closes off the field of historical becoming to those who are oblivious to its uses and abuses.

In the hegemonic domain of American and Native Indian relations, *Tracks* articulates clearly the imminent dangers in such a scenario, and reaffirms the significance of orality to narrative. In Nanapush's view, the main enemy is the written word, the white man's documents, which inscribe his people's culture in terms foreign and incomprehensible to them. The creation of a written history on the white man's paper becomes synonymous with the systematic destruction of the Anishinabe culture. The loggers who consume the forests and land of the Anishinabeg are a metaphor for the paper made from the lumber which consumes the lifestyle (and lives) of the last Anishinabe descendents. The novel, at times, proffers a savage indictment of the written word, used as it is to oppress and deceive, to structure and contain, to order and delineate a discursive form which perpetrates a system antithetical to the Anishinabe culture. It contests and deconstructs the logocentric impetus underscoring the discourse of the whites, a logocentric impetus degenerate and corrupt, cut off from the orality and commensurate intersubjectivity which constitutes and sustains the connective communal fabric of the Anishinabeg. The novel launches this critique in a manner that also deconstructs the suspect dichotomies of self and world, self and other, and self from narrative which characterizes the Western/Judeo-Christian tradition and which are exemplified in Pauline's narrative version of the events in the novel.⁹ Nanapush, as Rainwater argues, "declares that whites imposed

⁹ At least one irony becomes apparent in pursuing the implications of this theme. The biblical origins of logocentrism are not difficult to locate. God, or "the Word" precedes all. "In the beginning

their ideas of measurement and boundaries on the Native Americans, and he implies that the separation of experience into real and imagined events, and of time into past, present, and future, is part of an alien and oppressive world view which, together with writing, makes communication extremely difficult” (418).

Nanapush, whose narrative voice opens the novel, immediately sets up the confrontation between the written word and the oral. The “storm of government papers” which besieges his people in 1912, after they had already faced disease of plague-like proportions, is the first symptom of a conflict. Nanapush’s rejection of the papers is unequivocal: “I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake” (1-2). In contrast to the government papers, the power of his own voice is affirmed by Nanapush repeatedly in this opening chapter. Discovering that Fleur Pillager is the last remaining survivor of the Pillager clan, he rescues her, but barely saves himself in the process. When Father Damien finds them both on the verge of death, “strong tea and lard” awaken in Nanapush the stronger sustaining force of language itself within him: “I gathered speed. I talked both languages in streams that ran alongside each other, over every rock, around every obstacle. The sound of my own voice convinced me I was alive. I kept Father Damien listening all night . . . Occasionally he took in air, as if to add observations of his own, but I pushed him under with my words” (7). From the outset, Nanapush is conscious of the extent to which orality constitutes not just his knowledge of the world, but the life-force within him, a force which manifests itself through narrative. When he finds the young Fleur, for example, she is a source of worry for him because “[s]he was too young and had no stories or depth of life to rely upon” (7). In telling all this to the young Lulu, Nanapush hopes to help endow her with this “depth of life,” with “stories” upon which she can depend for strength.

It is worth emphasizing the intersubjective quality of Nanapush’s narrative. He is always conscious of the fact that the story he tells has relevance not simply or primarily to him but to the addressee of the narrative. This contrasts sharply with the anonymity of Pauline’s audience or listeners. Her narrative has no social grounding, no framework through which it attains a greater relevance. Nanapush never loses sight of the relationship of his past to those to whom he

was the Word . . . and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Yet, “the Word was made flesh” (John 1:14). As we shall see below, Pauline, despite committing her life to Christianity, is forever cut off from her own body, her own flesh. Even giving birth does not give her a connection to an embodied sense of self, for she gives her child away. Nanapush, Fleur and Eli, however, are connected to their bodies and experience an integration of body and mind Pauline cannot know.

speaks, or about whom he speaks. For instance, as Fleur is restored to health she becomes clearheaded, and recalls the events which led to her family's deaths. "With her memory," Nanapush observes, "mine came back, only too sharp" (5). Always cognizant of the connectedness of his memories of the past to others's, Nanapush forges a narratival vision informed by an ethical impetus reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical ethics of alterity, an ethics which begins with the acknowledgement of an ontologically prior "otherness" with which subjectivity must contend. The subject is (partly) constituted by a process of ontological and epistemological embeddedness in already narrated stories, and as such is always open to the reception of other narratives. The subject relies for its well-being on an always-on-going mixture of public history and private narratives.

The way Nanapush conveys this sense of interconnectedness is subtle but definite. The narrative of the Anishinabeg he conveys to Lulu is consciously aware of its indebtedness to other stories—to other imaginative projections as much as to any ostensibly "real" events. Indeed, the novel, in its varied uses of magic realism, forces the reader to relinquish conventional distinctions between the real and the imagined, as both collapse into a melting pot of ingredients which in fact comprise all narrativized accounts of the past. "The place of memory in any culture," as Andreas Huyssen points out, "is defined by an extraordinarily complex discursive web of ritual and mythic, historical, political, and psychological factors" (250). Or, as Mario J. Valdés argues, in linking memory to remembrance through "the narrativization of incidents" (218):

[W]e ought to be reminded that the collective memory of people is a vast tapestry with many elements of fact woven together with other elements of imagination or belief. The reality of our sense of the past is dependent on our narrativization of memory as Wittgenstein has shown us; or, as Ricoeur has said, there is a constant interweaving of history and fiction in our refiguration of the lived world on which our consciousness of human time rests. (219-20)

Such a description captures elegantly and aptly the means by which the history of the Anishinabeg is conveyed in *Tracks*, the complex intermingling of elements which constitute the reconstruction of the past. Karen Castellucci Cox also highlights the significance of magic realism as a means through which Erdrich explicates the historical consciousness of a culture radically different from our own: "Erdrich insert[s] . . . into the open-ended story cycle 'magical' episodes that we can perceive as giving shape to a revised historical consciousness" (158). Cox cites as an example one of the final scenes in the novel in which Fleur causes the entire forest to crash down around the loggers who have taken her land: "The image," argues Cox, "fleshes out the truncated story so that the reader

can perceive with Erdrich not the true story of the Chippewa but the truth of their desires—an interruption that celebrates Chippewa history in a fantastical gesture of power” (158). Cox’s comments here help explain why the intermingling of both historical and imaginative material conveys a greater meaning than that which conventional realistic modes of fiction are able to convey:

It is no accident that this meshing of genres—the real world images of fiction with the magical elements of folk legends and supernatural superstitions—has become so prevalent in the works of contemporary ethnic writers . . . because the communal memory exists outside historical progression in a nether-world of dreams and desires meant to shape the whole, it often constructs its stories from family secrets, folk legends, ghost tales, and the like. The community maintains this body of narrative which defines and orders it, but which does not exist within a literal, linear framework. Rather, the stories the members share act as an ahistorical communal identity, a reservoir of beliefs, memories, stories, and visions from which any member can recover a past. (159)

Likewise, “American Indian thought,” as Allen describes it, is essentially mystical and psychic in nature. Its distinguishing characteristic is a kind of magicalness . . . an enduring sense of the fluidity and malleability, or creative flux of all things” (68). Erdrich herself has argued that “[t]here is no quantifiable reality. Points of view change the reality of a situation and there is a reality to madness, imagined events, and perhaps something beyond that” (qtd. in Chavkin and Chavkin 224). In this sense, what Erdrich does so well is to provide “an alternative way of remembering that does not categorize pieces of a story as ‘true’ or ‘false’ but opens up the possibilities to include events that, regardless of their proof or probability, can best represent an imaginative consciousness that would otherwise go unnoted and ultimately unreported” (Cox 160).

The gist of both Erdrich’s and Cox’s statements here is reminiscent of a celebrated claim by American writer E.L. Doctorow, who once observed, in response to questions about what he was doing in his own fiction, that there is no meaningful distinction to be made between fiction and non-fiction, that there is “only narrative.” Thus, the ostensibly fictional conversations between Henry Ford and J.P. Morgan in Doctorow’s novel *Ragtime* have as much significance as if they had actually happened. Irving Howe, widely known as one of the key voices in twentieth-century political criticism, seems to agree in observing that “accurate reports” in a novel are not as important as “the presence of that quality which we loosely call ‘true to life’” (99).¹⁰ Where Erdrich’s novel adds its own

¹⁰ In a 1999 telephone interview with (now deceased) Canadian writer Timothy Findley, I heard the same sentiments echoed. Findley was a friend and admirer of Doctorow’s and a huge supporter of Doctorow’s commitment to capturing the “spirit” of an age or a person by using whatever tools of the

contribution to this discussion is in its emphatic illustration of the communal component which constitutes the essential character of the historical tradition of Native Indians. Erdrich illustrates this process eloquently in a passage that accentuates Nanapush's and Fleur's mutual dependence:

Since I saved her from the sickness, I was entangled with her. Not that I knew it at first. Only looking back is there a pattern. I was a vine of a wild grape that twined the timbers and drew them close. Or maybe I was a branch, coming from the Kashpaws, that lived long enough to touch the next tree over, which was the Pillagers, of whom there were only two—Moses and Fleur—far cousins, related not so much by blood as by name and chance survival. Or maybe there was just me, Nanapush, in the thick as ever. The name had a bearing on what happened later, as well, for it was through Fleur Pillager that the name of Nanapush was carried on and won't die with me, won't rot in a case of bones and leather. There was a story to it the way there is a story to all, never visible while it is happening. Only after, when an old man sits dreaming and talking in his chair, the design springs clear. (34)

This passage is a kind of Proustian account of the connection between memory and narrative, evoking as it does a sense of the power with which present recollection can order past events into a configuration, a mixture of imagination and "fact" which constitutes the narrative of one's life. It also illustrates the connectedness of the self which remembers to others which are remembered. Valdés points to this relationship as a significant one in the formation of narrative accounts:

The dialectic between self and other is the most fundamental relationship in the unfolding of the reflective imagination, and memory plays a central part in this dialectic. The other is not an external add-on to self. My argument, following Ricoeur, is that the other is the internal basis of self and that this dialectic structure is established in the singular and collective memory that constitutes personal and collective identity. Just as memory of self and memory of others are indistinguishable from each other, so too is personal memory entwined with the collective memory that is history. Therefore, the narrative of memory and of remembering is the ground for the narrative of identity which we interpret in the hermeneutics of life. (221)

There is in this passage a great deal to consider, more than the scope of this essay permits. What is of paramount relevance to previous arguments in this essay, however, is Valdés's focus on the relationship between narrative and history which helps to articulate the conditions of Nanapush's and Pauline's respective narration of events in the novel. At stake in the critique of logocentrism

imagination necessary—hence, justifying fictional conversations and events as long as they were "true to the spirit" of the person or era. Although anecdotal, this kind of support from such a pillar of the writing community merits some consideration, surely.

in *Tracks* is a particular attitude which informs the strategic use of the word, of language. It is, perhaps, not so much the written word which is to be feared, as Nanapush begins to understand, but the philosophical and ethical underpinnings of the Western sense of language which fosters a destructive use of the written word, and thus the commensurate forced inscription of Anishinabe history within a narrative framework inimical to Native-American historical consciousness. What strikes the reader initially as a simple antipathy has a much more profound significance than might first be suspected.

Nanapush's narrative does, as we have seen, begin with the outright repudiation of the written word. The history encoded in the government papers with which Nanapush is forced to contend is one which he is none too willing to embrace. It is a narrative which threatens all that he is, all that he represents. He will not even allow his name to be written in the required documents. "My girl, listen well. Nanapush is a name that loses power every time it is written and stored in a government file" (32). Yet, it is not out of ignorance or an inability to participate in the written system that Nanapush rejects it: "I could have written my name, and much more too in script. I had a Jesuit education in the halls of Saint John before I ran back to the woods and forgot all my prayers" (33). Nanapush, as his name suggests, is capable of the "trickery" required to combat the government papers. His strategy is to rely for as long as possible on the orality which sustains his narrative from the start and which connects him to the others with whom his narrative is shared.

One poignant example of this interconnectedness occurs when Nanapush sends Eli out to hunt. Both men are near starvation and separated by miles when Nanapush begins to sing, "calling on my helpers, until the words came from my mouth but were not mine, until the rattle started, the song sang itself, and there, in the deep bright drifts, I saw the tracks of Eli's snowshoes clearly" (101).¹¹ The words "were not mine," Nanapush maintains, a testament to the sense with which his narrative is not viewed as a personal possession, but instead as a vehicle through which intersubjective communication occurs. Indeed, Nanapush not only communicates with Eli through his narrative but actually sees and hears him, and even helps him in killing the moose that will sustain not just Eli and himself, but Fleur, Lulu and Margaret as well. Beating a drum to help Eli find his way home, Nanapush "strengthened the rhythm whenever he faltered beneath the weight he bore. In that way, he returned, and when I

¹¹ The "tracks" Nanapush sees echo the novel's title, of course, and intermingles with the notion of "tracks" as words on a page, adding a further significance to this passage if the manifest one were not sufficient to convey a thematic message deep at the heart of this complex, multi-layered narrative.

could hear the echo of his panting breath, I went outside to help him, still in my song” (104). On another occasion, it is Lulu with whom Nanapush merges in a narrative lullaby which saves her and restores her to health.

Once I had you I dared not break the string between us and kept on moving my lips, holding you motionless with talking, just as at this moment. . . . I talked on and on until you lost yourself inside the flow of it, until you entered the swell and ebb and did not sink but were sustained. I talked beyond sense—by morning the sounds I made were stupid mumbles without meaning or connection. But you were lulled by the roll of my voice. (167)

Nanapush is not only connected to others, he also enjoys a physical connection to the geographical setting of his narrative, to the land itself. This is why the rape of the land by white settlers is tantamount to a rape of the Anishinabeg: “From where we now sit, granddaughter, I heard the groan and crack, felt the ground tremble as each tree slammed the earth. I weakened into an old man as one oak went down, another and another was lost, as a gap formed here, a clearing there, and plain daylight entered” (9). Later, in “the dream I had in those days after my family was taken,” Nanapush articulates an even stronger connection between the Anishinabeg and their land: “I stood in a birch forest of tall straight trees. I was one among many in a shelter of strength and beauty. Suddenly, a loud report, thunder, and they toppled down like matchsticks, all flattened around me in an instant. I was the only one left standing. And now, as I weakened, I swayed and bent nearer to the earth” (127). Pauline, in contrast, has no connection to the land or, indeed, to any particular geography. Dispossessed of house and home, she finally goes to the nuns. Her acceptance into the Catholic church serves as a metaphor for the sterility of her narrative, for the absence of fruitful relations her account reveals and makes use of for support.

Earlier, I claimed that *Tracks* accommodates a paradox stemming from the need for Anishinabe culture to establish for itself a historical record, while placing that record within the domain of a (by now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century) commonly acknowledged postmodernist historical sensibility.¹² That paradox is maintained through the extent to which Pauline’s purely *written* historical narrative is undermined in various ways. One of these

¹² Indeed, we have long been in an age some critics refer to as beyond postmodernism or “post post-modernism,” the preference for which depends on one’s ideological slant or one’s proclivity for certain terminologies. Postmodernist understandings of history as malleable, contestable, changeable are a given in most areas of academic specialization these days, and, of course, form the basis of an underlying principle of most postcolonial discourses which seek to resurrect lost or unwritten histories from the mass grave of all that has been overlooked by “official” (read “colonial”) history.

ways concerns the extent to which her narrative version is disconnected from the natural world which has such prominence in the Anishinabe world view. For example, while the narratives of Nanapush and Pauline stand in opposition to each other in a number of respects, it is Fleur (who has no narrative voice) who better represents all that Pauline is not, and who maintains a strong connection to the physical world and to her physical body. Pauline is virtually invisible to the men around her. “The men would not have seen me no matter what I did, how I moved,” she realizes early in the novel (19-20). Fleur, however, does not escape anyone’s gaze. While Pauline narrates and fills the pages of the novel with her logocentric structure, Fleur maintains a centre, a symbol of pure presence whose power is virtually unlimited. As Maria DePriest reads her character, Fleur “erupts as a literary act of resistance to totalizing and discursive violence.” It is thus that Fleur emerges, even without an explicit voice—or, perhaps, in spite of this lack—as a character representative of the “polyvocal, multidimensional place” which constitutes the Native American sense of right dwelling (264-65).

Pauline’s narration begins with an account of the first time Fleur “drowned” (10) and quickly establishes Fleur’s status as the lake monster’s mistress: “[I]t was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself” (11). Fleur is restored to life by assigning “her place” in death to others: “You take my place,” she hisses to George Many Women, who soon drowns in his own bathtub. Indeed, the subsequent targets of her wrath are all representative symbols of patriarchal domination. What draws Fleur to Argus, Pauline observes, is the tall steeple of the Catholic church: “For if she hadn’t seen that sign of pride, that slim prayer, that marker, maybe she would have just kept walking” (13). When Fleur leaves Argus, it is only after the town has been decimated by a tornado, the church’s steeple “ripped off like a peaked cap and sent across five fields” (29), and the men who had raped her are dead (with the exception of Dutch, who is permanently maimed). If Fleur has no narrative voice, she nonetheless speaks throughout the novel with highly symbolic gestures, an argument DePriest makes convincingly. The men who had violated her, for example, are rendered impotent in every sense of the term. Pauline’s last description of them, when they are found dead in the meat freezer, frozen in the act of discourse, is a striking image of silences speakers: “Their faces were set in concentration, mouths open as if to speak some careful thought, some agreement they’d come to in each other’s arms” (30).

Pauline compensates for her sense of inferiority by her (mis)use of narrative. “Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline seemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage,” Nanapush observes

(39). Later, he claims, “she was a born liar, and sure to die one. The practice of deception was so constant with her that it got to be a kind of truth” (53). It is more than appropriate that Pauline finds employment with the local undertaker, a gesture which finds a parallel in the will to deception or non-being underlying her uses of narrative. Hence, when Sophie Morrissey calls her “death’s bony whore” the reference is not only to her position as assistant to Bernadette, but to the intentional deception in the story she has narrated about Sophie and Eli. Compared to Nanapush’s stories which breathe life into those who are involved in them, Pauline’s stories destroy and detract, isolate and alienate, even in regard to Pauline herself. Her relentless commitment to the church, to God, to the Word, is a commitment to an alienating narrative cut off from the intersubjective relations which fulfill Nanapush’s narrative. The Catholic church, one of the greatest monoliths of the Western world, here proves too vacuous an entity to fulfill the life-sustaining functions which the localized narratives of Nanapush do so well.

This is nowhere more evident than in the ways in which Pauline fails to connect with her own body as well as with the bodies of others. Her adherence to “the Word” prevents her from appreciating her embodiment as a woman. The failed encounter with Napoleon illustrates this clearly. As he takes off her clothes, she does not even come close to reveling in the sheer immediacy of the physical. Instead, she is dismayed by the sight of her own flesh. Lying naked with Napoleon, Pauline tries to go through with it, but a moment later Napoleon senses something wrong—“like a dog sensing the presence of a tasteless poison”—and he leaves (73). Yet Pauline remains behind and narrates an imagined version of the affair:

In my picture, we coupled in a blinding darkness, moved too fast to think. We howled like cats in a manger, dove and bucked like horses in their heat. I snapped him in my beak like a wicket-boned mouse. He crushed me to a powder and spread me across the floor. Yet when morning invaded the empty windows and doors, we woke whole, prepared for more pleasure. (73)

While the real coupling is postponed for the moment, it eventually does occur. Nonetheless, Pauline’s narration here remains isolated, cut off from a genuine connection to others. In her fantasy world, “we moved too fast to think,” but in reality Pauline’s problem is that she thinks too fast to move; she narrates with a view to a logocentric ordering which precludes the freedoms accorded the spontaneous actions of bodily existence. Consider, for example, her sense of exclusion when she observes the bodily connection between Fleur and Eli:

Yet what was between them was more obvious to me than if they touched. I could not pass between the two of them—the air was busy, filled with sparks and glowing

needles, simmering. Their bodies, like ore and loadstones, drew together and repelled me, or, if I stubbornly resisted, loomed close enough to crush. . . . In the morning, before they washed in Matchimanito, they smelled like animals, wild and heady, and sometimes in the dusk their fingers left tracks like snails, glistening and wet. (71-2)

At stake here is the division of self from world (and self from other selves) mentioned earlier. Fleur and Eli, connected as they are to each other, to their own bodies, even to the natural and animal worlds, stand in stark contrast to the alienated Pauline. Yet Pauline is relentless in her sterile application of a narrative order bereft of connectedness to others. She forces an ordering onto events which causes both herself and others grievous harm. Her narration of the encounter between Eli and Sophie is an example: "I turned my thoughts on the girl and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself . . . I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits" (83-4). Soon after this, Pauline again perceives the interaction of subjects as a mechanized process. Watching Fleur's reaction to Eli's return after the sexual encounter with Sophie, she says: "I watched closely, saw the workings clearly for a moment, as I had the time Dutch James pried off the back of his watch" (90).

"Pauline's and Nanapush's narratives," Peterson argues, "corresponds to the need to comprehend both textual and oral history. Nanapush tells his story to Lulu, but Pauline addresses no one in particular and thus implicitly addresses a reader, not a listener. This lack of an immediate audience also signifies Pauline's distance from oral tribal culture" (989). There is much more at work in the novel, however, than simply a mediation between the need for both oral and written histories. Pauline's "distance from oral tribal culture" is implicated in distancing she experiences from others, from the natural world, and from her own embodied existence. It is not only Nanapush, as Peterson maintains, who "deconstructs the West's reverence for the written word as the stabilizer of meaning and tradition" (989). Pauline's reliance on the textuality dominating the Anglo-American worldview also serves to deconstruct the written word—perhaps more effectively than does Nanapush's narrative. What emerges from the totality of Pauline's narrative amounts to a seamless web of associations in which the attempt to reduce historical being to textuality is ultimately linked to alienation, deceit, and the annihilation of a minority culture. How this can possibly be construed as a form of successful adaptation, as Claudia Egerer argues, remains for me a point of contention.¹³ Lying ineffably behind Pauline's narration of

¹³ Peter G. Biedler argues that Pauline's disintegration should be viewed as a form of madness brought on by colonial activity. "We see that for Erdrich the craziness of Indians like Pauline is caused by the destruction of their natural environment by the white man. Erdrich wants her readers to see that Pauline's crazy acts are caused by the white man's destruction of the environment—the buffalo and

isolation is the corollary that historical narrative must, to have strength and validity, be rooted in a shared understanding and memory of the world which draws on common myths, beliefs, and values. Anishinabe oral history, the novel poignantly illustrates, is predicated precisely on these things. As Hsinya Huang observes, Fleur too, along with Nanapush, embodies the intersection of all these things, “exemplifies the spirit of tribal healing—the interconnectedness of the cosmic web—in her way of being a mother” when, during labor, the voices of ‘the Manitous all through the woods’ speak through her” (Huang 51). Both Fleur and Nanapush’s interconnectedness with their own people and the natural world around them highlight the isolation of Pauline and underscore the sterility of her narrative.

It is both lamentable and ironic that Pauline gets to write the history of her own exclusion from her culture, using the very form of narration which is responsible for that exclusion. Everything for Pauline is an object to be structured, to be written into the text of life, like the workings of Dutch James’ watch. Even her own body becomes a text within which her child becomes inscribed: “The skin on my stomach tightened to a white transparency. Through that parchment, I tried to read the child” (133). But “death’s bony whore” reads only that which is already dead, like Fleur’s baby whom she fails to save. “I’ve read its name in the pattern of wet black twigs” (163).

The juxtaposition of the dualisms proffered by Erdrich’s novel generates a definitive concept of what constitutes Anishinabe (and perhaps, to generalize, “Native”) historical consciousness. First and foremost, the oral narrative tradition is shown to be irrevocably rooted in an intersubjective matrix through which the “remembering self” (to use Valdés’s term) is inextricably intertwined with others who are remembered. Second, however, and not so obvious, is the importance of the connection of mind to body, a connection absent in Pauline—an absence supported and fostered by the Judeo-Christian worldview Pauline embraces. As the novel progresses, so too does the distance between Pauline and her own body, which increasingly becomes an object to be mistreated, abused, and rejected.

Citing Gabriel Marcel, Calvin O. Schrag tries to deconstruct the mind/body dualism which has plagued Western philosophy for centuries. “My body is *my* body just so far as I do *not* consider it in this detached fashion, do not put

the forests—that sustains the Indians” (120). This is a connection established even more strongly in a subsequent Erdrich novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Such a view of Pauline, although with a different goal in mind, lends support to my argument that her narrative is effectively undercut.

a gap between myself and it. To put this point in another way, my body is mine in so far as for me my body is not an object, but rather I *am* my body" (48-9). Such a perspective seems to be inherent in the Anishinabe view as well—an amusing irony indeed, given the bias of modernity towards the ostensibly primitive character of aboriginal understanding. Pauline, however, in her commitment to an Anglo-American worldview, consistently reverts to a narrative form which separates her body from herself. Furthermore, as we have seen, Pauline's narration is cut off from the intersubjective connections characteristic of the oral tradition. Her insistence that the events around her (and the bodies around her) can be encoded in a text and ordered according to the view of an autonomous subject leads to her alienation from community in almost every form. Her failure is the failure to recognize that historical narrative—and the sense of personal and collective identity which derive from it—depends on a "dialectic of self and other," as Valdés argues (221), as well as on the resources of imagination, local myths and beliefs, a combination clearly evident in Nanapush's narrative.

At issue here, ultimately, seems to be the question of the sovereign subject itself informing much of the structure of Western thinking and the logocentrism behind it. The Anishinabe oral tradition is predicated on the belief in a subject which first comes to know itself in its relation to the stories handed down by others. A connectedness is immediately established between narrative, the self, and relationships with others which structure the subject's understanding of itself and the world: "I do not create the discourse and the action of others. I encounter the entwined discourse and action of the other and respond to it, and in this encountering and responding I effect a self-constitution, a constitution of myself, in the dynamic economy of being-with-others" (Schrag 84).

Tracks negotiates a path between and among a number of issues pertinent to both historiographic metafiction and Native American historical consciousness. In frequent conflict are the epistemological insights of the former with the political demands of the latter. If Erdrich *is* endorsing the necessity of aboriginal peoples to embrace the Western traditions of written history, she does so with reluctance and a clear warning embedded in the fabric of her narrative. As we have seen, there are often compelling reasons to be suspicious of the written word.

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敘述、口述與美國原住民的歷史意識： 路蕙絲·鄂萃曲的《蹤跡》中對 理性中心論的批判

摘要

鑒於對被遺忘和未受重視的原住民論述日益關注，本人認為應適時地回到傳統西方歷史論述與原住民的歷史意識之間辯論的核心文本。南西·彼德森在1994年的《現代語言學會會刊》(PMLA)上，刊登了一篇名為「歷史、敘述、路蕙絲·鄂萃曲的《蹤跡》」一文，讚揚鄂萃曲的小說平衡於兩個極端：一方是傳統記錄性歷史的再現思考，另一方是由後結構主義反再現所提出的語言深淵。彼德森對鄂萃曲小說的評價是細心且恰當。然而，我所關注的是彼德森低估了鄂萃曲賦予小說中主角納納布許的重要性。納納布許拒絕屈服於西方書寫典範，且讚揚美國原住民阿尼許納比族的口說傳統，並反抗殖民書寫霸權影響。彼德森似乎未察覺鄂萃曲削弱寶琳（小說第二敘述者）敘述聲音。彼德森宣稱「鄂萃曲的小說掌握了納納布許和寶琳緊張對立的觀點」。表面上的確如此，但是進一步探討卻有兩個關鍵問題：首先，她敘述記錄的奇譎與疏離本質；再者，納納布許的口述優點在互為主體的矩陣中茁壯，皆由他的社群和自然世界培養而成。因此，我認為《蹤跡》並非如彼德森所宣稱的「兩派並行」。更深入閱讀反而可以探索納納布許根植於人類與動物多元相互滋養中，發展認同感與敘述聲音，一種從當代物質生態論述而言，深具生命力的民主。

關鍵字：敘述，口說，美國原住民的歷史意識，理性中心論，《蹤跡》，鄂萃曲